

flexibility

By Ven. Thubten Gyatso

After fifteen months in dreary Ulaan Baatar, memories of suburban Melbourne in Australia conjure up a paradise of immaculate houses surrounded by green lawns and a profusion of trees and flowers. Like all things, however, appearances are not necessarily the reality. I also remember that, when I was a doctor making house calls in that pure land, the beautiful exteriors of houses often concealed interiors of great misery. Apart from the usual problems of sickness, old age, and death, I encountered scenes of domestic violence and personal anguish so bad that it is painful to even think about them.

Even when not at war, no human society has ever attained stable peace because the components of society, the people, are always in conflict with each other. Even when we are alone it is rare for our mind to be at peace. Apart from sleep, and some fleeting moments after orgasm, our minds are usually whirlwinds of uncontrolled thoughts and emotions that are anything but peaceful. Euphemisms such as “free world” for countries not under the control of totalitarian regimes, and “peace keepers” for soldiers trained to kill, belie the reality of what is happening behind our own front doors.

Collective peace in society may be impossible, but all is not lost. The short moments of peace we do experience as individuals indicate that our minds have the potential to be free from turmoil. To realize this potential we need to follow a personal path of wisdom and compassion winding through the minefield of relationships, families, and society. The meditation cushion is a vital aid to following this path, but significant progress is only achieved when we apply our wisdom and compassion within the social context. The true medium for spiritual growth is in our relations with others. Personal and international disasters can only be avoided when we learn to skillfully communicate with each other through wisdom and compassion.

A friend of mine has a problem in relating with her mother. Every day she has to frequently change between the three personas of being her mother's daughter, her mother's employee, and her mother's best friend. I said to her, “Insight into this situation gives you an excellent opportunity to train in the best method for living happily. Do not be too serious. Think that your purpose in life is to make others happy, and treat these situations as if you are acting on stage. Play the roles of daughter, employee, and best friend with all your heart whenever the script calls for it. Remember, there is no true you anyway – no person has any more concrete identity than a character in a play. Your craving to be recognized and treated as an individual in your own right is itself the foundation of all unhappiness; and it is based on an illusion.”

You, my reader, may object: “Wait a minute, tears and laughter in life are *real*, emotions on stage are pretended.” Well, I think the best actors and actresses identify with their character to the extent that their emotions on stage *are* real, even though they are reacting to pretended situations. Also, the situations in our lives that bring us to tears or laughter are not so real. Distorted by our prejudices, projections, and exaggerations, they contain a great deal of unreality. Remember, appearances are never what they seem. The admonition, “get real,” usually given by teenage children to their parents, deserves deep consideration because the unhappiness of miscommunication, and that of feeling isolated from others, is usually due to our keeping a rigid self-image and an inflexible attitude about what we will and will not do.

There is nothing definite about our life other than the fact that one day we will die. When that happens, we will look back on our lives and realize how stupid we were to cause so much unhappiness to others and ourselves by being far too serious in a life, which, as we are dying, will appear no more real than last night's dream. If we do not see this truth now, we will waste our lives absurdly posturing with pride and unnecessarily causing misery to others and ourselves by angrily and jealously defending our self-image, and feeding it with attachment and greed.

If we retain a fixed attitude of self-importance, the ever-changing and unexpected events of life will break us, like the wind snapping in half the strongest of trees, the oak. If, however, we are flexible, like the bamboo, even the most powerful wind will be unable to break us. My teacher, Lama Yeshe, was extremely skilful at communicating with others because he had no need to defend himself and no need to force his opinion upon others. At all times, he expressed interest in others, in their lives, their opinions, and their well being. Nobody felt threatened or bored; he made every situation exciting, humorous, and an opportunity to open the eye of wisdom. If we had any sense we would copy Lama Yeshe in the way we live our lives.

The secret path to happiness is to write our own script for life by treating our worst enemy, self-importance, as a joke. Whatever insult we receive, give it to self-importance. Whatever mistake we make, blame it on self-importance. In all situations, good or bad, we must be flexible and use them as opportunities to advance on the path and destroy the illusion of self before it destroys us. ●

Ven. Thubten Gyatso (Dr. Adrian Feldmann), is an Australian monk who is the resident teacher at the FPMT center in Ulaan Baatar, Mongolia.