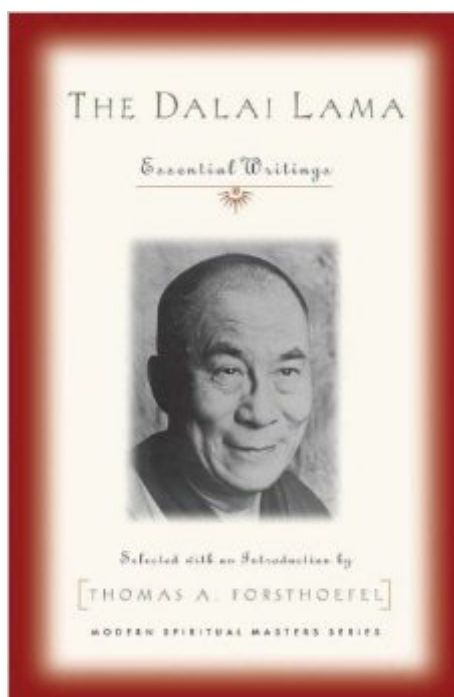


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# The Dalai Lama: Essential Writings (Modern Spiritual Masters)



## Synopsis

The 14th Dalai Lama (Tenzin Gyatso), the spiritual leader of Tibet, has lived in exile from his homeland since 1959. While working to preserve the culture of his homeland, he has also served as one of the preeminent representatives of Buddhism in the West. Through his wide travels and his many bestselling books he has helped to spread the Buddhist precepts of wisdom and compassion, while also fostering peace and understanding between different religious paths. In 1989 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. This anthology, drawing on over twenty books, presents the essential teachings of the Dalai Lama, highlighting a message that speaks to people of all traditions

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## Customer Reviews

"I think I am a reflection, like the moon on water. When you see me, and I try to be a good man, you see yourself." Thomas A. Forsthoefel's excerpts of the Dalai Lama's work give a glimpse into Buddhism. The core issue is that each person's soul is interconnected and strives to become a part of the infinite. These Buddhist concepts, that of reality being an illusion, mindfulness and the essential task of understanding and overcoming suffering are profound, abstract and difficult to grasp. The Illusion of Reality: In An Open Heart, 85-86 the Dalai Lama writes, "Ultimately, all our difficulties arise from one basic illusion. We believe in the inherent existence of ourselves and all other phenomena. We project, then cling to, an idea of the intrinsic nature of things, an essence that phenomena do not actually possess." Plato's Allegory of the Cave, told through Socrates is similar

in concept to the Buddhist idea of the illusion of reality. In the story of the Cave, a group of people (prisoners) were chained down to chairs from childhood, and forced to look at shadows upon a wall in the back of a cave. The images that the prisoners saw were projected from the sun in the front of the cave. One prisoner was given the chance to be freed and the opportunity to understand that the shadows were just mere images, that the light at the opening had produced them; it was not reality at all. The man experienced the true reality, that it was the sun that had produced the shadows on the wall. When he returned to the cave he informed the others that he had seen beyond the back of the wall of the cave and that it was not real at all but mere images. Could he have convinced them to come out of the cave? Can the Dalai Lama convince us that what we think is real is illusion? The answer may be yes only if we push ourselves, to look beyond what we perceive to be reality and ask, "Am I looking at the back of a wall in a cave?" This is what the great teachers like the Dalai Lama challenge us to do, look beyond our concept of reality.

**Suffering:** Suffering, from the Buddhist perspective involves several levels. The first is that of sensory suffering or painful sensations and feelings. The second is what the Dalai Lama calls the "suffering of change." In the cited paragraph from the Essence of the Heart Sutra this type of suffering means that experiences do not last forever and even happy experiences fade to neutral or can turn into unhappy states. The third level of suffering refers to the "unenlightened existence." This level signifies being ruled by negative emotions caused by an ignorance of the fundamental nature of reality. In order to develop deep wisdom, the sentient being has to understand this level of suffering. From there one can achieve freedom from suffering and move onto liberation. When you understand suffering, you develop compassion. You understand that everything is interconnected. The Dalai Lama writes, "This can be accomplished by consciously and intentionally recollecting the limitations and the harmful consequences of self-cherishing- cherishing only one's own well-being- and then reflecting upon the virtues and merits of cherishing the well-being of others." In *The Art of Happiness*, 140-41 the Dalai Lama writes, "Our attitude toward suffering becomes very important because it can affect how we cope with suffering when it arises. Now, our usual attitude consists of an intense aversion and intolerance of our pain and suffering. However, if we can transform our attitude towards suffering, adopt an attitude that allows us greater tolerance of it, then this can do much to help counteract feelings of mental unhappiness, dissatisfaction and discontent." Man's misplaced longings are the cause of his own demise causing unhappiness and needless suffering. I once had a friend in the military tell me "pain is weakness leaving your body." Suffering is a reality of life. Pain may also be the way we learn. It is what we learn from these experiences and how we grow as a person that we are better able to cope with negative events.

**Ego:** Further, from the Dalai Lama writes in *The Art of*

Happiness, 152 "We also often add to our pain and suffering by being overly sensitive, overreacting to minor things, and sometimes taking things too personally." So goes the saying, "Don't sweat the small stuff because it's all small stuff!" Easier said than done. People let the littlest of things get under their skin, and the root cause may be our ego. The most difficult task for the human is to give up egotism. In *An Open Heart*, 152 the Dalai Lama writes, "Possessiveness arises out of our sense of self. The stronger our sense of "me" the stronger is our sense of "mine." This is why it is so important that we work at undercutting our belief in an interdependent, self-sufficient self. Once we are able to question and dissolve the existence of such a concept of self, the emotions derived from it are also diminished." This is not an easy task, and made more difficult when on this Earth you are accorded great power and wealth. But not an impossible one, as history shows us. The great second century Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius in *Meditations* exemplified a compassion for others as well as mindfulness by documenting his struggles with the ego in his search for meaning in life. He saw the humanity of those he as Emperor ruled over, and understood that their souls were linked to his. He wrote in Book Two, "Neither can I be angry with my brother or fall foul of him; for he and I were born to work together, like a man's two hands, feet or eyelids, or like the upper and lower rows of his teeth. " (p.45)

Life and Death: In *The Path to Enlightenment*, 34 the Dalai Lama writes, "Spiritual happiness is not like that gained through materialistic, political, or social success, which can be robbed from us by a change in circumstances at any moment and which anyway will be left behind at death. As spiritual happiness does not depend solely upon deceptive conditions such as material supports, a particular environment, or a specific situation, then even these are withdrawn, it has further supports." Marcus Aurelius was influenced by the Greek Stoics who believed that everything was perpetually in the process of change. These themes from *Meditations* resonate with Buddhist teachings: the belief that power is a false goal as all Earthly power vanishes at death. In *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius wrote, "In the life of a man, his time is but a moment, his being an incessant flux, his senses a dim rush light, his body a prey of worms, his soul an unquiet eddy, his fortune dark, and his fame doubtful. In short, all that is of the body is as coursing waters, all that is of the soul as dreams and vapors; life a warfare, a brief sojourning in an alien land; and after repute oblivion." (p.51)

You see this in when you are a soldier in combat, where each day out on a mission you recognize could be your last, and for some of your fellow soldiers it was. War will hone that sense of the lack of permanence of the human body, but only because one was confronted with death so frequently. In civilian life, it is much easier to forget our impermanent nature: we get caught up in our day-to-day worries: the bills, work, and family. And perhaps technology which is a great boon in some respects, may also make us dissatisfied and more

materialistic, chronically yearning for the next new gadget, than when we were less advanced and had fewer things. As the Dalai Lama writes in *The Path to Enlightenment*, 87-88 "The time that death will strike is unknown to us. We do not know which will come first, tomorrow or the hereafter. None of us is able to guarantee that he or she will still be alive tonight. The slightest condition could cause us to suddenly part from this world. " And, "Many Tibetans place a great deal of faith in me and would do anything I ask; but when I die I must die alone, and not one of them will be able to accompany me. All that one takes with one are knowledge and spiritual methods and karmic imprints of one's life deeds. "[P.113] Life can be fleeting, in a blink of an eye and it can be gone. We take life for granted but the bigger problem may lie in how we are preparing ourselves for the afterlife. My human body is a vessel that I occupy for a short moment in time but what about my soul, spirit, my consciousness? That continues on into eternity.

Kindness: The Dalai Lama warns that no matter how wise others think you are, how many followers you have on this Earth, ultimately the journey of the soul is a solitary enterprise. The wisdom and teaching of the Dalai Lama, that of kindness, a loving and open heart are accessible ideas. Other concepts, such as the nature of reality, the understanding of suffering are abstract, and difficult to grasp. It is different than understanding that there is good and evil, that belief in Christ will allow you a place in Heaven. But perhaps at core, both Christianity, and for that matter most religions, is this basic concept as the Dalai Lama writes in *How to Practice*, 70 "Usually my advice for beginners is to be patient: have fewer expectations of yourself. It is most important to be an honest citizen, a good member of the human community. Whether or not you understand profound ideas, it is important to be a good person wherever you are right now." And so, maybe that is what the human journey boils down to.

A Policy of Kindness (Dalai Lama) Dan Smee, Author "Totally American" *Totally American: Harnessing the Dynamic Duo of Optimism and Resilience to Achieve Success*

*The Dalai Lama: Essential Writings* provides pieces selected and introduced by Thomas Forsthoefel, chair of the religion department at Mercyhurst College in Pennsylvania, and provides a fine set of basic teachings on wisdom and compassion. Offered up in chapters based on subject, *THE DALAI LAMA* is an excellent introductory primer for any spirituality collection.

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