

## THE BIG IDEAS

### Water + Tea

Rethinking secularism.

### Ethics

Knowing vs. doing.

### Emotions

Helpful or not?

### Contentment

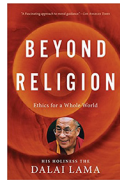
Material vs. mental.

### Meditation

As mental cultivation.

### Striving Together

With vision, courage, and optimism.



# Beyond Religion

Ethics for a Whole World

BY DALAI LAMA · MARINER BOOKS © 2012 · 208 PAGES

“Today, however, any religion-based answer to the problem of our neglect of inner values can never be universal, and so will be inadequate. 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. ...

In view of this, I am of the first opinion that we have within our grasp a way, and a means, to ground inner values without contradicting any religion and yet, crucially, without depending on religion. The development and practice of this new vision of ethics is what I propose to elaborate in the course of this book. It is my hope that doing so will help to promote understanding of the need for ethical awareness and inner values in this age of excessive materialism.

At the outset I should make it clear that my intention is not to dictate moral values. Doing that would be of no benefit. To try to impose moral principles from outside, to impose them, as it were, by command, can never be effective. Instead, I call for each of us to come to our own understanding of the importance of inner values. For it is these inner values which are the source of both an ethically harmonious world and the individual peace of mind, confidence, and happiness we all seek. Of course, all the world’s major religions, with their emphasis on love, compassion, patience, tolerance, and forgiveness, can and do promote inner values. But the reality of the world today is that grounding ethics in religion is no longer adequate. This is why I believe the time has come to find a way of thinking about spirituality and ethics that is beyond religion.”

~ Dalai Lama from *Beyond Religion*

*“I am a man of religion, but religion alone cannot answer all our problems.”*

~ Dalai Lama

Although I’ve created hundreds of Notes (including many by [Thich Nhat Hanh](#), another contemporary Buddhist master), this is our first Note on one of the Dalai Lama’s books.

I got this book after [Ray Dalio](#) strongly recommended it in *Principles*. (I also featured *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* based off of Dalio’s equally strong recommendation. As a reminder for those of you who wonder how I decide which books to feature: In addition to your wonderful recommendations, I take strong recs from other people I admire very seriously. Throw in Alexandra’s book list and I’m never in need of great titles! :)

It’s always a joy to read the words of a wise master. The Dalai Lama’s incredible thoughtfulness, humility, and grounded wisdom is inspiring.

If you’re looking for insight on how to help create a more ethical world with a universal set of ethical guidelines, I think you’ll love the book. (Get a copy [here](#).)

As always, the book is packed with Big Ideas. I’m excited to share a few of my favorites so let’s jump straight in!

## RETHINKING SECULARISM: WATER + TEA

*"In such a world, 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 human level. This search for a sustainable, universal approach is what I call the project of secular ethics."*

~ Dalai Lama

"To my mind, although humans can manage without religion, they cannot manage without inner values. So my argument for the independence of ethics from religion is quite simple. As I see it, spirituality has two dimensions. The first dimension, that of basic spiritual well-being—by which I mean inner mental and emotional strength and balance—does not depend on religion but comes from our innate human nature as beings with a natural disposition toward compassion, kindness, and caring for others. The second dimension is what may be considered religion-based spirituality, which is acquired from our upbringing and culture and is tied to particular beliefs and practices. The difference between the two is something like the difference between water and tea. Ethics and inner values without religious content are like water, something we need every day for health and survival. Ethics and inner values based in a religious context are more like tea. The tea we drink is mostly composed of water, but it also contains some other ingredients—tea leaves, spices, perhaps sugar or, at least in Tibet, salt—and this makes it more nutritious and sustaining and something we want every day. But however tea is prepared, the primary ingredient is always water. While we can live without tea, we can't live without water. Likewise, we are born free of religion, but we are not born free of the need for compassion."

Of course, the Dalai Lama is a deeply religious man. He's been a monk since the age of six. He remains a devout practitioner and teacher of Buddhism

And... He respectfully makes the point that, as powerful as religion is as a means to cultivate ethical behavior, it's impossible for any *one* religion to *universally* work for everyone. Yet... Ethical living is absolutely essential in our modern times. So, what do we do?

That leads us to the title of the book: "Beyond Religion." What do we find beyond religion? Secular ethics. Which leads us to the sub-title and theme of the book: "Ethics for a Whole World." Which leads us to this beautiful metaphor of water and tea.

Of course, every religion approaches things from a slightly different perspective but at the core of ALL major religions is an *absolute* commitment to ethical living. The differences are the "tea leaves and spices." At the core of these traditions we have the water that sustains us.

And, as the Dalai Lama says: Just as we all need water to survive, we all need ethics to thrive. The book is his take on these universal qualities we can all embrace to create a secular ethics that work for the whole world.

P.S. The Dalai Lama is a big fan of modern science and neuroscience in particular. I love the parallels between his approach and how the founders of positive psychology ([Martin Seligman](#), [Chris Peterson](#), and [Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi](#)) decided what to focus on as they tried to create a science for well-being and flourishing.

Do you recall what they did? They basically stripped away the "tea" from all the major wisdom traditions to find the universal truths—the "water" of all great wisdom. They identified six core virtues: Wisdom + Justice + Courage + Self-Mastery + Love + Transcendence. Then, they empirically demonstrated what we've known for millennia: If we want to have happy, flourishing lives, we need to put these virtues into action.

P.P.S. The Dalai Lama tells us that the "Two Pillars for Secular Ethics" are a recognition of our *shared humanity* and the understanding of *interdependence*. In short: We all aspire to be happy and we're all in this together.

## ETHICS: KNOWING + DOING

"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

*"In the face of all the challenges of today's interconnected world, is my optimism about the future of humanity idealistic? Perhaps it is. Is it unrealistic? Certainly not. To remain indifferent to the challenges we face is indefensible. If the goal is noble, whether or not it is realized within our lifetimes is largely irrelevant. What we must do, therefore, is to strive and persevere and never give up."*

~ Dalai Lama

*"Everyone has his or her own separate identity. Because of this, it is of primary importance, in any attempt to develop a genuinely universal approach to ethics, to have a clear understanding of what unites us all, namely our common humanity. We are all human, all seven billion of us. In this respect, we are all one hundred percent the same."*

~ Dalai Lama

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."

That's from a chapter called "Ethical Mindfulness in Everyday Life."

First, let's remind ourselves that ethics isn't simply a matter of knowing. It is about doing. We need to move from theory to practice. In fact, *"For this reason, even the most sophisticated ethical understanding, if it is not applied in daily life, is somewhat POINTLESS."* (Emphasis mine. lol)

That's Part I. Part II: How do we put ethics into practice in our daily lives? The Dalai Lama encourages us to consider three levels. First, we have the ethic of restraint. Before we start doing the good stuff, we need to STOP doing the bad stuff.

As we've discussed many times, this rule holds true in ALL aspects of our lives. You can't eat enough broccoli to make up for that pizza and soda. You can't work out once a day and think that'll take care of all that sitting you do.

So, Step 1. Remove the toxins. Get rid of the kryptonites. Exercise restraint. (Which begs the question: What's the #1 thing that needs to go in your life? ... Today the day?)

That leads us to the second level: It's time to get your virtue on. Cultivate your kindness, your compassion, your generosity, your self-discipline.

Then we arrive at the third level of altruism as we dedicate our lives to the welfare of others—Optimizing and actualizing so we can give ourselves most fully to the world.

Step 1. Step 2. Step 3. Let's put our ethical theories into practice. Note: The Dalai Lama tells us that our ethical mindfulness requires "constant cultivation."

## EMOTIONS

*"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 of liberation or to unity with God."*

~ Dalai Lama

"Interestingly, in the classical Buddhist science of mind in which I am trained, there is no concept of emotion as a single category that precisely corresponds to the understanding of emotion in contemporary western psychology. Indeed, there is no word in either Sanskrit or Tibetan that exactly translates the word 'emotion.' Instead, all emotional states are understood to contain five omnipresent mental factors, of which 'feeling' is one. ...

There are also various ways of categorizing our emotional states. For example, in contemporary psychology the main distinction is often drawn between emotional states which, on the one hand, are pleasurable or joyful and are described as positive, and those which, on the other hand, are unpleasant or painful and are described as negative.

In classical Buddhist psychology, however, the distinction is rather different. Instead, the primary distinction is not between those states which are pleasurable and those that are painful, but between those that are beneficial and those that are harmful. 'Afflictive' mental states, known as *nyonmong* in Tibetan or *klesha* in Sanskrit, are those which undermine our long-term well-being, while 'non-afflictive' mental states are those which have no such destructive impact.

Given these different ways to categorizing emotional experiences, it is important for readers not to confuse those emotions which are afflictive—that is to say, harmful to our long-term well-being—with those which simply don't feel good."

*"What is important is that when pursuing our own self-interest we should be 'wise selfish' and not 'foolish selfish.' Being foolish selfish means pursuing our own interests in a narrow, shortsighted way. Being wise selfish means taking a broader view and recognizing that our own long-term individual interests lies in the welfare of everyone. Being wise selfish means being compassionate."*

~ Dalai Lama

*"Generosity is the most natural outward expression of an inner attitude of compassion and loving-kindness."*

~ Dalai Lama

First, I think that's fascinating that the word "emotion" doesn't exist in Tibetan or Sanskrit. Rather, they have a more nuanced description of the mental factors involved beyond just "feeling."

Second, I also love the distinction between whether or not emotions *feel* good or bad versus whether they are helpful or harmful.

Think about that for a moment. Our entire Western psychological approach around emotions is centered around more pleasure and less pain. But what if we tweaked it to think about whether our emotions (and behaviors) were good for us or not?

Is that anger or impatience good for you? No, it's not.

Your kindness and patience and generosity? Yep. Cultivate THAT.

## CONTENTMENT: MATERIAL VS. MENTAL

"Time and geography will always impose limits on how much wealth anyone can succeed in accruing in a single lifetime. Given this natural limit, it seems wiser to set one's own limits through the exercise of contentment. In contrast, when it comes to acquiring mental riches, the potential is limitless. Here, where there is no natural limit, it is appropriate *not* to be contented with what you have, but to constantly strive for more. Unfortunately, most of us do the exact opposite. We are never quite satisfied with what we have materially, but we tend to be thoroughly complacent about our mental riches."

That's from a chapter in which we learn how to cultivate virtue (or what the Dalai Lama calls "inner values")—including the virtue of contentment. (The other virtues discussed include: patience, self-discipline and generosity.)

The Dalai Lama repeatedly comes back to the fact that our world is—to its detriment—incredibly materialistic. He talks about the same science we discuss in Abundance 101 and reminds us that, beyond having enough money to take care of ourselves, true wealth will be found on the mental/spiritual side of things.

The amount of material wealth we can create is finite. Therefore, we'd be wise to choose contentment at a certain limit.

However, the amount of \*mental\* wealth we can create is INFINITE. Therefore, we'd be wise to "constantly strive for more."

Enter: Becoming psychological billionaires—filling up our life's balance sheet with positive emotions, life satisfaction and a deep sense of flourishing. While stuffing our secret vault in our brain ("Hi, basal ganglia!") with diamonds of good habits rather than kryptonites of bad ones.

Unfortunately, most of us get this precisely backward: "*We are never quite satisfied with what we have materially, but we tend to be thoroughly complacent about our mental riches.*"

Let's not be like most people. How can you create a little more material contentment in your life and a little more mental wealth today?

## MEDITATION AS MENTAL CULTIVATION

"As to the specifics of practice, early morning is generally the best time of day. At that time, the mind is at its freshest and clearest. However, it is important to remember that if you are to practice well in the early morning, you need to have a good night's sleep beforehand. For myself, I must say that I have been most fortunate when it comes to sleep. Despite rising every morning around 3:30 A.M., on average I make sure that I get eight or nine hours of sound sleep. For a lot of people, this may be difficult to arrange. If, for example, there are young children in the house, it may not be possible to meditate during the early hours. If this is the case, it will probably be

*"In fact, the inner motivational dimension is the most important aspect of ethics. For when our motivation is pure, genuinely directed toward the benefit of others, our actions will naturally tend to be ethically sound. This is why I consider compassion to be the core principle on which an entire ethical approach can be built. It is from a compassionate concern for the welfare of others that all our ethical values and principles arise, including that of justice."*

~ Dalai Lama

better to find some other time to practice, preferably after a short nap or when the children are out of the house. I should also point out that the mind will tend to be sluggish if you have eaten a lot beforehand. Ideally you should not eat too much in the evening if you hope to practice well the following morning."

That's from a chapter called "Meditation as Mental Cultivation" in which we get some tips from His Holiness on how to develop our meditation practice so we can cultivate the mental strength that will be our greatest asset to live ethically.

We're told that the most important first step is to make sure our desire is strong. We need to take the time to make the connection between our mental strength and our well-being and then make the connection between our mental strength and our meditation practice.

Take a moment (if you're feeling so inspired) to reflect on why meditating would be good for you. And, what are you missing out on by NOT doing it? With that motivation, we begin our practice.

How? Well, if we're like the Dalai Lama, we approach it like we're Olympic athletes!! He spends hours a day on his practice and makes it clear that the goal is not relaxation per se, but mental strength.

The Dalai Lama wakes up to hit his mental gym at 3:30 A.M. every (!) morning. Doing the math, if he gets up at 3:30 A.M. and averages eight or nine hours of sleep, that means he goes to bed around 6:30 or 7:30 P.M. <— That's fantastic!! I knew I had a good bit of monk in me. :)

Note: The Dalai Lama doesn't blow up his brain at night with electronic stimulation nor does he roll over in bed and reach up to grab his smartphone right when he wakes up. (Do you?)

He's made the decision: He's chosen to dedicate his life to actualizing his potential in service to the world. To be Actualized vs. Entertained. (You?)

He also tells us: *"To conclude: in mental cultivation practice, moderate effort over a long period is the key to success. We bring failure upon ourselves by working overly hard or by attempting too much at the beginning. Doing this makes it highly likely that we will simply give up after just a short while. What good practice really requires is a constant stream of effort: a sustained, persistent approach based on long-term commitment. For this reason, practicing properly, even for short periods of time, is the best way. The emphasis should be on quality rather than quantity. And, above all, we should remember that the whole purpose of our practice is to become more compassionate human beings."*

P.S. Of course, we don't all live in a monastery. For those of us whose morning rituals involve kids, I'm reminded of this great passage from [Sri Swami Satchidananda](#) in [The Golden Present](#) where he reminds us to make taking care of our "little deities" a core part of our practice: *"At the same time, you should know your situation in life. If you are a wife and the mother of three children, you have certain family responsibilities also. If for that reason you cannot follow all the disciplines, getting up at a certain time and meditating for an hour and doing everything, you should not feel bad; but if you are not practicing due to your laziness, then you should feel hurt. If your responsibilities don't allow you to do everything you are excused for that, because you still have your first and foremost responsibility as a wife and a mother. You have to take care of the children. That is also part of yoga. So you should ask yourself, 'Am I not following everything due to my laziness, or due to my other responsibilities?' Then make the other responsibilities part of your practice also. For example, if you are all alone as an individual you may clean your altar and shrine room and decorate everything and sit and meditate. But as a mother every morning you have two, three deities to decorate. Pull them out of bed, wash them, give them a nice bath, dress them well, feed them. That is the offering you are giving to God. They are living gods in your home until you see them off to school. If you ignore them and go and sit and close your eyes and meditate, then God says, 'What is this? You offer a piece of fruit on the altar, but I am here in your home in the form of your child and you ignore me.'"*

## STRIVING TOGETHER WITH VISION, COURAGE AND OPTIMISM

*"Since society itself is nothing but a collection of individuals, human beings just like you and me, it follows that if we want to change society, it is up to each one of us to make our contribution."*

~ Dalai Lama

"To bring about this better world, therefore, let us all, old and young—not as members of this nation or that nation, not as members of this faith or that faith, but simply as individual members of this great human family of seven billion—strive together with vision, with courage, and with optimism. This is my humble plea.

Within the scale of the life of the cosmos, a human life is no more than a tiny blip. Each one us is a visitor of 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? Far better, surely, to use our short time in pursuing a meaningful life, enriched by a sense of connection with and service toward others."

Those are among the final words of the book. I'm reminded of some parallel wisdom from [Anthony de Mello](#) and [Dan Millman](#).

In [Awareness](#), de Mello tells us: "An Italian poet said, 'We live in a flash of light; evening comes and it is night forever.' It's only a flash and we waste it. We waste it with our anxiety, our worries, our concerns, our burdens."

While Millman puts it this way in [Everyday Enlightenment](#): "Life is brief—a flash of lightning, a snap of eternity's fingers."

Then we have Mary Oliver's beautiful question: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

Well... What will it be? How will you use this precious life of yours? I say we have fun Optimizing and Actualizing in service to the world!!

B

**Brian Johnson,**  
Chief Philosopher

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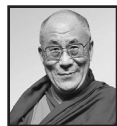
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### About the Author of "Beyond Religion"

DALAI LAMA



His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, was born in 1935 to a peasant family in northeastern Tibet and was recognized at the age of two as the reincarnation of his predecessor, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama. The world's foremost Buddhist leader, he travels extensively, speaking eloquently in favor of ecumenical understanding, kindness and compassion, respect for the environment, and, above all, world peace.

### About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives so they can actualize their potential as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + practical tools. Learn more and optimize your life at [optimize.me](http://optimize.me).