



# Universal Ethics

A synopsis of the book: *Ancient Wisdom, Modern World: Ethics for the New Millennium* by H.H. the Dalai Lama, Abacus, London 2000.

Dominique Side

In this book, the Dalai Lama proposes an ethical system for the modern world that is not contingent on any particular religion but, at the same time, is in harmony with all religions. He suggests there are basic ethical values that are universally valid and applicable regardless of religious affiliation or culture. In a world where there is a diversity of religious beliefs, and also a sizeable proportion of humanity with no religious beliefs at all, he sees an urgent need for a shared understanding of ethics that can underpin human lives and activity across the planet.

Another salient feature of the current context is a very widespread belief in science and its technological marvels. For many people in the developed world, the materialistic views on which science is based have supplanted traditional religious views. The Dalai Lama presents detailed arguments to show the limitations of materialism and to show just how vital it is to introduce an ethical perspective into everything we do.

The arguments and logic put forward by the Dalai Lama draw from key points of Buddhist thought such as: the primacy of mind in determining the results of our actions, which points to the role of morality; the complex interdependence of all things which justifies altruism; and an understanding of suffering as a fundamental experience that we all share and that we all deeply wish to be free of. These points are never asserted dogmatically, however, rather they are argued in the language of psychology and everyday experience. After laying the conceptual foundations of this ethical system, he goes on to look at how it can be applied by individuals and by society.

## The foundations of ethics

The starting point of this entire discussion is the observation that suffering is an experience that all beings have in common and that therefore has the potential to bring us closer together. Whether people are rich or poor, educated or illiterate, young or old, everyone is subject to unavoidable forms of suffering such as illness, old age and death. And especially in the developed world millions of people experience what is termed avoidable suffering, meaning suffering that is primarily mental and the result of attitudes or lifestyles that can be changed. People live this paradox where on the surface they enjoy everything they need but below the surface so many feel uneasy and dissatisfied with their lives, lonely and depressed. They then resort to tranquillizers and sleeping pills or various types of addiction and many personal and social problems ensue.

A second observation is that everyone desires to be happy and avoid suffering. We invariably hope that through this or that action we can bring about happiness. Since the wish to be happy is universal and knows no boundaries, the Dalai Lama considers it to be in our nature. As such, he says, it needs no



justification and is validated by the simple fact that we naturally and correctly want this.<sup>1</sup> And yet he depicts modern society as a place where there are tremendous sufferings of all kinds so that, despite our yearning to be happy, we somehow end up doing things that result in the opposite. In this regard, he identifies the root cause of unavoidable forms of suffering to be ethical problems. The conflicted actions that lead us in the wrong direction of further suffering each reflect our understanding of what is right or wrong, positive or negative, appropriate or inappropriate.

When we are faced with ethical dilemmas, we might discover for ourselves that scientific knowledge is of no help. Indeed, one of the greatest limitations of science appears to be its inability to provide ethical guidance. So, to make more informed choices we might consider what the law says, but ultimately the law cannot tell us how to act in a moral sense and even the best legal systems cannot, in themselves, eradicate wrongdoing.

To address the individual and social sufferings of this age, the Dalai Lama therefore calls not for an economic, political or technological revolution but for a spiritual revolution. A purely external approach will not suffice as demonstrated by historical events of the last century. At the root of our ethical difficulties is a neglect of the inner dimension of our existence. He goes on to make a clear distinction between religion and spirituality. Religion he takes to be concerned with faith in claims to salvation and their associated prayers, rituals and so on. Spirituality he takes to be concerned with qualities of the human spirit such as love and compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, contentment, a sense of responsibility and a sense of harmony. Crucially, these are the very qualities that bring about happiness and social harmony. Arguably we can do without religion, but we cannot do without these basic spiritual qualities.<sup>2</sup>

The spiritual practice recommended by the Dalai Lama is two-pronged. On the one hand it is about acting out of concern for the well-being of others, and on the other hand it entails transforming ourselves so that we become more readily disposed to do so. It means a radical re-orientation away from our habitual preoccupation with self in the recognition that our life and our happiness are not separate or independent from those of others. Any level of concern for the welfare of others presumes a measure of ethical restraint. We cannot be loving, compassionate and considerate unless we curb our own selfish impulses and desires.

*It is in everybody's interest to do what leads to happiness and avoid that which leads to suffering. And because our interests are inextricably linked, we are compelled to accept ethics as the indispensable interface between my desire to be happy and yours.<sup>3</sup>*

The Dalai Lama characterizes an ethical action as one that does not harm another's experience or expectation of happiness. He defines happiness as not solely related to the pleasures of the senses but also including a pervasive sense of inner peace and contentment. The most important factor determining the

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<sup>1</sup> Page 5.

<sup>2</sup> Page 23.

<sup>3</sup> Page 48.



ethical value of a given action is whatever drives or inspires the action in the first place: the particular motivation and state of mind in the moment of action. The aim of spiritual practice is to perfect our motivational drive so we become better human beings. It follows that any action undertaken through genuine love and compassion is considered to be ethical. Upon analysis we find that spiritual actions – those guided by the spiritual qualities mentioned above – which are undertaken not out of narrow self-interest but out of concern for others, are actually of benefit to us, too, and they make our life meaningful.

### **Ethics and the individual**

What are the implications of this view for the individual? Ethical behaviour, on which happiness depends, must be based on compassion, and compassion does not always arise naturally. Genuine and unbiased love and compassion have to be cultivated. This process is twofold. First, the individual needs to restrain those factors that inhibit compassion. This requires the inner discipline of not acting upon harmful thoughts and emotions, and deliberately changing any selfish habits and dispositions. This does not mean one should suppress such thoughts and emotions. Unlike physical discipline, true inner – or spiritual – discipline cannot be achieved by force but only through voluntary and deliberate effort based on understanding. In other words, conducting ourselves ethically consists of more than merely obeying laws and precepts, it requires an ethical disposition.<sup>4</sup>

Second, one needs to cultivate the factors that are conducive to compassion, namely patience, tolerance, forgiveness and so on. Every religion offers methods for developing these qualities, as do the modern sciences of personal development. One key insight of Buddhist psychology is that a thought or emotion cannot be present in any given mind in the same moment as its opposite. In other words, when one feels anger one cannot feel love in the same moment. It follows that the more we strengthen and prolong our spiritual qualities, the fewer harmful emotions will arise. Since spiritual qualities are the source of ethical conduct, we find that ethical conduct gradually becomes automatic. Furthermore, spiritual qualities are the source of inner contentment so peace and joy become our constant companions.

### **Ethics and society**

The interdependent nature of existence means that every act has a universal dimension. In the past, families, communities and nations could exist more or less independently of one another but these days that is clearly impossible. Today's world is so interconnected on every level – economic, social, environmental and so on – that a different outlook is needed. That is why the Dalai Lama urges the need to cultivate a sense of 'universal responsibility'. This does not mean that every individual is directly responsible for wars and famines in different parts of the world. What is entailed is not an admission of fault but a reorientation of our heart and mind away from self and toward others.<sup>5</sup> It means that if we see an

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<sup>4</sup> Page 84.

<sup>5</sup> Page 169.



opportunity to benefit others, we take it in preference to merely looking after our own narrow interests. We become more sensitive to the impact our actions have on the world.

Universal responsibility, as proposed by the Dalai Lama, entails a sense of justice: a requirement to act when we become aware of injustice. Naturally, we need to evaluate our situation carefully for it is hard to criticize those who fear for their loved ones. But occasionally it will be necessary to take risks in order to benefit the wider community. Universal responsibility also implies that individuals and governments have a duty of care for each member of society. The needs of every individual should be supported in an unbiased way. Other aspects of this perspective include an acceptance of diversity, sharper environmental awareness and a clearer acknowledgement of the need to work for non-violent resolutions to conflict in a spirit of reconciliation.

The important thing is that whatever we do for others, and whatever sacrifices we make, should be voluntary and arise from an understanding of the benefits of such action. This kind of understanding is contingent on education, media and many other social influences. It is therefore important for these information sources to communicate the nature and benefits of a spiritual perspective for, ultimately, it is our spiritual qualities that will really bring about change in the world.

## **Discussion**

What is the Dalai Lama's contribution to contemporary debates on ethics?



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