

Hylton Murray-Philipson finds scientific research supporting 2,500 year old Buddhist belief that the best way to find personal happiness is through showing kindness to others.

**The Art of Happiness in a Troubled World
His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Howard C. Cutler**

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The search for happiness is intensifying. Faced with recurring financial and political problems, environmental degradation and climate change, an increasing number of people are questioning the direction in which the world is heading.

Although we are far richer than we were 50 years ago, are we any happier ? is personal isolation and the loss of community a price worth paying for the ever increasing amount of “stuff” in our lives ? is the pursuit of growth still feasible in the context of finite resources and an exploding population ?

These, and other questions, are in the public domain as never before.

In America, billionaires are giving away half their fortunes ; in the UK, the Movement for Happiness has been launched by Anthony Seldon (Headmaster of Wellington) ; Geoff Mulgan (former policy advisor at No 10) and Richard Layard (Professor at the London School of Economics). Before the election, in an echo of Bhutan’s pursuit of GNH (Gross National Happiness) above GNP, David Cameron stated that the improvement of GWB (General Well Being) is the central political challenge of our time.

In this wonderful sequel to the original “Art of Happiness” published in 1998, psychiatrist Howard Cutler and His Holiness the Dalai Lama explore the underlying causes of suffering and violence in our world, and suggest practical ways in which we can lead happier lives. Throughout the book, 2,500 year old Buddhist philosophy is tested against the latest scientific discoveries on the workings of the brain.

In one experiment, Dr Richard Davidson of the University of Wisconsin- Madison examines the brain of a Tibetan monk on an MRI scan as he begins a profound meditation on compassion; the left prefrontal cortex (already associated with positive emotions and wellbeing) lights up - demonstrating that “ the very act of concern for the well being of others creates a greater sense of well being within oneself.”

Our brains are incredibly flexible, making 1 million new connections every second. If we could only see things in their true perspective, we can develop the higher functions of our brains to help address our problems.

The Dalai Lama's personal story and the plight of the Tibetan people show that life is uncertain, and suffering is part of the human condition. But, just as a sore throat will pass, it is likely that the increasing prosperity and urbanisation of the Chinese people will lead to political change. It is just a matter of time.

Seeing people as individuals is a fundamental way to diminish differences and promote dialogue – in the Middle East, Afghanistan, Northern Ireland or Tibet. Setting aside the regime responsible for perpetrating atrocities against the Tibetan people, the Dalai Lama is able to say “I actually enjoy meeting Chinese people”.

People come together in times of crisis (eg the Blitz on London or New York after 9/11), but we need to foster feelings of co-operation in day to day life without (as the Dalai Lama jokes) the threat of an invasion from Mars to force us to work together. With modern communications technology at our disposal, the 21st century should become the first “Century of Dialogue “. In theory, climate change could help force us into a more collaborative way of administering the world – though the snail's pace of international negotiations is not encouraging.

However overwhelming global or individual problems may appear, we should believe in the fundamental goodness of human nature. We should never give up hope, and we should each do whatever we can.

Compassion is the highest form of human emotion. The similarity with St Paul's message in 1 Corinthians Chapter 13 is striking – “ And now abideth faith, hope and charity. These three. But the greatest of these is charity.” Crucially, compassion not only helps others – by exercising compassion we receive the benefit of happiness ourselves.

In the closing scene of the book, an exchange of scarves illustrates the harmonious interdependence of neighbours. The custom originated in India and the material is made in China, but exchanging scarves is now part of Tibetan culture. “Wonderful” the Dalai Lama exclaims, as he breaks into familiar peels of laughter and gives the co-author a friendly bear-hug.

Hylton Murray-Philipson is an environmental entrepreneur. He was on the board of Tibet House in New York, and serves on the Advisory Council of the Rainforests Project of HRH the Prince of Wales. He is a contributor with the Dalai Lama in the anthology “Moral Ground – Ethical Action for a Planet in Peril.”