

Introduction



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Emotions unite and divide the worlds in which we live, both personal and global, motivating the best and the worst of our actions. They save our lives, enabling quick action in emergencies. Yet how we behave when we are emotional can make our lives, and the lives of those we care about, miserable. Without emotions there would be no heroism, empathy, or compassion, but neither would there be cruelty, selfishness, nor spite. Bringing different perspectives to bear—Eastern and Western, spirituality and science, Buddhism and psychology—the Dalai Lama and I sought to clarify these contradictions and illuminate some paths that might enable a balanced emotional life and a feeling of compassion that can reach across the globe.

As the leader of a millennia-old spiritual tradition as well as a nation in exile, the Dalai Lama holds something resembling divine status among his fellow Tibetans. He is the world's principal living advocate of nonviolence and the winner, in 1989, of the Nobel Peace Prize and, in 2007, of the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest award given to a civilian by the U.S. government. He is denounced and at times publicly despised by the leaders of the People's

Republic of China, which has occupied Tibet since 1950. Yet he is also more than a religious and political leader: In the Western world his celebrity approaches that of a rock star. He has authored several bestselling books and is nearly always traveling, speaking, and inspiring audiences that number in the thousands. He is also strongly interested in integrating the findings of modern science into the Buddhist worldview. In our conversations, it became clear to me that he considers himself first and foremost a Buddhist monk and an interpreter of Buddhist thinking to the rest of the world. He believes that Buddhist wisdom provides an ethical framework through which the world might be able to better deal with the problems that divide us.

I am a professor emeritus at the University of California-San Francisco School of Medicine, having spent more than forty years establishing the universality of humans' emotional behavior, mapping the expressions of the face, discovering how lies are betrayed in our demeanor, and proposing theories to explain both the nature of emotion and why and when people lie. This research has helped to reawaken scientific interest in both emotion and deception. I am the author or editor of fourteen books, five of them—*Unmasking the Face*, *Face of Man*, *Telling Lies*, *Why Kids Lie*, and *Emotions Revealed*—written for the general public, and over my career I have become an expert on Charles Darwin's writings on emotional expression. My work has been of interest to a wide range of organizations, from animation studios to police departments, and I now run a business that designs interactive training tools for improving emotional understanding and evaluating truthfulness. I also advise several governments' antiterrorism agencies. I am Jewish in background but not observant, and as skeptical about Buddhism as I am about any religion. I have spent my life as a behavioral *scientist*, developing and applying hard, objective methods to the investigation of what had been considered the soft phenomenon of emotion.

Despite our differences, we discovered important common ground in our perspectives. We share a commitment to reducing

human suffering, intense inquisitiveness, and a conviction that we were likely to learn from each other. Our conversations reveal the unfolding of what developed into an intense friendship over the course of the nearly forty hours we spent exploring these issues. Our common concerns for personal and social welfare, borne from decades of thought and work in the most contrasting of conditions, united our efforts and brought forth new ideas, new ways to understand ourselves, practical steps for creating better worlds, in our closest and most distant relationships.



I first met the Dalai Lama in 2000, when I attended a small conference on destructive emotions organized by the Mind and Life Institute, in Boulder, Colorado.¹ Since 1987, the institute has brought scientists to Dharamsala, India, where the Dalai Lama lives in exile, for conferences on diverse scientific topics. At the 2000 conference I was one of six scientist-participants who talked with the Dalai Lama over five days. My responsibility was to present the Darwinian view of emotion and to explain my scientific research on the universality of emotional expression and physiology. Whether through a shared sense of playful and probing curiosity, our commitment to reducing human suffering, or a conviction that we were likely to learn from each other, the Dalai Lama and I immediately found an unexpectedly strong rapport across the wide gulf of the intellectual heritages we each represent.

In the following few years, I participated as one of a group of scientists in three other conferences with the Dalai Lama. In addition, I was in the audience at a panel session, “Opening the Heart,” that was held in Vancouver, British Columbia, in 2004, in which the Dalai Lama was one of a number of religious leaders in attendance. One by one, the spiritual leaders addressed the group: Bishop Desmond Tutu talked about how his religion had helped him open his heart; Dr. Jo-Ann Archibald, a Northwest American Indian, talked about how her religion had opened her heart; the

Iranian justice Shirin Ebadi and then Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi each spoke about how their religions had opened their hearts. His Holiness was the last to speak.* He looked around at each of the individuals who had preceded him and, with a broad smile on his face, said something like, “But religions often divide the world. What unifies us are our emotions. We all want to have happiness and reduce suffering.” I thought to myself, exactly right—but our emotions also divide us.

When I left the Vancouver meeting, my mind was filled with the issues about the nature of emotion that had been raised by the Dalai Lama’s remarks, issues that I thought merited exploration. He was right in saying emotions are what we had in common, but he had left out all the ways in which our emotions can separate us, and cause us to have conflicts with one another. I was concerned that perhaps I had oversimplified matters in my presentation about emotions four years earlier. I began a list of the unexplored questions, some of them focusing on how humanity might be able to reduce the divisions among us through the unifying nature of our emotions, others on how to decrease the destructive influence emotions can bring into our lives. My initial outline came to twenty pages.

Motivated by the sense that, coming from our distinct traditions of Western psychology and Buddhist philosophy, a back-and-forth discussion could spark between us new ideas, I sought the opinions of two colleagues I had met at the Mind and Life Institute conference in 2000. One was Matthieu Ricard. Matthieu received his doctorate in biology in 1972 and then chose to leave the academic world, becoming a Tibetan Buddhist monk and a renowned author and photographer.² He has resided at the Shechen

* I was told the honorific “His Holiness” was adopted for addressing the Dalai Lama when he leaves the home of the government in exile in Dharamsala to represent the Tibetan cause around the world since the Tibetan term for addressing him is very long and cumbersome; “His Holiness” was adopted because it is how the pope, the head of another world religion, is addressed. I rarely used the honorific in our conversations as, being nonreligious myself, I view him as an extraordinary person but not a holy one.

Monastery in Nepal for more than thirty years and has served as a French translator for the Dalai Lama. Matthieu has been a guest in my home many times and agreed to be the subject of scientific study of his expressions and physiology in a series of experiments.³ I also sent the outline to B. Alan Wallace, who was ordained as a monk in 1973 and studied with the Dalai Lama before leaving the monastery to return to the United States, completing his education, and marrying. Alan is the author of many books on meditation and founded the nonprofit Santa Barbara Institute for Consciousness Studies. He too has become a good friend and had in the past served as the meditation trainer for one of my research projects. Both Matthieu and Alan added ideas to the outline and then urged me to contact the Dalai Lama through his office.

Knowing that the Dalai Lama's schedule was already overfilled, I was reluctant to request the ten to twelve hours I thought would be required for a conversation on these questions. But I sent it on to Thupten Jinpa, the renowned Tibetan scholar and former monk who serves as an English translator for the Dalai Lama when he travels outside of India. Jinpa is a sweet and gentle man with whom it was easy to establish a warm relationship. In my letter to him I asked if he thought the issues I had outlined were important enough to merit a private conference with the Dalai Lama. Jinpa's response was enthusiastic. He suggested other issues that should be included and then advocated for three days of meetings. It took fourteen months for a time to open up in the Dalai Lama's calendar.

As a result of Jinpa's determination, during the weekend of April 22–23, 2006, the Dalai Lama and I sat down for eleven hours of intense discussion on my twenty-four pages of questions about emotion and compassion, as well as several other questions that came out of the natural flow and surprise of our conversation. It ended up being the first of three dialogues, a total of thirty-nine hours of intimate exchange that we shared over a period of fifteen months.

Our first meeting was held in Libertyville, Illinois, in the luxurious living room of a farm belonging to the Pritzker family, which

heads the Hyatt Corporation. The walls were adorned with a portion of what is reputedly the best private Asian art collection in the United States. I sat to the immediate left of the Dalai Lama. “Perched” is a better word, for I was on the edge of my chair, bent toward the Dalai Lama, throughout our conversation. In front of me on a coffee table was the twenty-four-page outline I had prepared. Next to my outline were a few handouts that I distributed as the discussion progressed, which appear in the text alongside our conversation. We talked about every item on the outline and many other issues, some directly relevant and others too fascinating not to pursue.

We were both clearly excited by the challenge of reorganizing our thinking in light of the other, and our focus and concentration were palpable. But we also brought enthusiasm and enjoyment, expressed through our loud voices and equally loud (and frequent) peals of laughter. We came to the table with highly developed viewpoints, stemming from totally different sources, each of us at the top of our field. We also knew that there might never again be such an opportunity: The Dalai Lama was seventy-one at the time of our conversation, and I was seventy-two.

When we decided to devote the better part of three days to intense discussion—something I had never before done with anyone, and reportedly quite a rare event for the Dalai Lama—we were already aware of the strong connection we had felt in our previous meetings at more public conferences. A few days into the 2000 conference, a sense of *deja vu* emerged in me, as if I had already known the Dalai Lama for a long time. The Dalai Lama also sensed our strong connection. In his book *The Universe in a Single Atom*, he wrote, “I felt an immediate affinity with him and sensed that a genuine ethical motivation underlies his work, in that if we understand the nature of our emotions and their universality better we may be able to develop a greater sense of kinship in humanity.” And in the very next sentence, he slipped in a joke, which, like all his jokes, riffs on something true: “Also, Paul speaks at exactly the right pace for me to follow his presentation in English without difficulty.”

As one would expect for the leader of a world religion, particu-

larly one who is a head of state and has received death threats, we were not alone. At one entrance sat a U.S. State Department protective service officer, who was regularly relieved, every thirty minutes, by a fellow officer. Other members of the protective service surrounded the house; a car was kept idling twenty-four hours a day outside the front door in case there should be need for a quick exit. At the other end of the room, forty feet away, a member of the Tibetan government-in-exile entourage gazed down from a high balcony.

To the Dalai Lama's right sat my ally in this endeavor, Thupten Jinpa, who served as the translator for the meeting, and next to him sat another Tibetan, Geshe Dorji Damdul. (*Geshe* is the term used for those scholars who, in their study of Tibetan Buddhism, have reached a level equivalent to that of a Western doctorate.) Occasionally in our discussion, Dorji responded to a question posed by the Dalai Lama about how my comment fit with Tibetan scholarship. He is fluent in English and needed no translation to understand what I said, but spoke directly to the Dalai Lama in Tibetan and never spoke without being asked to do so.

The conversation was also witnessed by several individuals, including the Dalai Lama's American doctor, Barry Kerzin, who three years earlier had been ordained as a Buddhist monk, and his personal Tibetan physician, Dr. Tsetan Sadutshang. The doctors were there both because of their interest in the topic and out of concern for the Dalai Lama's health; he had just a day before been discharged from the Mayo Clinic, where he had gone for a regular examination. Twenty-five feet away, at the other end of the large room, sat my family: my son, Tom Ekman, who had recently graduated from law school and had not before met the Dalai Lama; my wife, Mary Ann Mason, who was then dean of the graduate division at the University of California-Berkeley and in 2003 had attended (as a silent observer) my twenty-minute audience with the Dalai Lama to discuss an issue I had raised for scientific investigation ("Why does meditation focusing on the breath benefit emotion?"); and my daughter, Eve Ekman, an artist, writer, and social

worker who had observed the five-day conference on destructive emotions at which I first met the Dalai Lama in 2000.

The last member of the group was Dr. Clifford Saron, a psychologist, neuroscientist, “super tech,” and personal friend. Cliff, whose knowledge of the brain and of Buddhism far exceeds mine, was invited to provide not only the essential, high-quality audio recording of the conversation but also to provide me with advice during the breaks on phrasing my questions about Buddhism.

The experience of talking day after day about issues that I had spent most of my life thinking and writing about, engaging in more than conversation but less than debate, is hard to describe. There were challenges back and forth, and as I had hoped, new ideas were sparked that had not emerged before in my thinking. I am always excited when a new idea crystallizes, but this time the excitement was multiplied by learning more about Buddhist thinking, getting to know this remarkable man better, and witnessing his ideas change during the course of our discussions. If I were to say I felt “high,” it would capture only some of what I felt when it was over; “satisfied” also only captures part of it. I was far from exhausted, and though I sensed this would not be the last of our discussions, I did not anticipate that this would turn out to be less than a third of the time we were to spend together in the following year. In the next months I played the tapes to a group of colleagues and friends interested in the topic, who raised many questions about what either he or I had said, which made it clear that I would need to meet with the Dalai Lama again.⁴

A year later, we met in India, at a five-day conference in April 2007 sponsored by the Mind and Life Institute. During that conference, each scientist in the group was asked to explain his or her reactions to the Dalai Lama’s *The Universe in a Single Atom*, his book in which he described what he had learned from his many meetings with scientists.

The Dalai Lama and I managed to meet twice during breaks in the conference, each time for an hour and a half. These private conversations were held in a room used for meetings with indi-

viduals or small groups; *thangkas** covered the walls, and air-conditioning was available. (The Dalai Lama likes it to be much colder than I do, even though his monk's robes provide less coverage than traditional Western clothing.) As always in these intimate meetings, he removed his shoes and crossed his legs beneath him. We sat very close to each other, neither of us leaning back in our chairs. I had been warned that if he ever sits back, you have lost his interest, but that never occurred.

Geshe Dorji Damdul joined us, translating and sometimes contributing to the conversation. Occasionally the two of them would fall into a long conversation in Tibetan, trying to decide if my scientific perspective had any correspondence in the Buddhist texts. At the end of the sessions, I explained my plan to splice much of what we had said into the original dialogue, so that our amplified points would come just as the reader needed them. I proposed to provide the integrated text to Jinpa, who could check for inaccuracies against the transcripts, but wanted to know if the Dalai Lama himself would like to review the manuscript before I sent it to the publisher. "Who are the authors?" he asked for clarification. "The Dalai Lama and Paul Ekman," I replied. He then said that he would like to invite me to come back to India and read the entire manuscript to him aloud so that he could review and elaborate on it.

I had not expected this. I was already committed to making a trip a few weeks later to Europe and could not cancel it. Later, one of the Dalai Lama's senior managers told me not to worry: I would have to wait at least a year, as there was no time free in the Dalai Lama's schedule for what would likely take a week of reading and commenting. When Jinpa, who was also attending the conference,

* A *thangka* is a painted or embroidered Buddhist banner that is hung in a monastery or at a family altar and carried by lamas in ceremonial processions. *Thangka* painting originally became popular among traveling monks because the scroll paintings were easily rolled and transported from monastery to monastery. *Thangkas* served as important teaching tools and depicted the life of the Buddha, influential lamas, deities, and Bodhisattvas. To Buddhists, these banners are believed to be a manifestation of the divine.

heard about this, he once again intervened as a champion for the book, arguing that it would be wrong to delay its publication. And so, at the end of June 2007 I traveled again to India, just before the start of the monsoon season. We met every day for five hours, five days in a row. It was exhilarating and it was exhausting.

This time yet another set of people observed and participated. Dr. Bernard Schiff, a retired psychologist and a close friend, read aloud my part in the previous discussions. I thought he might well provide me with useful suggestions from both of his backgrounds, but as it turned out I was too completely engaged to want any suggestions. Bernard thoroughly enjoyed this opportunity to meet the Dalai Lama, though he was sometimes frustrated that he too could not become a participant, only a reader. I read aloud what the Dalai Lama had said. We rarely got through a page before either he or I or both of us interrupted the reading to question or expand on what had been said. Joining us was the Dalai Lama's brother—who a few times commented on the exchange—as well as his son. A Tibetan scholar from the nearby Institute of Dialectics attended in order to resolve any uncertainty about how particular issues were explained in the Buddhist texts; he never spoke in English during the reading. This last set of meetings added another very valuable third to this book and convinced me to reorganize the original discussions by topic, weaving together what we had to say about each issue considered, whether it was said during the first, second, or third set of conversations.⁵ They also helped me identify moments in our dialogue at which further explanation, beyond the interplay between the Dalai Lama and myself, would be enriching. These appear as occasional footnotes (introducing or expanding upon Buddhist or scientific terms or identifying the individuals mentioned) and commentaries from Buddhist thinkers, including Geshe Dorji Damdul and meditation teachers Margaret Cullen and B. Alan Wallace, and other scientists, including Frans de Waal, Richard J. Davidson, Margaret Kemeny, Robert Levenson, and Cliff Saron.

When I was speaking, I tried to make clear when my comments were based on scientific evidence—my own or that of others. But

on many of the most interesting and important issues that we considered, there is no science yet. Thus I invited the viewpoints of other scientists to comment on some of these issues as well as questions about their work that came up in our discussion. While I believe my ideas are extrapolations from the existing evidence, they should be evaluated as more in the tradition of philosophy than of science, accepted or rejected as they are useful or interesting. I was to learn from the Dalai Lama that the Buddha cautioned his readers to accept only what they found useful.

We began by discussing how people view the world, a topic I found is fundamental to the Dalai Lama's conception of compassion, and by digging into the assumed antagonism between science and religion. Once this ground was settled, we turned our focus to the nature of our emotions, the topic that had inspired us to meet one-on-one. As we explored the differences between emotions and other mental states, I reported to the Dalai Lama some of the findings from an experiment I conducted, with my colleague Robert Levenson, on Matthieu Ricard's ability to calm a difficult person with whom he is engaged in conversation. Is it an engrained part of Matthieu's temperament or a product of his Buddhist training? Matthieu's case seemed instructive as we looked at the problems faced by people who become emotional very quickly. We discussed tactics for obtaining emotional balance available from the Buddhist and Western psychology traditions.

Later, we considered the emotions of anger, resentment, and hatred before turning to the question of how to cultivate compassion. While we agreed from the outset that anger can be constructive, the Dalai Lama persuaded me that, in the long term, hatred always corrodes our lives, and we contemplated how people can let go of resentments and grievances, which are responsible for many conflicts between peoples in the world. As we shifted to our discussion of compassion, I witnessed the Dalai Lama become, at this point, a Darwinian, quoting Darwin back to me! As we reviewed examples of compassion and moral virtues in other animals, we soon considered the prospects for extending compassion to all human beings.

In the closing chapter of our conversation, I share the story of my personal transformation six years earlier during a break in my first meeting with the Dalai Lama. As my daughter, Eve, asked, and the Dalai Lama answered, a question about anger and love, I experienced an unusual awareness that changed my own emotional life. Always the scientist, I provided to the Dalai Lama my evidence and my explanation for what had occurred then and asked the Dalai Lama to provide his own.



While these topics have been considered in some previous books, including books by the Dalai Lama and myself, our conversation offers a level of immediacy, passion, and depth that is conveyed in the back-and-forth of our exchange. The dialogue also offers a uniquely vivid view of the Dalai Lama's remarkable personality. At one point, I told him how relieved I was that in our conversations I did not need to tamp down my enthusiasm or my force of argument. Usually I feel obliged to do so, as people can misinterpret my excitement and passion for anger. The Dalai Lama replied, "Why talk unless you feel passionately!"

Because I spoke more clearly, loudly, and distinctly than my usual mumble, translation was not often required, allowing more fluidity in our conversation than there would have been if every word I spoke had to be translated. While often the flow was interrupted when the Dalai Lama replied in Tibetan, which then had to be translated, sometimes he became so eager to proceed that he spoke in English, providing a unique picture of how he thinks. About a third of the time he spoke in English, more so in our later meetings. I have avoided the temptation to correct his grammar. He speaks with many shadings of intonation and emphasis, which of course are missing on the printed page, but the sense of what it is like to talk with this man comes across most clearly in the untranslated sections.

I hope you find our conversations as invigorating and thought-provoking as we did.