

Ethics is About Knowing and Doing



Courtesy of robertharding/Alamy.

***Beyond Religion: Ethics for a Whole New World,*
His Holiness the Dalai Lama
Excerpts from Chapter 8 (Ethical Mindfulness in Everyday Life),
pp. 103–112**

Ethics is not simply a matter of knowing. More important, it is about doing. For this reason, even the most sophisticated ethical understanding, if it is not applied in daily life, is somewhat pointless. Living ethically requires not only the conscious adoption of an ethical outlook but also a commitment to developing and applying inner values in our daily lives.

Now, regarding the question of how to put ethics into practice in everyday life, it may be helpful to consider the process as having three aspects or levels—each progressively more advanced and dependent for its success upon the former. As outlined in some classical Buddhist texts, these are as follows: an ethic of restraint—deliberately refraining from doing actual or potential harm to others; an ethic of virtue—actively cultivating and enhancing our positive behavior and inner values; and an ethic of altruism—dedicating our lives, genuinely and selflessly, to the welfare of others.

To be effective, these three stages must be considered in relation to all our behavior. In other words, not just in relation to our outward physical actions, but also in relation to what we say, and ultimately to our very thoughts and intentions. . . .

The Ethic of Restraint

Regarding certain kinds of obviously harmful behavior, all the world's major faiths and the humanistic traditions converge. Murder, theft, and inappropriate sexual conduct such as sexual exploitation are by definition harmful to others. So of course they should be abandoned.

But the ethic of restraint calls for more than this. Before we can contemplate actively benefiting others, we must first of all ensure that we do them no harm, even by our actions which are not immediately violent.

With regard to this principle of doing no harm, I am particularly impressed and humbled by my brothers and sisters in the Jain tradition. Jainism, which is something like a twin religion to Buddhism, places great emphasis on the virtue of nonviolence, or *ahimsa*, toward all beings. For example, Jain monks go to great lengths to ensure that they do not accidentally tread on insects or harm other living beings in their everyday activities.

However, the exemplary behavior of Jain monks and nuns is hard for all of us to emulate. Even for those whose circle of primary concern is restricted to humanity rather than encompassing all sentient beings, it can be very hard not to contribute to harming others through our actions in indirect ways. Consider, for example, how rivers come to be polluted: perhaps by mining companies extracting minerals, or industrial plants producing components that are crucial to the technologies we use on a daily basis. Every user of those technologies thereby is partly responsible for the pollution and thus contributes negatively to the lives of others. Unfortunately, it is perfectly possible to harm others indirectly through our actions without any intention of doing so.

So, realistically, I think the most important things we can all do to minimize the harm we inflict in our everyday lives is to apply discernment in our behavior, and to follow that natural sense of conscientiousness which arises from the enhanced awareness that discernment brings us.

Harm Caused by Nonviolent Means

While harm inflicted by outward actions can normally be seen, the suffering we inflict on others with words can be more hidden but is often no less damaging. This is particularly the case in our closest, most intimate relationships. We humans are quite sensitive, and it is easy to inflict suffering on those around us through our careless use of harsh words.

We can also inflict harm with dishonesty, slander, and divisive gossip. No doubt we have all, at some time or another, felt the negative consequences of such idle talk. It undermines trust and affection and can create all kinds of unfortunate misunderstandings and enmities between people. Here, as in other areas, we need to observe the "golden rule" found in all of the world's ethical systems: "Treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself" or "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

When it comes to avoiding harmful actions of body and speech, in addition to the fundamental rule, I personally find a list of six principles from a text by the second-century Indian Thinking Nagarjuna to be helpful. In this text, Nagarjuna is offering advice to an Indian monarch of the time. The six principles are as follows:

Avoid excessive use of intoxicants.

Uphold the principle of right livelihood.

Ensure that one's body, speech, and mind are nonviolent.

Treat others with respect.

Honor those worthy of esteem, such as parents, teachers, and those who are kind.

Be kind to others.

In spelling out what constitute "right livelihood," Nagarjuna lists the following examples of a wrong approach to livelihood: trying to gain material benefits from

others through pretense; using attractive words to gain things from others through deceit; praising another's possessions with the intention of trying to obtain them for oneself; forcibly taking what belongs to someone else; and extolling the qualities of what one has obtained in the past with the hope of receiving more.

Most of these pertain, in one form or another, to being dishonest. Dishonesty destroys the foundations of others' trust and is profoundly harmful. Transparency in our dealings with others is therefore tremendously important. Many of the scandals we hear about today, notably the corruption which is observable at so many levels and in so many fields—government, the judiciary, international finance, politics, media, even international sports—are related to this issue of right livelihood.

Heedfulness, Mindfulness, and Awareness

Just as a carpenter would not think of mending a chair without having a chisel, hammer, and saw near at hand, so too do we require a basic toolkit to help us in our daily effort to live ethically. In Buddhist tradition this toolkit is described in terms of three interrelated factors known as *heedfulness*, *mindfulness*, and *introspective awareness*. These three ideas may also be useful in a secular context. Together they can help us retain our core values in everyday life and guide our day-to-day behavior so that it becomes more in tune with the aim of bringing benefit to self and others.

The first of these, heedfulness, refers to adopting an overall stance of caution. The Tibetan term *bhakyö*, is often translated as "heedfulness" or "conscientiousness," carries the sense of being careful and attentive. For example, if we are diagnosed as having diabetes, the doctor will advise us to be very careful with our diet. We must avoid sugar, salt, and fatty foods to keep our blood pressure and insulin in check. The doctor will warn us that if we fail to adhere to this dietary regime there may be serious consequences for our health. When patients care about their health, they will follow this advice and adopt an attitude of caution regarding their diet. When they are tempted to eat something they should avoid, this attitude or stance of caution will help them exercise restraint.

In one classical Buddhist text, heedfulness is illustrated with a story about a man convicted of a crime who is ordered by the king to carry a bowl of sesame oil, full to the brim, while a guard walks next to him carrying an unsheathed sword. The convict is warned that if he so much as spills a single drop of oil, he will be struck down with the sword. We can imagine how careful and vigilant the convict would be! He would have complete presence of mind and total attentiveness. The story illustrates how closely related heedfulness is to the qualities of mindfulness and awareness described below. . . .

Today there are many secularized techniques for the development of mindfulness, and these have been shown to be effective in stress reduction and the treatment of depression. As I understand it, mindfulness in this context usually refers to gaining awareness of our own patterns of behavior, including thoughts and feelings, and learning to let go of those habits, thoughts, and emotions which are unhelpful. This seems a very worthwhile endeavor. . . .

Yet, in the context of living ethically on a day-to-day basis, in my view the most important meaning of mindfulness is *recollection*. In other words, mindfulness is the ability to gather oneself mentally and thereby recall one's core values and motivation. In Tibetan the word for mindfulness, *drenpa*, also means "memory," so it suggests bringing presence of mind into everyday activities. With such recollection, we are less likely to indulge our bad habits and more likely to refrain from harmful deeds. Littering, being wasteful, and overindulging oneself are all simple examples of behavior which can be improved through the application of mindfulness.

Awareness, or *sheshin* in Tibetan, means paying attention to our own behavior. It means honestly observing our behavior as it is going on, and thereby bringing it under control. By being aware of our words and actions, we guard ourselves against doing

and saying things we will alter regret. When we are angry, for instance, and if we fail to recognize that our anger is distorting our perception, we may say things we do not mean. So having the ability to monitor oneself, having, as it were, a second order level of attention is of great practical use in everyday life, as it gives us greater control over our negative behavior and enables us to remain true to our deeper motives and convictions.

Such awareness of our own behavior—our actions, thoughts, and words—is not something we can learn overnight. Rather, it develops gradually, and we become more aware, we slowly gain mastery. . . .

Practicing awareness is not quite the same as listening to your conscience, however. In Buddhist ethical theory there is no idea of the conscience as a distinct mental faculty. But being conscientious is still very important. It is described in terms of two key mental qualities, namely *self-respect* and *consideration of others*.

The first of these, self-respect, relates to having a sense of personal integrity, a self-image as a person who upholds certain values. So when we are tempted to indulge in harmful behavior, our self-image acts as a restraint, as we think “this is unbecoming of me.” The second mental quality, consideration of others, pertains to having a healthy regard for others’ opinions, especially for their potential disapproval. Together, these two factors give us an added level of caution about doing wrong which can strengthen our moral compass.

The Ethic of Virtue

If, through mindfulness, awareness, and heedfulness, we can manage to refrain from harming others in our everyday actions and words, we can start to give more serious attention to actively doing good, and this can be a source of great joy and inner confidence. We can benefit others through our actions by being warm and generous toward them, by being charitable, and by helping those in need. Therefore, when misfortune befalls others, or they make mistakes, rather than responding with ridicule or blame, we must reach out and help them. Benefiting others through our speech includes praising others, listening to their problem, and offering them advice and encouragement.

To help us bring benefit to others through our words and actions, it is useful to cultivate an attitude of sympathetic joy in others’ achievements and good fortune. This attitude is a powerful antidote against envy, which is not only a source of unnecessary suffering on the individual level but also an obstacle to our ability to reach out and engage with others. Tibetan teachers often say that such sympathetic joy is the least costly way of promoting one’s own virtues.

The Ethic of Altruism

Altruism is a genuinely selfless dedication of one’s actions and words to the benefit of others. All the world’s religious traditions recognize this as the highest form of ethical practice, and in many it is seen as the main avenue to liberation or to unity with God.

But though a complete and selfless dedication to others is the highest form of ethical practice, this does not mean that altruism cannot be undertaken by anyone. In fact many people in caring professions such as social work and health care, and also those in teaching, are involved in the pursuit of this third level of ethics. Such professions, which bring direct benefit to the lives of so many, are truly noble. Yet there are countless other ways in which ordinary people can and do lead lives which benefit others. What is required is simply that we make serving others a priority.

An important part of serving others is using discernment to assess the likely consequences of our own actions. Then, by being heedful, mindful, and attentive in our everyday lives, we will begin to gain mastery over our actions and worlds. This is the very foundation of freedom, and it is through gaining such self-mastery, using it to ensure that our actions are non-harmful at every level, that we can start to actively work for the benefit of others.



Study and Critical Thinking Questions

1. The Dalai Lama starts out saying that ethics is about both _____ and _____.
2. List and briefly explain the three aspects or levels of putting ethics into practice in daily life.
3. The Dalai Lama asserts that these aspects are not only confined to our actions, but also. . .
4. In discussing the ethics of restraint, the Dalai Lama describes this as "doing no _____." What kinds of behaviors does he discuss in this and the next section (Harm Caused by non-Violent Means) that could bring harm – thus, one should restrain from?
5. What three tools does the Dalai Lama say are needed in order to live ethically? Briefly describe what he means by each.
6. What is the Ethic of Virtue?
7. What is the Ethic of Altruism?
8. What is one point the Dalai Lama makes in this chapter that you find useful in your own thinking about yourself as an ethical leader? Please give an example of a potential situation in which one of the Dalai Lama's principles or ideas might guide you.