

Dear Respected Dalai Lama,

When I first picked up your book, Freedom in Exile, in fifth grade, I read a few pages and put it down. It stayed in my bookshelf, its bland gray spine blending into the background. It was just a book and a boring one at that. Then something changed, my father passed away. Reading became my outlet to escape the reality around every corner of my life. Suddenly, this bland gray spine stood out on my shelf and history repeated itself. I picked it up once more, but this time, instead of turning straight to chapter one like I usually do, I turned to the title page. In the top corner, my father's neat print said, "Ajay Kumar, March 1991." What a strange date, I thought, three months before my birthday, and twelve years and six months before his death. When I started, my purpose for reading this book was to see what my father saw in this book. Yet as I read, my purpose changed. I began to look to you as a mentor, and thought fondly of you as if I had met you in person. The words written on those yellow pages, of events so far away in time and place, offered indirect advice about things that happen every day. I began to look forward to the twenty or so pages I read every night and the thoughts I would ponder until sleep closed my eyes.

I slowly read through the details of your childhood. It reminds me of all I have to be thankful for. It amazed me to see what humble things were such luxuries in Tibet. I look at all my possessions and see things that could go to clothes, food, and toys for another child. So now, whenever I see something I think I need, I ask myself, "How long will I use this for?" The answer is usually "not for a very long time," so I won't buy the product. I will go home, take a dollar from myself and put it in a jar every time I have to ask myself this question and the answer is like the one above. That jar of money goes to something I will need in the future. I do not know what, possibly something like medical school. That money will pay for something that will enable me to help others, and not myself. Every time I read about your childhood in your book, I pray that some child somewhere, will get one book, preferably one of my favorites, and will see things in the book I have never seen in it before. Since I have read the childhood part of your book twelve times so far, I have prayed that prayer twelve times. So perhaps one day, I will meet one of those twelve (or more as I read the part again and again) children; that book will be one of their favorites too, and we will compare our opinions on it.

Then, I read how you responded to every arrogant Chinese official with respect and humility. That does not astound me. I knew a person like that, one that I wish I could be more like. You may have guessed that person was my dad. The astounding part is that you, as a leader, deserved to be treated with respect. Yet you were not, and you still did not demand what you deserved. So now, I keep a record. Not one on paper, but one in my head. I heard somewhere that the materialistic way of discipline, or the reward and punishment system, is not the system that will change your character; it will change your habits. A dollar could not punish me as well as my own mind does, and so I change, slowly but surely, to become a better person. "N.P.G.," my dad used to say, and in our "code language", it meant nice, polite, and gentle. So finally I listen, not because he is dead, but because I should have all along, and now I see what difference it can make in my life, as it did in yours.

You never hold a grudge. At the end of the book, you say you do not hold bad feelings against the Chinese. You did not think that the few that are doing harm are like all the Chinese, and that touched me deeply. Many people today base opinions on stereotypes, or just a few people of a race, and that is upsetting. I was glad that you emphasized that "whilst maybe several thousand are participating in acts of cruelty at any one moment, I believe there must be several million performing acts of kindness."

Sometimes, I feel like a Tibetan refugee in a strange place. The world looks so unfamiliar without my father. But this book is like your visits to the refugee camps in India, and I finish the book refreshed and ready to face new challenges, just like a Tibetan refugee after your visit at their camp. The refugees beat all the odds

and survive, and I plan to do the same. I look to the Tibetans' futures as something to compare my own future with.

Several times since my father's death, I have asked myself, "What does it mean to be alive?" Does it mean to love, or to hurt? If all good things come with bad things attached, what is the point in living? Often, I turn to the last page of your book, where the prayer is underlined several times: "For as long as space endures/And for as long as living beings remain/Until then may I too, abide/to dispel the misery of the world." Those lines have brought clarity to my thoughts and have helped me see past the mist of sorrow to my future that lies ahead. It reminds me that others suffer too, and some, such as my family, would suffer more if I were to give up.

Before reading your book, I did not personalize the effects of wars and other horrible events. Therefore, I did not realize the true magnanimity of the consequences born by the world. Now I look at September 11, 2001, Iraq, Tibet, and countless other places more carefully. Instead of heroes, gallantry, and honor (as I saw in the past), I see my dad. I see him dying thousands of times, one for each person dead. I see a girl like myself, having her world fall apart. I see me, holding my hands over my mouth, piecing together a phone conversation that ripped my world apart...and I imagine all the families and people that have heard the same thing. I see families struggling to get on with life, hidden tears glittering in dark corners, and everyone trying to be brave for one another. This is what happens during war, and your book made me realize that though these things may take place far away, they are very real. However, I also see the brotherhood that holds the humankind together, and that the human spirit is the same in all of us. All of us would try to be brave for the people we cared about. All of us love and care about people, and all of us will bear pain that comes with love. That is the human spirit, full of courage, love, honor and strength. In that way, all of us are the same. I think your book has changed my perspective and has made me consider others and things I would not have cared about before. You have made me think, cry, laugh, sigh and made me feel like I understand the people of Tibet, though I do not even come close. But one thing I have done is changed myself, so I am a better person than I was before I read your book.

At one part of the book, you tell a European to tell the world about Tibet when he asks what he can do to help. I promise to share with people the plights of the new Tibets of today, the places that do not have the choices they should. I will keep them all in my thoughts and prayers. As they say "There is always someone better than you in this world," there is always someone with more problems. Reading this book, I learned to think of others, not just myself. I also learned to think about the consequences of our actions more deeply and to really think about the things I do, and whether they are necessary. . I now have to ask myself, "What can we do to avoid this?" and "Are any human beings truly bad, and not just corrupted?" "Is there a fair and just punishment for anything?" I have yet to find the answers to these questions, but it is a step in the right direction just to ask them. Dalai Lama, thank you for writing a book I believe has and will change my life.

Natasha Kumar