



*The Dalai Lama in the study of his home in Dharamsala, India.*

# At Home with the Dalai Lama

BY VICTOR CHAN



Morning at the Dalai Lama's residence: His Holiness with one of his personal attendants.

Victor Chan had a unique opportunity to spend some private time with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. He writes to his daughters about what he learned that special morning.

### Dear Lina and Kira,

You are now sixteen and nineteen years old and starting to chart a course for your own lives. Gone are the days when we had seemingly endless time to just sit and talk. I miss hanging out with you on the beach and going for long trips in our Westfalia camper when you were dutifully receptive to what I had to say.

One story I wish I had told you was about the morning I spent with the Dalai Lama. It was a deeply meaningful experience for me. Those few hours I was with him gave me a clear snapshot of how he spends his time in private, away from the limelight. He hardly spoke to me at the time. But what he did that morning spoke volumes and has relevance for all of us.

So I decided to write you this letter.

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PHOTO BY DON FARBER

I was working on the manuscript for *The Wisdom of Forgiveness*, which I coauthored with His Holiness, when he invited me to spend a morning with him at his home in Dharamsala, India. I had traveled with him to four continents and interviewed him many times, but I had never been in the inner sanctum of his residence. For once, I didn't mind getting up in what was, for me, the middle of the night.

At 3:45 a.m. I was sitting on a small piece of carpet on the floor of the Dalai Lama's meditation room. The space was serene and gorgeous, its elegance understated. There was room for a desk, a meditation alcove, and a small sitting and dining area. Display cases made of precious wood held bronzes of different sizes, ritual implements, and stacks of ancient loose-leaf Tibetan scriptures. Heavy drapes were drawn back to expose a floor-to-ceiling window, and in the predawn light I could just make out the silhouette of the Himalayas.

At a time when only the street dogs were up, the Dalai Lama began his prostrations. From a standing position he knelt, then stretched his body full-length down on the floor, only a thin cushion insulating his torso from the parquet. His arms were fully extended beyond his head; his palms, each resting on a square piece of fabric, were cocked at an acute angle with fingers pointing to the ceiling.

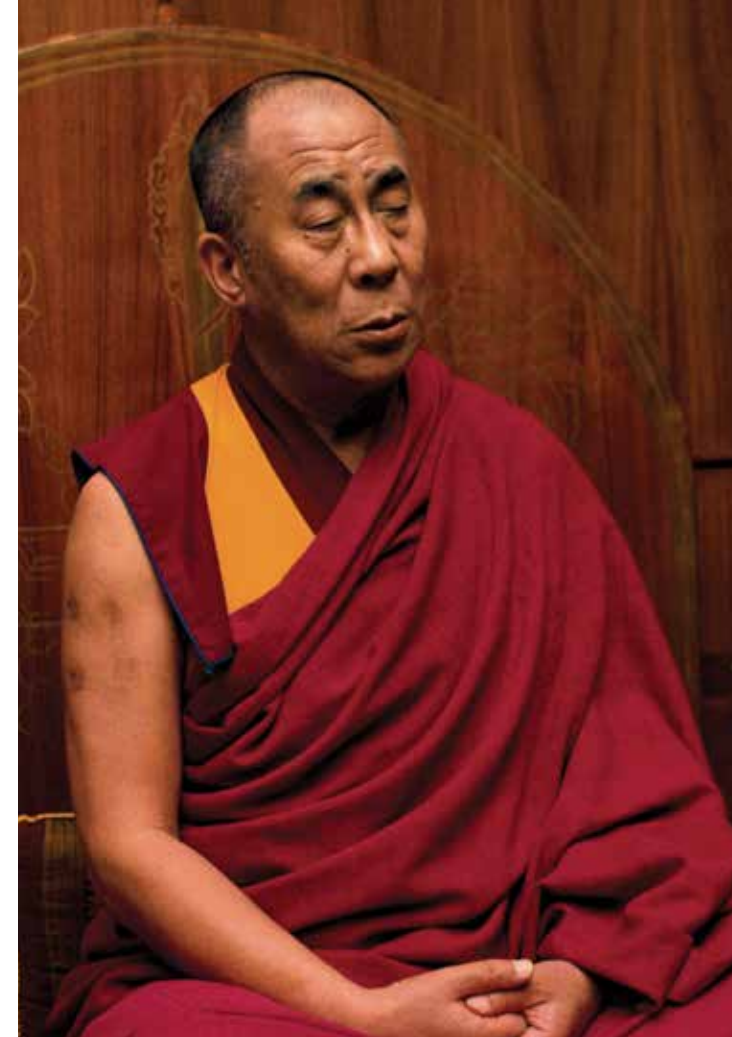
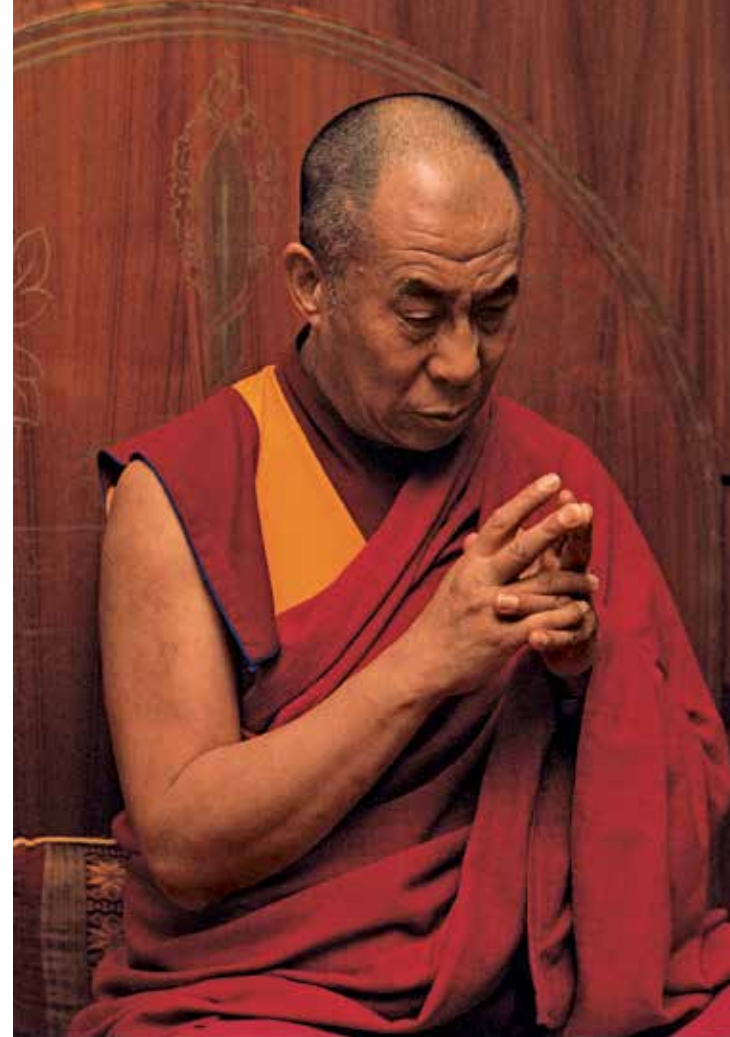
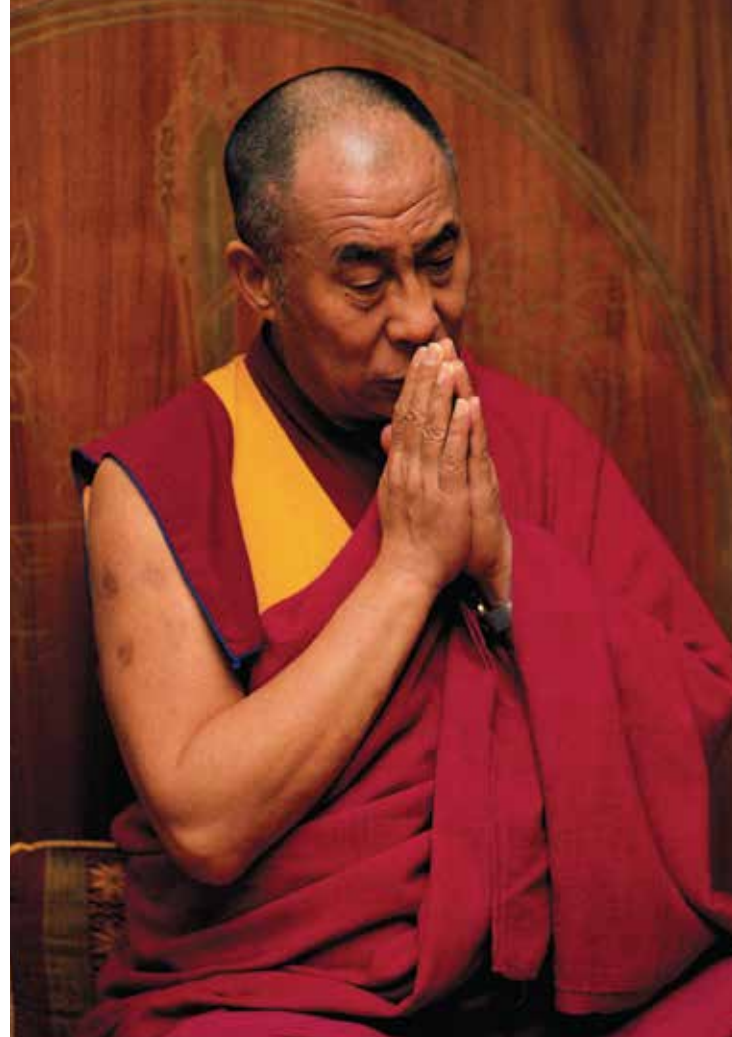
Then, with a practiced motion he slid his hands backward toward his thighs for support, folded his body into a kneeling position, and stood up straight again. He placed his palmed hands on the crown of his head, lowered them smoothly to his chest, and went down full-length on the floor again. Then he repeated the sequence.

I lost count after a while, but I figured he must have done about three dozen full prostrations. The Dalai Lama has practiced prostrations nearly every day of his life, and if someone were counting, I'm sure the total would come to well over one million repetitions over his seven decades.

*(Top to bottom) The Dalai Lama begins each day with prostrations to the Buddha; lighting the incense on his shrine; reading in his study.*



PHOTOS BY JAMES NACHTWAY



The face of wisdom and compassion: the Dalai Lama in meditation.

With his prostrations done, he walked to a treadmill tucked away by the window. He hung his prayer beads on the handlebar next to a draped towel and began to pace rapidly on the moving belt. Almost immediately, he closed his eyes as he surrendered to the machine's rhythm and meditated as he exercised. It was a much faster version of walking meditation.

After showering, the Dalai Lama took me up to the roof of the residence. The surrounding mountains were still dark, their barely discernable outlines untouched by the sun. Tiny tendrils of smoke curled from unseen chimneys and then dissipated in the chilly air. Further down the Kangra Valley, a sprinkling of lights from the Indian towns could be seen in the distance. It was so early the birds had not yet begun their songs.

The Dalai Lama stared into the distance, absorbing the quiet, allowing all of his senses to experience the tranquil majesty of the surroundings. He was very present, undistracted by my being next to him. As I watched him, standing perfectly still, one hand lightly resting on the green metal railing, I was touched by the ineffable grace of the moment.

It was chilly and we didn't stay long on the roof. After we returned to his room, the Dalai Lama immediately went into meditation. He sat on a cushion behind his desk, a circular, gold-painted mahogany panel at his back. He glasses were off, and the entirety of his visage, the embodiment of a life lived to the fullest,

was on display. There were dark pouches beneath his eyes, and deep fissures ran down the sides of his face to his chin. His face effortlessly projected gravitas and wisdom.

As the Dalai Lama meditated, his body swayed slightly from time to time, like a metronome. His eyes were partly closed but I could see occasional fluttering of the eyeballs within their sockets. At times they would roll upward for a couple of beats and I could see the white expanse of his eyes. His hands rested on his lap, fingers clicking his prayer beads rhythmically. I was uncomfortable, sensing my intrusion into something that was extraordinarily private.

I had no doubt the Dalai Lama was in a deep and special place. He would tell me later that his meditating mind was not as quiescent as, say, that of a Zen monk. It was actively shaping his motivation for the day, occupied with how to deepen his compassion. He aspires to be kind to everyone and to help relieve suffering in whatever way he can. Rational analysis at this time allows him to strengthen and ascertain an important insight: that by being compassionate to others, he himself benefits by having peace of mind.

After four hours, it was time to take my leave. He grasped my hand firmly and led me to one of the cabinets, where he picked out a small grey stone carving of an Indian monastery with an ornate central tower atop a two-story podium. Four smaller towers anchored the four directions. "Temple in Bodhi Gaya. For you," the Dalai Lama said.

PHOTOS BY DON FARRER

He was already leading me to the door when a thought struck him. He steered me to another display case full of glorious objects. "Aha!" he exclaimed in delight. He carefully took something out and handed it to me: a small mahogany carving of a wrinkled old man with a waist-length beard. It was a quintessential rendition of a Chinese sage.

At that moment, Paljor la, the Dalai Lama's personal monk attendant, quietly entered the room. He handed over a small red envelope that the Dalai Lama passed to me.

"A little red packet for you, a *lai si*, according to Chinese custom. See you soon," the Dalai Lama said with obvious warmth. Inside the envelope was a wad of American dollar bills. I felt a flush spreading across my face. I was mortified. Unexpectedly, the Dalai Lama had given me presents, perhaps even valuable things with significant provenance. And knowing that I had limited means, he had also given me a gift of money.

As I walked out of the meditation room, I was struck by how pleased the Dalai Lama looked at that moment. His face was radiant. It was as if giving me things brought him a great deal of satisfaction. It manifested noticeably in his face. Some of the deep vertical lines along the sides of his cheeks had filled out; his brow appeared less furrowed, and the pouches under his eyes were a lighter shade. There was a palpable aura of well-being about him.

Lina and Kira, you know a bit about the benefits of giving from

personal experience. Our family spent a year in India when you were seven and nine. You might remember how difficult those first couple of weeks were. You had a bad dose of culture shock when you were confronted with abject poverty and overpowering misery. You felt terrible. Then you discovered the street puppies in Dharamsala, and you took pleasure in caring for them.

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I vividly remember the two of you crawling into the filthy gutters to bring food and water to the small animals. When they started to die because of a spreading virus, you threw yourselves into fundraising, trying to buy enough vaccine to save them. This act of caring, putting others' welfare before your own, buoyed your spirits dramatically.

As Shantideva, a ninth-century Indian sage whose teachings influenced the Dalai Lama profoundly, wrote: "All the joy



From his hilltop residence, the Dalai Lama looks out on the Himalayan valley that separates the Indian subcontinent from his Tibetan homeland.

the world contains has come through wishing the happiness of others.” As the Dalai Lama has said often, “If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.”

After leaving the Dalai Lama’s residence, I went to a café in the Dharamsala bazaar. Over a surprisingly good cappuccino, I reflected on my experiences over the past few hours. I had seen a routine that was simple, even mundane. The Dalai Lama prostrated, exercised on the treadmill, took in his surroundings on the roof, meditated, and gave me things. Nothing out of the ordinary, really. Yet I could still feel the glow of goodwill he had emanated.

I’d seen a man who takes good care of himself, physically and spiritually. I knew that his morning routine does not vary year in and year out. It takes discipline, perseverance, and self-control to get up every morning at 3:30, to work on spiritual development for a few hours before beginning his onerous official duties. The Dalai Lama has been doing that for decades, even when he is several time zones away from his home.

The Dalai Lama has told me repeatedly that he is not fond of exercise. But as someone with a scientific bent of mind who keeps up with the latest advances in health, he knows it is important. He is acutely aware of the passage of time, and of the imperative of not

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squandering it. His ability to fulfill as much as possible his mission to help one and all depends on how well his body is tended.

I also know that he wasn’t a particularly good student when he was young. He had a mercurial temper and was impulsive. Monastic disciplines like meditation and scriptural study did not come naturally to him.

“Around seven or eight,” the Dalai Lama told me in an earlier meeting, a mischievous gleam in his eyes, “I had no interest in study. Only play. But one thing: my mind since young, quite sharp, can learn easily. This brings laziness. So my tutor always keep one whip, a yellow whip, by his side. When I saw the yellow whip, the holy whip for holy student the Dalai Lama, I studied. Out of fear. Even at that age I know, if I study, no holy pain.”

Despite his reluctance to study when he was a child, the Dalai

PHOTOS BY JAMES NACHTWAL

PHOTO BY SUSANNE MARTIN

Lama applied himself every morning. With perseverance and self-control, he learned to sit still for long periods. Gradually he was better able to control his errant impulses. Meditation and study came before play; delayed gratification became a matter of course.

For a long time, psychologists focused on raw intelligence as the most important predictor of success in life. Nowadays most would agree that IQ is largely at the mercy of self-control. The brightest kids cannot always get by purely on their brainpower. Long-term success depends on the ability to self-regulate, to mitigate harmful impulses and enhance life-affirming ones.

Kira, I think you can relate to this. All through school, you used to dive into your homework, not leaving it until the last minute. This speaks well for your ability to delay gratification. I think you relish the feeling of accomplishment that comes with discharging your responsibilities in a timely manner. It lifts a burden from your shoulders and frees you to do other, perhaps more fun, things. I’m very glad you have internalized this useful habit, one that could prove important in your life.

The Dalai Lama has lectured often on the importance of self-control. He believes it is a necessary element of spirituality. It gives us the means to cultivate and hone our life-affirming qualities. It allows us to question our behavior and open up the possibility of remedies. He likens our undisciplined mind to an untamed, rampaging elephant. If we are able to instill a good dose of inner discipline, we are more likely to foster the development of compassion, the foundation of genuine happiness.

It is obvious that meditation is important to the Dalai Lama. He spends a big part of his day doing it, and I have seen him invigorated after his morning session. The Dalai Lama was quoted recently as saying, “If every eight-year-old is taught meditation, we will eliminate violence from the world within one generation.”

More and more people are meditating these days. But I suspect that despite good intentions, not many are able to keep it up in a sustained way. Sooner or later, pressing concerns interrupt the routine for many.

For the Dalai Lama, meditation is like brushing his teeth. It is a daily

habit. He does it every morning and every evening. By my calculation, he has devoted well over 100,000 hours of his life to meditation. And without a doubt, he is the happiest person I’ve ever known. His sense of humor, his ability to laugh and to enjoy life, is legendary. The Dalai Lama has given me some simple tips for integrating meditation into a daily routine. Don’t try to be too ambitious; temper your impatience. Don’t practice for



His Holiness walking with the author.

too long in the beginning, not more than ten or fifteen minutes per session. But do it fairly often—a few times a day—and make it a regular habit.

Creating a sustained rhythm, making meditation a daily habit, is the Dalai Lama’s secret to increasing his reservoir of well-being. And in recent years, science has confirmed the close correlation between meditation and genuine happiness.

“But progress takes time,” the Dalai Lama told me. “It’s not like switching on a light. More like kindling a fire: start from small spark, then becomes bigger and bigger, more light, more light. Like that.”

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Here are some things I learned that morning. Exercise. It is good for body and soul. Meditation is good too. No surprises there. I'm not telling you anything new. But I was also struck by a few old-fashioned insights embedded in the Dalai Lama's morning routine. Nothing earth-shattering, but it was good to see them as lived experiences.

The first is self-control and all that it implies: delayed gratification, discipline, perseverance. The second is habit. Forming an unvarying routine helps create sustainability and success in everything we want to do. The third is the gratification that comes from giving, from being helpful to others. These are all practical, proven strategies we can use to make our lives more successful, more flourishing.

The deepest insight presented itself fleetingly when I was on the roof with His Holiness. Even now I glimpse only its sketchiest contours. I don't expect that the two of you can relate to it easily at this time, but it is worth keeping at the back of your mind. It was on that roof that I got a brief sense of interdependence and its significance.

The Dalai Lama was in a reflective state of mind, and he hardly spoke to me. But those few minutes in the chilly predawn touched me with unexpected intensity.

I intuited his powerful and very real connection to everything

around him, a connection that transcends thought.

I was reminded of an earlier interview I had with him. He had told me about something he'd experienced when he was in his late twenties. Whenever he looked at something—a table, a chair, another person—it was as if it had no substance, no physical essence. There was an “absence of solid reality,” the Dalai Lama told me.

Seeing that I was nonplussed, he elaborated. “Those moments like picture show, like watching TV or movie. It is especially like watching a movie. Feeling something real going on, but at the same time, while your eyes looking there, your mind knows it is mere picture. Only acting, not real.”

This way of seeing, this subtle perception of reality, is the bedrock of the Dalai Lama's spirituality. He knows, cognitively as well as experientially, that everything is subject to the law of impermanence and that our existence depends on a complex web of relations. It is as if his personal boundaries have dissolved. As a result, he feels a profound kinship with everything and everyone.

Lina and Kira, this sums up what went through my mind about that morning. I will always remember those few hours I spent with the Dalai Lama. He didn't give me any wisdom teachings, not in the usual sense. He ignored me most of the time. But as you can tell, I learned a few things of some importance—things that are not easy to express in words.

With much affection, your daddy. ♦