

His Holiness the Dalai Lama Speaks on Aging and Death in Switzerland

DHARMA AND THE MODERN WORLD

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His Holiness the Dalai Lama at Université de Lausanne, Switzerland, April 2013. Photo by Jon Schmidt.

In April 2013, His Holiness the Dalai Lama visited Switzerland. His Holiness was in Fribourg April 13-16 at the invitation of Gendun Drupa Centre, the FPMT center in Muraz/Sierre, Switzerland; Rigdzin Community; and the Foundation for the Preservation of the Tibetan Culture. During the weekend in Fribourg, His Holiness taught on The Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment by Atisha Dipamkara, conferred a White Tara initiation and gave a public talk on "Ethics Beyond Religions." On April 15, His Holiness met with scientists from Université de

Lausanne. The next day, His Holiness went to Bern to dialogue with university students in a session called "Towards a Sustainable Future."

Séverine Gondouin, spiritual program coordinator for Gendun Drupa Centre, summarizes His Holiness' main points from the April 15 discussion in Lausanne on "Living and Dying in Peace, Cross-views on the Elderly":

The event began with a thought exercise proposed to the panelists and audience: A child comes to his grandpa and asks, "Grandpa is it nice to grow old?" What would you answer? Other questions followed: How can we grow old well? Is there spiritual health and spiritual illnesses?

His Holiness the Dalai Lama spoke about preparing for old age and the importance of education for developing secular ethics or, more simply, a good heart. From His Holiness' point of view, ethics prevents our disturbing emotions – anger, jealousy, craving, etc. – from arising. His Holiness also suggested that in addition to caring for our physical health, we also need hygiene for our emotions. His Holiness stressed that when we have compassion and warmheartedness, we cannot be lonely. It is our responsibility to train our mind to be peaceful and to keep it clear and sharp. And this has to be learned from an early age. Time is an important factor because developing inner qualities is a long process.

If our mind is trained, His Holiness continued, physical suffering that comes with old age won't disturb us much. He suggested that we should have the determination and motivation to develop love and compassion. We need to be equipped with internal skills, to develop internal resources. Otherwise, if we are used to looking for pleasure in the sensorial world, when we grow old and lose our ability to perceive sights, sounds and smells, it becomes difficult.

His Holiness remarked that we may think "I'm not lucky," but reminded us that all have difficulties. He encouraged us to look at others' problems and feel that we're the same human being and that our potential is the same. Concerning people who are losing cognitive abilities, like dementia, His Holiness stressed the importance of surrounding them with affection, because affection goes beyond words.

In the afternoon, His Holiness answered questions about death. Seventy percent of the Swiss population dies in a hospital. Sociologists were concerned about this fact, as many people don't

like this idea. But His Holiness surprised everyone, re-framing this fact into an idea of being so lucky to have access to medical attention; many people in India would love to die in a hospital because that would mean everything possible had been done, so they could die without regret!

His Holiness also discussed the delicate question of euthanasia. He emphasized that one should reflect on every individual case through analysis. If it is done out of impatience, then one should not answer to that impulse. But if there's too much suffering and problems for everyone, if there's no hope, if it's too many expenses, then perhaps, why not? He suggested that we have to think in terms of long-term benefit.

His Holiness advised that we need to prepare ourselves mentally in order to deal better with death when it happens. We can become familiarized with it, accepting it is part of life. We can visualize the process of the dissolution every day and train in lucid dreams. His Holiness commented that the best would be to die with joy, and if that's not possible, to die without fear, or at least to die without regret.

There was also a debate about rituals. His Holiness expressed skepticism about them, saying that we really need to be careful and to understand what we are doing. For him, it is much more useful to think about death while we are living than trying to do something for the dead.

His Holiness was characteristically humorous, laughing and expressing his loving-kindness. Humble, he answered many times "I don't know" throughout the event. He brought to university students many ideas for research, including studying the importance of surroundings for seniors and mental health's link to physical health.