

How to Live a Good Life: Exploring Secular Ethics

Shantideva Center
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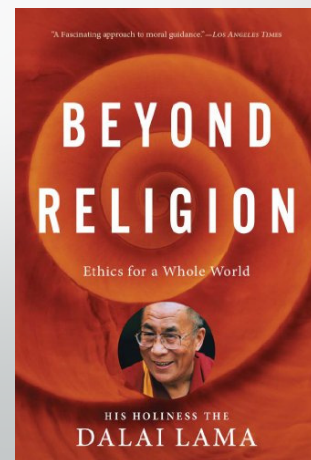
How to Live a Good Life: Exploring Secular Ethics

This course will primarily be based upon:

- *Beyond Religion: Ethics for a Whole World*

His Holiness the Dalai Lama

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011



How to Live a Good Life: Exploring Secular Ethics

With additional use of:

- “Study Guide for Beyond Religion,”
The Dalai Lama Foundation, 2014



How to Live a Good Life: Exploring Secular Ethics

Part One: Introduction to Secular Ethics and Inner Values

Part Two: Appreciating Our Shared Humanity

Part Three: Investigating Genuine Happiness

Part Four: Utilizing Compassion, the Foundation of Well-Being

Part Five: The Role of Discernment

Part Six: Cultivating Ethical Mindfulness

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How to Live a Good Life: Exploring Secular Ethics

In remarking on how, in spite of so much material progress in our world, people are still quite anxious and often complain, His Holiness says the following.

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It is clear that something is seriously lacking in the way we humans are going about things. But what is it that we lack? The fundamental problem, I believe, is that at every level we are giving too much attention to the external, material aspects of life while neglecting moral ethics and inner values.

Beyond Religion, p.x-xi

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By inner values I mean the qualities that we all appreciate in others, and toward which we all have a natural instinct, bequeathed by our biological nature as animals that survive and thrive only in an environment of concern, affection, and warm-heartedness – or in a single word, compassion.

Beyond Religion, p.xi

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The essence of compassion is a desire to alleviate the suffering of others and to promote their well-being. This is the spiritual principle from which all other positive inner values emerge.

Beyond Religion, p.xi

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What else besides compassion would you include in “inner values?”

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Where should we turn to find a system of such inner values to guide human behavior?

Religion? Government? Science? Something else?

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In today's secular world, religion alone is no longer adequate as a basis for ethics. ... What we need today is an approach to ethics which makes no recourse to religion and can be equally acceptable to those with faith and those without: a secular ethics.

Beyond Religion, pp.xiii-xiv

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What comes to mind when you hear the word "secular?"

What constitutes a system of ethics being secular?

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I feel it is vital for us to find a genuinely sustainable and universal approach to ethics, inner values, and personal integrity – an approach that can transcend religious, cultural, and racial differences and appeal to people at a fundamental level.

Beyond Religion, p.12

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This search for a sustainable, universal approach is what I call the project of secular ethics.

Beyond Religion, p.12

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The Relationship between Religion and Ethics

- Theistic traditions
- Non-theistic traditions

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The Two Dimensions of Spirituality

- “Basic spiritual well-being,” which is like water
- “Religion-based spirituality,” which is like tea

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More fundamental than religion, therefore, is our basic human spirituality. When we nurture this most fundamental human resource – when we set about cultivating those inner values which we all appreciate in others – then we start to live spiritually.

Beyond Religion, p.17

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The challenge, therefore, is to find a way of grounding ethics and supporting the cultivation of inner values that is in keeping with the scientific age, while not neglecting the deepest needs of the human spirit, which, for many people, religion answers.

Beyond Religion, pp.17-18

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His Holiness proposes that we ground such ethics in human nature, but what is the essential orientation of human nature? Are we predominantly oriented toward:

- Destructive tendencies, such as violence, aggression, competitiveness?
- Kindness, gentleness, compassion?
- Somewhere in-between?

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Generally speaking, if we view human nature as dominated by destructive tendencies, our ethics will most likely be grounded in something outside ourselves. We will understand ethics as a means for keeping those destructive tendencies in check in the name of some greater good.

Beyond Religion, p.18

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If, however, we view human nature as predominantly oriented toward kindness and the desire for a peaceful life, then we can consider ethics an entirely natural and rational means for pursuing our innate potential.

Beyond Religion, p.18

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On this understanding, ethics consists less of rules to be obeyed than of principles for inner self-regulation to promote those aspects of our nature which we recognize as conducive to our own well-being and that of others.

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What are such principles for inner self-regulation?
His Holiness suggest two principles that he calls the
“two pillars for secular ethics.”

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The Two Pillars for Secular Ethics

- The recognition of our **shared humanity**
- The understanding of **interdependence** in human existence

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From these two principles we can learn to appreciate the inextricable connection between our own well-being and that of others, and we can develop a genuine concern for others' welfare.

Beyond Religion, p.19

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Together, I believe, they constitute an adequate basis for establishing ethical awareness and the cultivation of inner values. It is through such values that we gain a sense of connection with others, and it is by moving beyond narrow self-interest that we find meaning, purpose, and satisfaction in life.

Beyond Religion, p.19

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What makes us human, and what defines our shared humanity?

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In discussing the complexity of the human mind, I am not just thinking of our intellectual or rational processes and our ability for self-reflection, but rather of the entire range of our conscious experience, which includes not just thoughts, imagination, and memory but also feelings and emotions.

Beyond Religion, p.24

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We humans have a strong and subtle capacity for remembering,... which allows us to project our thoughts into the past. We also have the ability to project our thoughts into the future.

Beyond Religion, p.25

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In addition, we have very powerful imaginations and a highly developed capacity for communication through symbolic language.

Beyond Religion, p.25

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And, perhaps most distinctively, we have the capacity for rational thought – the ability to critically evaluate and compare different outcomes in both real and imaginary situations.

Beyond Religion, p.25

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Along with these characteristics, we have a further quality which is central to our identity as human beings: our instinctive capacity for empathy.

Beyond Religion, p.26

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A definition of empathy

“the ability to enter into affective resonance with the other’s feelings and to become cognitively aware of his/her situation”

Altruism, by Matthieu Ricard, p.26

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Since we are social animals – that is, since our survival and flourishing depend on being part of a group or community – our capacity for empathy has profound implications for our pursuit of happiness and well-being.

Beyond Religion, pp.26-27

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In our quest for happiness and the avoidance of suffering, we are all fundamentally the same, and therefore equal.

Beyond Religion, p.28

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Do you agree that we are all equal and the same in our basic humanity, and in our desire to pursue happiness and avoid suffering?

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This is an important point. For if we can integrate an appreciation of this fundamental equality into our everyday outlook, I am very confident that it will be of immense benefit, not only to society at large, but also to us as individuals.

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If we accept that human beings are fundamentally oriented toward the pursuit of happiness and the avoidance of suffering, it remains to be explored what is meant by happiness, and where it might come from.

Beyond Religion, p.31

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Happiness is a rather general term, so there is potential for misunderstanding. For example, it should be made clear that in this book's secular context, we are not talking about religious conceptions of ultimate happiness, but rather the simple joy or happiness we all understand in an ordinary or everyday sense.

Beyond Religion, p.31

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So what are the sources of happiness?

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Three factors immediately suggest themselves which, I think most people will agree, contribute significantly to human well-being, namely wealth or prosperity; health; and friendship or companionship.

Beyond Religion, pp.31-32

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These considerations reveal that when we speak about happiness we are often mixing up two quite different and largely independent states – two levels of satisfaction.

Beyond Religion, p.37

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Two Levels of Satisfaction

1. Pleasurable feelings derived from positive sensory experiences in the external world

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This first kind of satisfaction, since it is dependent on sensory stimulation, is by its nature fragile and transient. Such pleasures last only so long as the sensory stimulation, and when this is over, they make no lasting contribution to our overall sense of well-being.

Beyond Religion, p.37

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Two Levels of Satisfaction

2. Our inner state of being – having peace of mind, a purpose to our lives beyond our own well-being, and a connection to others through a feeling of community.

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On the other hand, there is a deeper level of satisfaction, deriving not from external stimuli but from our own mental state. It is this second level of satisfaction, coming from within us, which I refer to when I talk about genuine human happiness.

Beyond Religion, p.37

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With inner resilience it is possible, even in extremely aggravating circumstances, to maintain a degree of happiness. And yet, without this inner strength, no amount of sensual gratification can ever make us happy.

Beyond Religion, p.39

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But if peace of mind is our first defense against hardship and suffering, there are also other crucial factors which greatly contribute to our level of genuine happiness and joy.

Beyond Religion, p.39

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Recent scientific research suggests that chief among these are a sense of purpose which transcends narrow self-interest and a feeling of being connected with others or of belonging to a community.

Beyond Religion, p.39

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The root of both of these, I believe, is compassion or warm-heartedness, and it is to this that I now turn.

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His Holiness points out how much we depend on warmth and affection in our human lives, beginning with infancy during “our prolonged period of nurture,” although this continues throughout life and even when we reach the end of our lives.

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In all this I do not want to propose that our well-being is entirely passive or dependent on the way others treat us. Even more important than the warmth and affection we receive are the warmth and affection we give.

Beyond Religion, pp.44-45

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It is through giving warmth and affection, through being genuinely concerned for others – in other words, through compassion – that we gain the conditions for genuine happiness. For this reason, loving is of even greater importance than being loved.

Beyond Religion, p.45

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His Holiness then puts forth some observations on compassion:

- It is not a religious practice, although it is central to the ethical teachings of all major religions.
- It is good not just for others but also for oneself, in that it “reduces our fear, boosts our confidence, and brings us inner strength.”

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Compassion is a marvel of human nature, a precious inner resource, and the foundation of our well-being and harmony of our societies. If therefore, we seek happiness for ourselves, we should practice compassion; and if we seek happiness for others, we should also practice compassion!

Beyond Religion, p.48

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Two Levels of Compassion

1. The **biological level**, “exemplified by the affection of a mother for her newborn child”
2. An **extended level**, “which has to be deliberately cultivated” into what His Holiness calls “universal compassion”

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Extended, universal compassion is not rooted in any self-regarding element, but rather in the simple awareness that all others are human beings who, just like oneself, aspire to happiness and shun suffering.

Beyond Religion, p.52

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With this kind of compassion, our feeling of concern for others is completely stable and unaffected by the attitude they may have toward us. Even if others threaten or verbally abuse us, our compassion for them, our concern for their welfare, remains.

Beyond Religion, p.52

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His Holiness proposes that universal compassion:

- Is not idealistic but rather “essentially practical and indeed necessary.”
- Is not religious since at its root it is “the determination to alleviate the suffering of others,” which can be seen in many individuals.

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His Holiness proposes that universal compassion:

- Does not entail “taking on the woes of the world” – although there is some discomfort initially involved when you empathize with others in distress, “having voluntarily chosen to open yourself to the difficulties of that other person shows courage, and courage imparts confidence.”

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However, since universal compassion involves gradually expanding one's circle of concern until it finally embraces the whole of humanity, it needs constant cultivation.

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While sound compassionate motivation is the foundation of ethics and spirituality, a further factor is crucial if we are to achieve a balanced and genuinely universal system of ethics.

Beyond Religion, p.73

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While intention is the first and most important factor in guaranteeing that our behavior is ethical, we also need discernment to ensure that the choices we make are realistic and that our good intentions do not go to waste.

Beyond Religion, p.73

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His Holiness proposes two tasks involved in cultivating wise ethical behavior:

- 1. Establishing inner values through investigation that can act as general guidelines in everyday life**
- 2. Dealing with dilemmas using inquiry and discernment**

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All of our actions have consequences, and these inevitably have an impact on both ourselves and others. Since in everyday life we constantly have to make small decisions which have this ethical dimension, it is very helpful to have basic ethical rules or guidelines to fall back on.

Beyond Religion, p.74

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We need to use our discernment to gain understanding about the benefits of certain kinds of behavior and the negative consequences of other kinds. In this way, we can develop an internalized value system to guide us in our responses to everyday life.

Beyond Religion, p.76

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His Holiness proposes two tasks involved in establishing ethical behavior:

1. Establishing inner values through investigation that can act as general guidelines in everyday life
2. **Dealing with dilemmas using inquiry and discernment**

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While internalized values are indispensable as practical tools for living ethically, there are, unfortunately, exceptional circumstances in which such general principles are inadequate. Particular situations may present themselves in which we are forced to choose between principles we hold dear.

Beyond Religion, p.76

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It is in such cases that the use of discernment, in service of our compassionate motivation, becomes crucial. For only by assessing the consequences and weighing the pros and cons of different courses of action can we come to a balanced conclusion about which course of action is most beneficial.

Beyond Religion, pp.76-77

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The Dalai Lama asks himself the following questions when faced with a difficult decision:

- 1.** Do I truly have others' well-being at heart (checking motivation)?

Study Guide, p.14

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The Dalai Lama asks himself the following questions when faced with a difficult decision:

2. Am I being influenced by disturbing emotions (anger, hostility, impatience, etc.)?

Study Guide, p.14

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The Dalai Lama asks himself the following questions when faced with a difficult decision:

3. What are the deeper conditions and causes of the dilemma?

Study Guide, p.14

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The Dalai Lama asks himself the following questions when faced with a difficult decision:

4. What choices do I have, and what are their probable outcomes?

Study Guide, p.14

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The Dalai Lama asks himself the following questions when faced with a difficult decision:

5. Which actions are likely to yield the biggest benefit for others in the long run?

Study Guide, p.14

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Discernment is crucial if we are to have a realistic understanding of the world we live in. Here the key principle we need to grasp is that of interdependence.

Beyond Religion, p.77

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This general yet profound principle can be approached at various levels and in various contexts. ... We have already discussed the interdependence of our own well-being and that of others.

Beyond Religion, pp.77-78

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Every situation we face in life arises from the convergence of a great number of contributing factors, so taking a broad view is essential if our responses are to be realistic. It is not enough to look at any given situation or problem from only one perspective.

Beyond Religion, p.78

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The fact is, every incident we encounter comes about as the result of countless different causes and conditions, many of which are beyond any individual's control, and some of which may even remain hidden altogether.

Beyond Religion, p.79

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Of course, no matter how hard we may try, human discernment is always incomplete. ... There is always bound to be some element of uncertainty.

Beyond Religion, p.80

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This uncertainty is another reason why ethics must be grounded at the level of motivation, rather than purely on consideration of consequences. The fact is, the consequences of our actions are often not within our control.

Beyond Religion, p.80

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Where we do have control is at the level of our motivation and in deploying our critical faculties, our discernment. When we combine these two elements, we can ensure that we are doing our best.

Beyond Religion, p.80

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The Two Pillars for Secular Ethics

- The recognition of our **shared humanity**, which is embodied in our motivation of compassion
- The understanding of **interdependence** in human existence, which is involved in our discernment, making us wiser

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His Holiness outlines many of the problems we are facing in this age, including:

- environmental degradation and climate change;
- technological progress that is devoid of human values;
- war, violence and terrorism;
- greed, income inequality and excessive materialism; and
- political corruption and narrow self-interest on the part of nations and ethnic groups.

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If human action can create these problems in the first place, then surely we humans must have the capacity as well as the responsibility to find their solutions. The only way we can put them right is by changing our outlook and our ways, and by taking action.

Beyond Religion, p.84

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In this age of globalization, the time has come for us to acknowledge that our lives are deeply interconnected and to recognize that our behavior has a global dimension. When we do so, we will see that our own interests are best served by what is in the best interests of the wider community.

Beyond Religion, p.85

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In the light of our current times when schools are not as apt to educate children in ethics, His Holiness suggests that we need to find a way to provide such education that is unbiased and inclusive.

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What is required is a way of promoting inner values which is genuinely universal – which can embrace, without prejudice, both agnostic humanist perspectives and religious perspectives of various kinds.

Beyond Religion, p.94

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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.

Beyond Religion, p.103

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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.

Beyond Religion, p.103

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Now, regarding the question of how to put ethics into practice, 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.

Beyond Religion, p.103

Three Stages of Ethical Development

DEDICATING
OURSELVES
GENUINELY TO THE
SERVICE OF OTHERS

Ethic of Altruism

ACTIVELY CULTIVATING
POSITIVE INNER VALUES AND
BEHAVIOR

Ethic of Virtue

REFRAINING FROM DOING ACTUAL OR
POTENTIAL HARM TO OTHERS THROUGH
OUR PHYSICAL ACTIONS, SPEECH OR
THOUGHTS

Ethic of Restraint

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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.

Beyond Religion, p.103

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The first of these, heedfulness, refers to adopting an overall stance of caution. The Tibetan term bhakyö, often translated as "heedfulness" or "conscientiousness," carries the sense of being careful and attentive.

Beyond Religion, pp.107-108

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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.

Beyond Religion, p.109

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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.

Beyond Religion, p.109

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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 later regret.

Beyond Religion, p.109

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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.

Beyond Religion, p.109

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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."

Beyond Religion, p.109

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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.

Beyond Religion, p.109

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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 words.

Beyond Religion, p.110

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This is the very foundation of freedom, and it is through gaining such self-mastery, and 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.

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If, as I have suggested, the key to human happiness lies in our own state of mind, so too do the primary obstacles to that happiness. Without a doubt the greatest impediments to our individual well-being and our ability to live a spiritually fulfilling life are our own persistent propensities toward destructive or afflictive emotions.

Beyond Religion, p.113

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Such emotions are the real enemies of human happiness, and the ultimate source of all destructive human behavior. Tackling these negative emotions is an important goal of ethical and spiritual practice.

Beyond Religion, p.113

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Generally speaking, we can define destructive emotions as those states which undermine our well-being by creating inner turmoil, thereby undermining self-control and depriving us of mental freedom.

Beyond Religion, p.117

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Within this, it is also possible to distinguish between two sub-categories: those emotional states that are destructive in themselves, such as greed, hatred, or malice; and those states, such as attachment, anger, or fear, which only become destructive when their intensity is disproportionate to the situation in which they arise.

Beyond Religion, p.117

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Examples of when these emotions are constructive but can become destructive:

- **Attachment** that allows us to hold families and communities together and thus is constructive, as opposed to attachment that wants to control others, and thus becomes destructive.

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Examples of when these emotions are constructive but can become destructive:

- **Anger** that arises from a compassionate response to injustice in the world and thus is constructive, as opposed to anger that wishes to retaliate in reaction to harm that is done to oneself, which is destructive.

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Examples of when these emotions are constructive but can become destructive:

- **Fear** that enables us to avoid danger and thus is constructive, as opposed to fear that becomes obsessive or excessive, thus paralyzing us and inducing anxiety, which is thus destructive.

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Often we can make this determination only by taking into account the underlying motivation, the specific object of the emotion, and so on. In the area of the human mind, therefore, we should always maintain an attitude of open-mindedness, pragmatism, and flexibility.

Beyond Religion, p.120

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One feature that characterizes all destructive emotions is a tendency to distort our perception of reality. They cause us to narrow our perspective so that we fail to see a given situation in its wider context.

Beyond Religion, p.121

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*Our inner development with regard to regulating our destructive emotions calls for a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, we must seek to **reduce the impact of the destructive potentials** that are inherent within us; on the other, we must seek to **enhance the positive qualities** that also naturally exist within us.*

Beyond Religion, p.124

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Steps to decrease these destructive emotions:

- **Adopt a stance of opposition to them**
- Understand their causes
- Develop emotional awareness
- Cultivate attentiveness to catch them as they arise

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To counter these tremendously powerful destructive emotions we all have within us, we need to develop very strong enthusiasm and determination for the task. This enthusiasm will come, in large part, from considering the negative impact of those emotions. ... So I encourage people to contemplate the destructive nature of such emotions on a regular basis.

Beyond Religion, p.126

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Steps to decrease these destructive emotions:

- Adopt a stance of opposition to them
- **Understand their causes**
- Develop emotional awareness
- Cultivate attentiveness to catch them as they arise

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If we are to succeed in effectively tackling our destructive tendencies, first of all, we must observe and study them closely. For dealing with destructive propensities is not merely a matter of suppressing them.

Beyond Religion, p.129

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Instead of suppressing our destructive emotions, therefore, we must be open and honest with ourselves and bring mindful awareness to what triggers them, how they make us feel, and what kind of behavior they provoke.

Beyond Religion, p.130

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This kind of introspective attentiveness to the way these emotions arise within us and manifest in our behavior is what I call emotional awareness. It is only by practicing such awareness – by facing these emotions directly and giving them careful scrutiny – that we can gradually bring them under control.

Beyond Religion, p.130

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In this context, it is helpful to consider the onset of destructive emotions as a kind of causal chain, which starts with an external stimulus and ends with our behavioral response. The aim of emotional awareness is to bring our attention or mindfulness into this split-second process, and thereby to gain some control over it.

Beyond Religion, p.131

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His Holiness suggests trying the following:

- Calm yourself by taking deep breaths or diverting your mind from the trigger
- View the situation
 - In a more positive light
 - In the context of its multiple causes and conditions
 - From different angles or perspectives

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There is no doubt that dealing with our negative propensities is very challenging. Faced with life's daily setbacks, we can all too easily fall into old negative habits of mind such as frustration, anger, or despondency. What we need, therefore, is a constant renewal of our effort to live by the values we want to uphold.

Beyond Religion, p.134

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Part One: Introduction to Secular Ethics and Inner Values

Part Two: Appreciating Our Shared Humanity

Part Three: Investigating Genuine Happiness

Part Four: Utilizing Compassion, the Foundation of Well-Being

Part Five: The Role of Discernment

Part Six: Cultivating Ethical Mindfulness

Part Seven: Dealing with Destructive Emotions

Part Eight: Developing Key Inner Values

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Let us recall the two-pronged approach to genuine ethical practice: on the one hand, working to restrain our destructive emotions; on the other, actively cultivating our positive inner qualities.

Beyond Religion, p.137

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Regarding **Patience**

- It entails the ability to endure suffering and not give in to our instinctive urge to respond negatively to our difficulties
- It does not mean being passive or impotent, but actually requires great strength
- There are three aspects of patience to consider

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The benefits of cultivating patience are obvious. The practice of patience guards us against loss of composure and, in doing so, enables us to exercise discernment, even in the heat of difficult situations. It gives us inner space.

Beyond Religion, p.142

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Regarding **Contentment**

- It can be seen as an ethical value in the light of it being seen as an “absence of greed,” enabling one to find satisfaction without looking for more
- In that context, it is something like the virtue of moderation, having a modesty of ambition or limited desires, which frees us from the sense of insecurity or insufficiency born of incessant craving

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Regarding **Contentment**

- Cultivating contentment is especially important in today’s materialistic world of global consumerism
- Controlling our desire for more and learning to live within limits is moreover necessary if we are to overcome the challenges to life on Earth that our incessant quest for more generates

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Regarding **Contentment**

- Thus, contentment and moderation are the antidotes to greed which is behind so many of the crises we face in our times
- However, when it comes to acquiring mental riches, because the potential is limitless, it is inappropriate to be content but rather we should constantly strive for more and more

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Regarding **Self-Discipline**

- This quality is essential for all our inner values, and it is something that must be voluntarily embraced
- Basically it is self-regulation that arises from an appreciation of the value of such discipline as well as an understanding of the benefits of refraining from bad habits

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Regarding **Self-Discipline**

- Without self-discipline, we succumb to bad habits and cause harm to ourselves, others, and even to humanity at large, as we can see when corruption arises with the unchecked attitudes of greed, bias, and dishonesty in our world

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Regarding **Self-Discipline**

- An ability to resist temptation in our own lives can be developed gradually until eventually self-discipline will come naturally and no longer require conscious effort or willpower, resulting in a great sense of freedom that comes with self-mastery

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Regarding **Generosity**

- Generosity is the most natural outward expression of an inner attitude of compassion and loving-kindness
- In this context, it refers not just to giving in a material sense, but to generosity of the heart

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Regarding **Generosity**

- The motivation of any giving should never be to seek one's own benefit by ingratiating oneself with others but only be done to benefit the recipient
- One should also be discerning when engaging in acts of generosity, giving appropriately and timely

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We have now explored in some detail what spirituality and ethical living entail in terms of personal practice. We have discussed ways to develop greater awareness so that we can learn to regulate our emotions, and, finally some ways to actively cultivate our inner values.

Beyond Religion, p.155

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By mental cultivation I mean a disciplined application of mind that involves deepening our familiarity with a chosen object or theme. Here I am thinking of the Sanskrit term bhavana, which connotes "cultivation," and whose Tibetan equivalent, gom, has the connotation of "familiarization."

Beyond Religion, p.155

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These two terms, often translated into English as meditation, refer to a whole range of mental practices and not just, as many suppose, to simple methods of relaxation. The original terms imply a process of cultivating familiarity with something, whether it is a habit, a way of seeing, or a way of being.

Beyond Religion, pp.155-156

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How, then, does this process of mental cultivation lead to spiritual and inner transformation? Here it may be helpful to invoke the idea of the "three levels of understanding," as found in the classical Buddhist theory of mental transformation.

Beyond Religion, p.156

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The Three Levels of Understanding

1. Understanding derived through hearing or learning, which can be somewhat superficial
2. Understanding derived through reflection, in which one develops a deeper conviction
3. Understanding derived through contemplative experience, in which it becomes internalized

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As we become more accomplished in our practice, we come more and more to see the trainability of the mind. We learn to substitute positive thoughts and feelings for negative ones and to weaken the hold that afflictive thoughts and emotions have over our minds.

Beyond Religion, p.180

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Essentially, the purpose of the mental training exercises that I have been describing is, especially from the perspective of secular ethics, to make ourselves calmer, more compassionate, and more discerning human beings.

Beyond Religion, p.182

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Within the scale of the life of the cosmos, a human life is no more than a tiny blip. Each one of us is a visitor to this planet, a guest, who has only a finite time to stay. What greater folly could there be than to spend this short time lonely, unhappy, and in conflict with our fellow visitors?

Beyond Religion, p.188

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Far better, surely, to use our short time in pursuing a meaningful life, enriched by a sense of connection with and service toward others.

Beyond Religion, p.188

