

A UNIVERSAL EDUCATION

By Pico Iyer

The heart of every life, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama says every time I see him, is potential; we all have the possibility to do much more than we suspect and we should never underestimate the power, wisdom and sense of kindness we have within us. This is not just a Buddhist truth, he always hastens to point out; it is simply a human and universal fact of life. Most of the people alive today, he once said to me, have no religion at all, and that's fine; we can't force them to be otherwise. But none of them is without the capacity for compassion and responsibility and what he always calls simple "secular values." I suppose this is one reason why he, like most wise beings, seems so committed to education, a "drawing out" of what we have inside us; children are potential incarnate and, free of assumptions about what they could be doing, not yet told or encouraged to look askance at the world, they can do things—pick up foreign languages, question everything, take nothing for granted—before they even know that they're supposed to be incapable of so doing.

Three years ago, traveling around Japan with the Dalai Lama for a week, I saw that he had a single day free in Tokyo. He'd devote it to a news-conference, I thought, or to meeting with Japanese policy-makers, or to seeing the power-brokers who can maybe help him talk to China and ease life in Tibet. Wrong. He spent the entire morning meditating with and then talking to a group of elementary and junior high-school boys, and the entire afternoon with another set of schoolboys. The next year, he committed one whole day to visiting a school of young female students. These are not the obvious sources of power and influence he could have been cultivating and yet, in his more spacious and far-sighted view of things, very much the ones who'll be making the world we inhabit thirty years from now.

In classical Tibet, of course, every school was part of a monastery; secular education didn't exist at all. And high monks like the Dalai Lama had to go through a rigorous training in metaphysics and logic and dialectics, equivalent to beginning in kindergarten and not concluding until you have earned a doctoral degree. Outside his home in Dharamsala, one can still see monks practicing traditional debating, lunging at each other with questions—"If there is no self, then who is delivering that sentence?"—as one monks sits quietly under a tree and another fires out enquiries. The Dalai Lama himself cannot see a sound system, a camera, a Japanese text without wanting to learn more about it and expand the knowledge that, until he came out into exile, was circumscribed by geography and circumstance.

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More than that, education itself is a constantly shifting presence, he seems to see: as soon as he arrived in exile, he realized that he could introduce modern and Western teachings to his monks' curriculum, and empirical, 21st century science is now something that every Tibetan monk in exile has to learn. Education, he might be saying, is not learning what we know or what we want to believe already, but traveling into precisely those spaces that are dark and entirely beyond our ken. Only by exposing ourselves to very different doctrines can we come to a measured, objective and rounded sense of our own.

As a Tibetan monk comes to the Institute this coming month, and as the Dalai Lama comes to Los Angeles for four days of varied teachings and discussions—on science, on the relations between religions, on happiness and kindness (each leading to the other) and, in fact, on secular values—it's worth recalling that education has less to do with what the world does to us than with what we do to ourselves, and so to the world. Everyone, as Emerson and Thoreau often reminded us, has the potential to be a student and so a teacher.