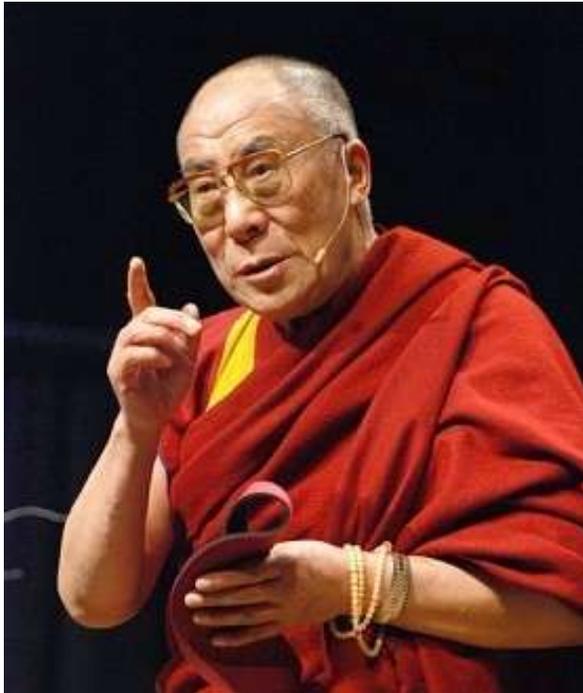


# How To Lead an Ethical Life

His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama  
Nottingham, England, May 25, 2008

Transcribed, translated in parts, and lightly edited  
by Alexander Berzin  
With clarifications indicated in violet between square brackets



## Self-Interest versus Interest in Others as Bases for an Ethical Life

The essence of Buddhism is: if we can help others then we need to do that; if we cannot, then at least restrain from harming others. That's the essence of leading an ethical life.

Every action comes from a motivation. If we harm others, that's from a motivation; and if we help others, that also comes from a motivation. So, for helping others, for serving others, we need a certain motivation. For that, we need certain concepts. Why do we help and why do we not harm?

For example, when we are just about to harm somebody, we would have some type of awareness and that would cause us to refrain. That means we need some sort of determination [not to cause harm.] One corner of our mind wants to harm somebody, but because of a certain state of mind, another part of our mind says that this wrong, this is not right. Because we see that it's wrong, then we develop willpower and we refrain. In terms of both choices [to cause harm or to refrain from so doing,] we need to have an awareness that certain actions are going to have long-term consequences. As human beings we have the intelligence to see long-term consequences. Then, when we see them, we can, on an immediate level, restrain ourselves.

There are two different approaches we can take here. With the first, we think in terms of the interest of ourselves and then if we can help, we do so; and if we can't help, then we refrain [from causing any harm]. The other approach is to think in terms of the interests of others and likewise, if we can help, we help; and if not, then

we refrain [from causing harm]. In terms of refraining from harming others, the thought: “If I do this, I will face negative consequences including legal consequences” and so restraining ourselves because of that reason is refraining because of the reason of self-interest. Now, in terms of the thinking of others as our reason, we would think: “Others are just like me. They don’t want suffering and pain; therefore, I will restrain myself from harming them.”

When we train [our minds], first we think in terms of self-interest and then we strongly think of others. In terms of effectiveness, strongly thinking of others is more powerful. In terms of *pratimoksha* – the vows of individual liberation, the vinaya tradition of monastic training – the primary basis is thinking of our own self-interest and, because of that, we refrain from causing harm. That’s because we are aiming for liberation. In terms of bodhisattva practice, the main reason to refrain from harming others is consideration of others’ interests. Perhaps the second one, refraining from causing harm and helping others on the basis of altruism, has a connection with the universal responsibility that I speak about so often.

## **Our Basic Nature as Human Beings**

Generally, we humans are social animals. No matter who it is, his or her survival depends on the rest of humanity. Since individual survival and well-being depends on all of society, the need to think of the well-being of others and being concerned about it derive from our own fundamental nature. If we look at baboons, for example, the elder one takes full responsibility for the herd. While others are feeding, one older male baboon is always to the side, watching. The stronger one helps to take care of the rest of the group for the sake of the society.

In prehistoric times, we human beings had no education or technology. Basic human society was simple: everybody worked together and shared together. The communists say that this was original communism: everybody working and enjoying together. Then, eventually, education developed and we got civilization. The [human] mind became more sophisticated and so greed increased. That brought jealousy and hatred and, over time, they grew stronger.

Today, in the twenty-first century, so many changes have occurred [in human society. Differences among us have developed – differences in] education, jobs, and social backgrounds. But even differences in age and race – all of these are secondary. On a fundamental level, we are all still human beings and we are all the same. This is the level of several hundred thousand years ago.

The attitude of young children is like that. They don’t care about the social background, religion, race, color, or wealth of the other children. They all play together; they are genuine playmates, so long as they are friendly with each other. Now we grown-ups supposedly are more intelligent and more highly developed, but

we judge the social background of others. We calculate, “ If I smile, will I get what I want; if I frown, will I lose something?”

## **Universal Responsibility**

The sense of universal or global responsibility functions on a human level. We’re concerned about other humans because: “I am one of them; my welfare depends on them no matter what the differences are.” Differences are always there; but this can be helpful.

For several centuries, the population was only one billion people on this planet; now there are over six billion. Already, because of overpopulation, one country can’t provide all the food and resources for its own population. So we have global economy. Therefore, according to today’s reality, the world is much smaller and is heavily interdependent. This is reality. On top of that, there is the ecological issue: global warming. This is a concern for all six billion inhabitants of this planet, not just for one or two nations. The new reality needs a sense of global responsibility.

For example, in older times, the British here thought only of themselves and sometimes exploited other areas of the globe. They didn’t care about the concerns or feelings of these other people. OK, that’s past. But now things are different; things have changed. Now we must take care of other countries.

Actually, the British imperialists did some good things, in fact. They brought good education in the English language to India. India has much to acknowledge from this. Also Britain brought technology, the railroad system. That is one of your redeeming qualities. When I came to India, some Gandhians were still alive and they advised me on Gandhian nonviolent methods. At that time, I had felt that the British imperialists had been very bad. But then I saw that there was an independent India judiciary, free press, freedom of speech, and the likes. So, when I reflected more deeply, I saw that these things were very good.

Today, nation to nation and continent to continent, there is heavy interdependence. According to this reality, we really need global responsibility. Your own interests depend on the development and interests of others. So for your own interest, you have to take care of others. In the economic field, this is already there. Even if there are different ideologies and even if we don’t trust each other, we have to interact in our global interdependent economy. Therefore, global responsibility on the basis of respect of others’ interest is very important.

We need to consider others as brothers and sisters and have a close feeling. This is nothing to do with religion. We really need this. The very concept of “us and them” – on a certain level, of course we can say that – but the whole world needs to consider itself as part of “us.” Our neighbors’ interest is our own interest.

## **Contentment**

Leading an ethical life as an individual, then, means not to harm others, and, if possible, to help them. [In doing this,] if we take others' welfare as the basis for our own ethics – this becomes a wider scope of ethics. Our own lifestyle must take these factors into consideration.

There is a big gap between rich and poor, even in the United States. If we look at America, the richest country, still there are pockets of poverty there. Once when I was in Washington DC, the capital of the richest country I saw that there were many poor areas there. The basic needs of these people were not adequately met. [Similarly,] on a global level, the industrialized north is much more developed and richer [than the rest of the planet]; whereas many countries in the southern half of the globe are even facing starvation. That's not just morally wrong; it's a source of big problems. So, certain rich countries have to look and examine their lifestyle; they need to practice contentment.

Once, in Japan, fifteen years ago, I expressed to the people there that your assumption that the economy must grow every year and that every year material progress should happen is a big mistake. One day, you may see your economy becoming more limited. You must be prepared so that, when it comes, it won't be a disaster in your minds. A few years later, that situation actually happened there in Japan.

Some peoples' lifestyles have too much luxury. Without stealing, without exploitation, and with no cheating, they have a great deal of money. From the point of view of their own self-interest, there is nothing wrong so long as their means of acquiring money is not unethical. But, from the point of view of the interests of others, although there's nothing wrong with regard to themselves; yet, ethically, it's not good when others face starvation. If everyone had that same high lifestyle of luxury OK; but until that's achieved, the better lifestyle would be to have more contentment. As I experienced in Japan, in the United States, and in other more affluent societies, some modification of lifestyle is needed.

In many countries, there's one family but two, sometimes even three cars. Imagine India and China, these two nations with a combined population of well over two billion people. If two billion people acquired two billion cars or more, this would be very difficult. There would be a big problem and big complications about fuel, material resources, natural resources, and so on. It would get very complicated.

## **Consideration of the Environment**

One additional aspect of ethical life, then, is therefore consideration of the environment, for example in our use of water. My own contribution may be silly, but since many years I never bathe in a bathtub; I only take showers. A bathtub uses too

much water. Maybe I'm being silly, since every day I take two showers, so the amount of water I use is the same. But nevertheless, concerning electric lights, for example, when I leave the room, I always put the lights out. So, I make a small contribution to ecology. A certain ethical life comes about, then, from a sense of global responsibility.

## **How To Help Others**

As for how to help others, there are many ways; much depends on the circumstances. When I was young, seven or eight years old, and doing my studies, my tutor Ling Rinpoche always kept a whip. At that time, my immediate elder brother and I were studying together. Actually, there were two whips. One whip was yellow color – a holy whip, a whip for the holy Dalai Lama. If you use the holy whip, though, I don't think there was any holy pain! It looks harsh as a method, but actually it was very helpful.

Ultimately, whether any action is helpful or harmful depends on the motivation. Out of sincere concern about others' long-term well-being, methods may sometimes be harsh, sometimes gentle. Sometimes even a little lie can help. For example, a dear friend or a parent in a distant country might be seriously ill or nearly dying and you know that. But you also know that if you tell another person that their parent is about to die, that person will become so upset and worried, they might faint. So you say, "They're OK." If you are a hundred percent caring not to upset the other person, then in such case, although a lie from the point of view of one's own interests is unethical, yet from the point of view of the other, it may be most appropriate.

## **Violent versus Nonviolent Methods**

So, how best to help others? That's difficult. We need wisdom; we need clear awareness of the circumstances; and we need flexibility to use different methods according to different circumstances. And most importantly, our motivation: we need to have a sincere sense of concern for others.

For example, whether a method is violent or nonviolent depends very much on motivation. Although telling a white lie is, itself, violent, but according to the motivation it might be a method to help others. So, from that point of view, it's a nonviolent method. On the other hand, if we want to exploit others and so we give them a gift, in appearance it's nonviolent; but ultimately, since we want to cheat the other person and exploit them, it's a violent method. So, violent or nonviolent also depends on motivation. All human actions depend on motivation. It also somewhat depends on the goal; but if our aim is just the goal and our motivation is anger, then this is difficult. So, ultimately, motivation is most important.

## Interreligious Harmony

As for what to bring home with you from our discussions here, the important thing is to try to develop inner peace. This we must think about and bring about within ourselves. In addition, if there are some in the audience who follow a religion and are believers, one of my main emphases is always on interreligious harmony. I think all major religions, maybe not so much minor ones that worship the sun and the moon - they don't have much philosophy - but most major religions have some philosophy or theology. And because their religion is based on a certain philosophy, it's been maintained for thousands of years. But despite different philosophies, all religions consider the topmost practice to be the practice of love and compassion.

With compassion, a sense of forgiveness comes automatically, and then tolerance and contentment. With these three factors, there's satisfaction. This is common to all religions. These are also important for extending the basic human values we've been talking about. So in this regard, all our religions are helpful in the sense that they promote what is the basis of our happiness, namely leading an ethical life. Therefore, since all religions carry the same message, all of them have the same potential to help humanity.

At different times, in different locations, different teachings have come about. That's necessary. These different times and locations and different ways of life evolved because of environmental differences, and because of that, differences in religion developed. For each of those times, certain religious ideas were suitable and [were therefore adopted.] Because of that, thousand-year old religions each have their own traditions. We need this variety of rich traditions: they serve all different types of people. One religion can't suit and serve all.

At the time of Buddha, there were already many non-Buddhist traditions in India. Buddha didn't attempt to convert all Indians to Buddhism. Other religions were OK. Occasionally, they did have some debate among them. Especially after Buddha, masters for many centuries debated each other. These debates are very helpful, especially in the field of epistemology. One scholar from another tradition critically examines the philosophy and views of a different religion and this causes everybody to think about their own religions and their own traditions and debate. So, naturally it brings about progress. In some cases, perhaps there was a little violence involved in these debates and that's unfortunate; but, in general, it was a healthy development.

India, then, is a very good example of real religious tolerance that has lasted through centuries as a tradition itself; and it's still alive in India. This is a good model for the rest of the world.

In ancient times, people were isolated, so OK. But now we are in different circumstances. For instance London - it's almost a multi-religious society. Religious

tolerance, then, is very important. So those of you with faith in a religion: harmony and tolerance are very important. When you have an opportunity, make contributions in this regard.

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