

Secular Ethics for the 21st Century

A Message from His Holiness the Dalai Lama

Until the last fifty years or so, the world's diverse Buddhist communities had only a distant inkling of each other's existence and little appreciation of how much they held in common. As the Buddha's teaching took root in different places, certain variations in the style in which it was practiced and upheld evolved naturally. Indeed, the Buddha himself gave different teachings according to the predispositions of his disciples at different times. What distinguishes our contemporary situation is that almost the entire array of Buddhist traditions that evolved in different lands is now accessible to anyone who is interested. What's more, those of us who study and practice these various Buddhist traditions can now meet and learn from one another.

Shakyamuni Buddha attained enlightenment in Bodha Gaya about 2600 years ago, yet I believe his teachings remain refreshing and relevant today. Moved by a spontaneous concern to help others, following his enlightenment the Buddha spent the rest of his life as a homeless monk, sharing his experience with those who wished to listen. Both his view of dependent arising and his advice not to harm anyone, but to help whoever you can, emphasize the practice of non-violence. This remains one of the most potent forces for good in the world today, for non-violence is to be of service to our fellow beings...

In an increasingly interdependent world our own welfare and happiness depend on many other people. Other human beings have a right to peace and happiness that is equal to our own; therefore we have a responsibility to help those in need. Today, in a new millennium, our world requires us to accept the oneness of humanity. Many of our world's problems and conflicts arise because we have lost sight of the basic humanity that binds us all together as a human family. We forget that despite the superficial differences between us, people are equal in their basic wish for peace and happiness. Part of Buddhist practice involves training our minds through meditation. But if our training in calming our minds, developing qualities like love, compassion, generosity and patience, is to be effective, we must put them into practice in our day-to-day life. Even as our world continues to develop materially, there is increasing need for similar progress in our sense of inner values. The 20th century was a century of war and violence; now we all need to work to see that the 21st is a century of peace and dialogue. We Buddhists can contribute to this by learning from the world's other religious traditions and sharing with them the distinctive qualities of our own tradition.

There is great emphasis on the practice of love and compassion in the Buddha's teaching, as in the teachings of other spiritual traditions, but it is important to recognize that compassion and love are fundamental to relations between sentient beings in general and human beings in particular. I believe that we should no longer talk about Buddhist ethics, Hindu, Christian or Muslim ethics, because these values are universal. Buddhism does not explain the virtue of values such as honesty and integrity in a way that is different from how Christianity or Islam or any other religious tradition explains them. Therefore, in recent years, I have found it more appropriate to talk about the need to foster what I call secular ethics. I refer to these values as secular ethics because believing in one religion or another or not believing in one at all does not affect our need for them. The basic foundation of humanity is compassion and love. This is why,

if even a few individuals simply try to create mental peace and happiness within themselves and act responsibly and kind-heartedly towards others, they will have a positive influence in their community. I believe Buddhism does have a special role to play in our modern world.

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