

Chapter 17

Interview With the Dalai Lama

“And for this Friday, December 19, 2036, we bring you a special edition of the Newshour. I’m Katherine Parks and this evening we present another in our series ‘Perspectives on Change in America’. I’m honored to bring you a conversation with his holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso. Who better to provide us with a spiritual perspective on change?”

The Dalai Lama’s face beamed from the right half of the split-screen, Parks looked out from the other.

“Your holiness, thank you for joining us.”

“It is most certainly my pleasure, Katherine.” His words emerged slowly, as if each expressed a complete thought. “When we last met, I believe it was at your Washington studio. Unfortunately, my age now makes travel difficult.”

“Yes, your holiness. Last year you celebrated your hundredth birthday. Can you tell us your feelings about having reached this landmark?”

The monk smiled. Advanced age infused his face with a certain translucence.

“I am quite amazed to be here, Katherine.” He chuckled playfully. “I truly did not expect it. But since you ask about my feelings, I’ll tell you.”

Parks waited as the monk adjusted his eyeglasses and gathered his thoughts.

“The body you see is old. But, you must be aware, Katherine, that it is merely a shell, a vessel. It is not me. I am the spirit inhabiting the shell, and that spirit remains young. That spirit feels just as it did so many years ago when my brother and I played football on the lawns of the Potala Palace. I do find it bothersome, now be constrained by

the limitations of this body, particularly by the sensation of pain. After all," he looked at her through the camera lens, "I am only human. But soon, I will be liberated. Like the hermit crab of the oceans, I will find another shell. And, when I take up residence in that shell," his eyes sparkled, "you must interview me once again."

She laughed, not expecting this suggestion, but the query that followed was that of a journalist. "How will I know you?"

The creases around his eyes deepened. "That is exactly the right question, Katherine. I will make myself known to you, but you must be prepared to interview an ant or perhaps a mouse."

Parks smiled. She had always enjoyed interviewing him. She was never quite sure when he was joking. Perhaps he didn't know himself. He put her at ease.

"There have been rumors that the Chinese may end your exile and allow you to return to the Potala Palace. I take it that you're aware of these discussions."

"When I fled Tibet so many years ago, I had to detach myself from the longing for my home. It is the sort of labor that lies at the core of my spiritual practice, but I am afraid that I am no better at such things than anyone else. Should I return to the Potala Palace, I must detach myself from the pain of leaving my new home in Dharamsala and I must detach myself from the joy of returning to Lhasa. All of this detachment feels like a great deal of work for an old man." He considered a moment longer. "I neither wish for it to happen, nor do I wish it not to happen. I am—," the smile on his face widened, "entirely neutral."

Parks hesitated before asking her next question. "Your holiness, the last time we talked I asked if you feel that you have reached a state of enlightenment. You told me that you had not. Do you feel any closer to that now?"

"No closer, Katherine. But no further either. The truth is that I am not the Buddha. I have no more right than you, or anyone, to expect enlightenment. And yet, we cannot help wanting what is beyond

our reach.” He looked directly into the camera. “It is a dilemma. Can we stop ourselves from wanting everything, from being greedy, from the desire to experience all before we die?”

Parks was about to go on when the monk continued.

“For me, it is like Friends.”

Parks waited, not certain where her guest was going.

“You know, Katherine, how much I enjoyed that TV program. Such warm people, enjoying love and friendship in the face of difficulties, some of their own making. The final episode left me with a sense of loss. It was, perhaps, a happy ending, but I wanted more. I wanted these friends to remain with me. I felt unsatisfied. But then I made a discovery.” The monk paused for a moment. “I discovered that I could watch all the seasons again and again. My friends had not vanished. They had moved onto the wheel of life, living their lives again and again in this state of samsara. And who is to say that, as their story repeats itself for eons, they will not reach a state of perfection. But, as for myself, Kathleen. I remain a simple monk who has not reached enlightenment.”

“Your holiness, I also asked you whether you were disturbed by the prospect that you might be the last Dalai Lama. You said that you were not bothered by this. You told me that nothing is permanent.”

He smiled. “You have a good memory. That is exactly my feeling.”

“Many Americans believe that their country has changed in some fundamental way,” Parks went on, “that America is no longer a nation but a collection of disparate states. I know you follow the news of America. What is your view of where America has been heading?”

The Dalai Lama considered this question for some time before speaking.

“You know, Kathleen, that I am a great admirer of America, particularly of American culture. Among nations, I have always thought that your country was in the best position to create change

for good in this world. But, when you have a land with many millions of people, it is natural for individuals to hold different ideas. Such differences cannot be easily hidden in a nation where people are free to express themselves. I admire the liveliness of your debates and the fearlessness with which Americans wade into difficult issues. When is it morally justified to end the life of an unborn child? A difficult question even for the Buddha, and impossible for a simple monk like me. And yet, people must make such decisions.” Now the monk seemed to catch himself. “I have not answered your question, have I?”

Parks smiled and shook her head.

The old monk repeated her question, “What is my view of where America has been heading? On one level, nothing matters. America doesn’t matter. Tibet doesn’t matter. China doesn’t matter. We are a dream in the mind of the Buddha. And yet, on another level, on the level of dharma, of what we perceive as reality, it is our duty to fulfill our obligations in life as perfectly as we are able.”

“And you think that America has fallen short?”

He was quiet for a moment. “No one can know the dharma of another. And we cannot know if this concept of dharma applies to nations in the same way as it does to individuals. The teaching of the Buddha provide no guidance. But let us suppose that this is the case. Let us say that your nation’s dharma, its duty, lies in perfecting its democracy.”

Parks was hanging on the monk’s words.

“You are correct, Katherine, I do closely follow news of the US and, as any observer, I have formed an opinion, but it is not for me, a Tibetan monk, to say whether America is perfecting its democracy. That is for Americans to determine.”

Parks looked disappointed, but she did not press him to answer as she might have done with her other guests.

The holy man laughed. “Do not be sad, Katherine. It takes an

immeasurable length of time for one to escape the wheel of samsara and reach a state of moksha. America is so young. One can hardly expect this. But here is what I can tell you. One cannot move towards perfection without change. No one can be certain if some particular change will bring them closer or further from perfection. We can only be certain that, in the absence of change, one cannot progress. Perhaps we can say the same of America. It is not necessary to evaluate whether any particular change brings America closer to an ideal. Better to celebrate all change. Without change, there is never a possibility of reaching perfection.”

As the Dalai Lama spoke, Parks felt herself transition from interviewer to student. She found the idea of celebrating all change to be counterintuitive, and yet, she could find no flaw in the monk’s logic, that standing still would certainly take one no closer to perfection.

“The Buddha experienced many changes during his life. He abandoned his family to wander as an aesthete. Was this a ‘good’ thing or a ‘bad’ thing? One could argue either way, but it is a foolish question to ask. The Buddha’s abandonment of his family was simply a change. Must we evaluate it? The Buddha discovered that starving his body brought him no closer to enlightenment. That too is neither good nor bad, it was simply a stage along the Buddha’s path to enlightenment.”

The Dalai Lama went on before Parks could reply. “America is a shell, like my aging body. It contains not a single spirit, but millions. Those millions spin on the wheel of life and death just as you and I. Sometimes there is order and sometimes chaos. The Buddha’s life shows that the path to enlightenment is tangled as a ball of thread. Each individual must follow their dharma, must fulfill the duties of their role in life as best they can. It is, perhaps, too much to expect that America will progress towards perfection. It is possible, however, to find joy in the acceptance of change.”

Parks was watching her producer through the wide window of the control room. For the past two minutes, he’d been motioning across

his throat with a forefinger. The interview had already gone long overtime.

“Thank you, your holiness. I look forward to our next interview... in whatever form you present yourself.”