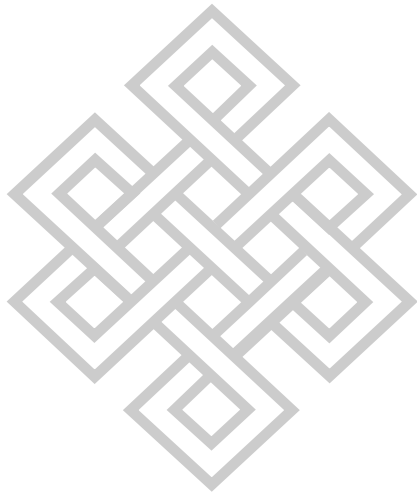


# Spiritual Humanism: Essays



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# *Introduction*

What is spiritual humanism? How can a humanist who does not have any beliefs about the supernatural also be spiritual? What does practicing spiritual humanism look like? I created this booklet to offer my personal answers to these questions.

I am not selling the answers to all of life's questions. I am not selling the solutions to all of life's problems. I am not selling a worldview that is somehow better than other worldviews. I am simply sharing a perspective on ethics and spirituality that I happen to enjoy.

## **Agnosticism**

I am agnostic about the supernatural. I do not deny the supernatural. I simply have no convincing evidence of the supernatural. Without evidence of the supernatural, I have no basis on which to form beliefs about the supernatural. Without beliefs about the supernatural, I cannot practice any spirituality that relies on beliefs about the supernatural. I need an approach to spirituality that does not involve any beliefs about the supernatural.

## **Spirituality**

Drawing on ideas from the Dalai Lama's books *Ethics for a New Millennium* and *Beyond Religion*, I define ethics and spirituality in the following ways:

1. Ethics is my commitment to help reduce suffering and promote well-being for the benefit of all.
2. Spirituality is my commitment to cultivate personal qualities and values that improve my ability to reduce suffering and promote well-being.

My approach to ethics and spirituality is humanistic because it sets aside beliefs about the supernatural and focuses on life in this world, here and now. It searches for ways of responding to difficult conditions of human existence such as suffering, aging, and death. It adopts an attitude of thinking about how to live a worthwhile life, taking into account both what is important to me and what impact my life has on other people.

## **Buddhism**

Practicing ethics and spirituality requires more than merely defining ethics and spirituality. I use ideas and practices from Buddhism to help me fulfill my ethical and spiritual commitments.

- I do my best to uphold 10 ethical guidelines taught by Buddhism.
- I study Buddhist teachings to cultivate a more compassionate worldview.
- I use Buddhist practices to calm my mind.

However, I do not limit myself to Buddhism. I supplement Buddhist teachings and practices with ideas from poems, religions, philosophies, and the sciences.

My approach to Buddhism is not typical. I camp at the edges of Buddhism. I have already decided not to grow angry or argue with anyone who says that I am not a Buddhist. I may indeed be so atypical that, for many people, I fall outside the borders of Buddhism.

## **What's In This Booklet?**

The essays in this booklet describe ideas that I have found helpful in

practicing my ethics and spirituality. These ideas come from various poems, religions, philosophies, and sciences.



# Orientation

## *Why Am I Agnostic?*

Look, it can't be seen.

Listen, it can't be heard.

Reach out, it can't be touched.

Breathe in, it has no taste or smell.

I perceive things when matter and energy in the world around me interact with special cells in my body called receptors. Receptor cells respond to input from physical matter and energy. They translate patterns in the physical matter and energy into information that my brain analyzes and "perceives." However, the supernatural is not made of physical matter or physical energy. The supernatural cannot interact with the receptor cells in my body. The supernatural cannot be perceived.

It is neither up nor down.

It is neither in nor out.

It is neither large nor small.

It is neither before nor after.

It is neither light nor dark.

It is neither alive nor dead.

It is neither one nor many.

It neither exists nor does not exist.

Concepts do not apply to it.

Words cannot describe it.

Concepts and words are grounded in people's experiences with the physical world around them. Concepts and words help people understand and interact with the physical world. However, there is no reason to assume that concepts and words created for use in the physical world also apply to the supernatural. There is no reason to assume that concepts and words

accurately describe what is “beyond” the physical world or what is “other than” the physical world.

Suppose someone comes to me and says, “The supernatural has been miraculously revealed to me.” How do I know this person is not caught up in wishful thinking, deluded by the misguided advice of others, mistaking a psychological experience for a miraculous revelation, suffering from hallucinations, or simply lying? How can I prove the person has actually received a revelation?

Moreover, people from different places and different historical periods have made conflicting claims about the supernatural.

- Should I accept ancient Egyptian claims about gods, goddesses, magic, and life after death?
- Should I accept ancient Greek claims about gods, goddesses, magic, and life after death?
- Should I accept Hindu claims about gods, goddesses, and life after death?
- Should I accept Christian claims about god, angels, demons, miracles, and life after death?
- Should I accept Buddhist claims about divine beings, karma, reincarnation, and nirvana?

How do I know whose claims about the supernatural are right and whose claims are wrong? Who can prove it to me?

I do not deny the supernatural. I simply have no convincing evidence of the supernatural. Without evidence, I have no basis to form beliefs about the

supernatural. Without beliefs about the supernatural, I cannot practice a spirituality that relies on beliefs about the supernatural.

If the agnostic does not believe in God, then, so the argument goes, they will not do any of the things associated with that belief: engage in prayer, worship, read their experiences in a religious light, refer to religious ideas in deciding what they should do, and so on. And this, in effect, is a rejection, or an ignoring, of religion. Surely it would just be irrational to live a religious life, whilst not accepting the theoretical basis for such a life? Such a life, it seems, could only be based on self-deception. ('I do not believe, but I will pretend that I do, and perhaps half-convince myself that I do.') And how could anyone rationally opt for a life of self-deception?

– Robin Le Poidevin <sup>1</sup>

If I am going to practice a spirituality, then it needs to be a spirituality that does not involve beliefs about the supernatural.

## Reference

1. Robin Le Poidevin (2010). *Agnosticism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition. Quote taken from page 97.

# *What is Spirituality?*

Spirituality is constructed in different ways by various religious traditions, spiritual movements, belief systems, cultures, and contexts, and not least by particular individuals in specific circumstances. All may use the term 'spirituality', but each may well be using it in quite different ways.

– John Swinton and Stephen Pattison <sup>1</sup>

People define spirituality in different ways.

People who view spirituality as superstitious and dangerous to secular society will define spirituality in ways that support their arguments to abandon spirituality. People whose spirituality plays an important role in their lives will define spirituality in ways that emphasize the benefits they receive from practicing spirituality. People who grow up in different religious and cultural environments will define spirituality in ways that reflect their upbringings. Even within a small circle of family and friends, people have their own individual and nuanced definitions of spirituality.

## **Is “Spirituality” Too Ambiguous?**

Is the word “spirituality” too ambiguous? Do people use the word spirituality in so many different ways that it becomes meaningless? Should people stop using the word spirituality and replace it with other words instead?

Spirituality is no more ambiguous than other common words. Consider the words “art,” “freedom,” “beauty,” “philosophy,” and “love.” People define these words in many different ways. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote about the difficulty of defining the word “game” because games vary so widely in terms of rules, activities, goals, equipment, number of players,

playing fields, time limits, and so on. Wittgenstein suggested a fuzzy definition of the word game based on family resemblances. A specific game shares at least some characteristics of games in general, but a specific game does not share all characteristics of all games. In other words, a specific game resembles—but is not identical to—other games in the extended family of all games.

Despite their ambiguity, people continue to use words such as art, freedom, beauty, philosophy, love, and games. The ambiguity of the word spirituality clearly does not stop me from using it. Nevertheless, I respect people's freedom to substitute other words for the word spirituality, or to not talk about spirituality at all.

### **My Personal Definition**

I find it liberating that people define spirituality in so many different ways. The fact that other people are free to define spirituality in ways that make sense for their lives means that I am free to define spirituality in a way that makes sense for my life.

Drawing on ideas from the Dalai Lama's books *Ethics for a New Millennium* and *Beyond Religion*, I define ethics and spirituality in the following ways:

1. Ethics is my commitment to help reduce suffering and promote well-being for the benefit of all.
  - I believe that an inclusive approach to secular ethics, one with the potential to be universally accepted, requires recognition of only two basic principles. ...The first principle is the recognition of our shared humanity and our shared aspiration to happiness and the avoidance of suffering; the second is the understanding of interdependence as a key feature of human reality, including our biological reality as social animals. 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.

– Dalai Lama <sup>2</sup>

- Ethical conduct is thus not something we engage in because it is somehow right in itself. We do so because we recognize that just as I desire to be happy and to avoid suffering, so do all others.

– Dalai Lama <sup>3</sup>

2. Spirituality is my commitment to cultivate personal qualities and values that improve my ability to reduce suffering and promote well-being.

- Spirituality I take to be concerned with those qualities of the human spirit—such as love and compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, contentment, a sense of responsibility, a sense of harmony—which bring happiness to both self and others.

– Dalai Lama <sup>4</sup>

- Spiritual practice according to this description involves, on the one hand, acting out of concern for others' well-being. On the other, it entails transforming ourselves so that we become more readily disposed to do so.

– Dalai Lama <sup>5</sup>

Paraphrasing the Dalai Lama: <sup>6</sup>

Practicing ethics and spirituality does not require a temple, church, mosque, or synagogue. It does not require a complicated doctrine or philosophy. The temple is the mind. The doctrine is love, compassion, and respect for the rights and dignity of others regardless of who they are. The vow is to help reduce suffering and promote well-being for the benefit of all.

## Other Definitions

Here are six definitions of spirituality that describe my spirituality relatively well. Please keep in mind this is a small and cherry-picked set of definitions. There are many other ways of defining spirituality that do not describe my spirituality.

1. "Spirituality refers to that dimension of our lives that deals with values —truth, meaning, love, integrity, joy, and happiness, in essence, with how and why we live." – William Murray <sup>7</sup>
2. "Spirituality is the aspect of humanity that refers to the way individuals seek and express meaning and purpose and the way they experience their connectedness to the moment, to self, to others, to nature, and to the significant or sacred." – Christina Puchalski, Robert Vitillo, Sharon Hull, and Nancy Reller <sup>8</sup>
3. "Spirituality means to be concerned with one's own existence, the role in one's own life and the lives of others, as well as to see a meaningfulness in that." – Piret Paal, Cornelia Brandstötter, Reinhard Grabenweger, Kate Jones, and Megan Best <sup>9</sup>
4. "By spirituality I mean a sense of compassion, nonviolence, truthfulness, lovingkindness, being connected to the whole, and living a simple, peaceful harmonious life." – Mehrdad Massoudi <sup>10</sup>
5. "Spirituality is a personal search for meaning and purpose in life, which may or may not be related to religion. It entails connection to self-chosen and or religious beliefs, values, and practices that give meaning to life, thereby inspiring and motivating individuals to achieve their optimal being. This connection brings faith, hope, peace, and empowerment. The results are joy, forgiveness of oneself and others, awareness and acceptance of hardship and mortality, a heightened



sense of physical and emotional well-being, and the ability to transcend beyond the infirmities of existence.” – Ruth Tanyi <sup>11</sup>

6. “Spirituality is a way of being in the world in which a person feels a sense of connectedness to self, others, and/or a higher power or nature; a sense of meaning in life; and transcendence beyond self, everyday living, and suffering.” – Elizabeth Weathers, Geraldine McCarthy, and Alice Coffey <sup>12</sup>

## **Other Spiritualities**

My spirituality shares a number of similarities with other spiritualities. For example, my spirituality shares similarities with:

[Spiritual Naturalism](#)

[Religious Humanism](#)

[Secular Buddhism](#)

[Secular Spirituality](#)

My spirituality could be categorized as an example of spiritual naturalism, religious humanism, secular spirituality, or secular Buddhism. However, my spirituality differs from each of these spiritualities in important respects. I prefer to describe myself as a spiritual humanist who happens to borrow a number of ideas and practices from Buddhism.

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2. Dalai Lama (2011). *Beyond Religion*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. Quote taken from page 19.
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  6. Dalai Lama (1999). *Ethics for the New Millennium*. New York, NY: Riverhead Books. Paraphrased from page 234.
  7. William Murry (2011). *Becoming More Fully Human: Religious Humanism as a Way of Life*. Published by Religious Humanism Press. Quotes taken from page 5.
  8. Christina Puchalski, Robert Vitillo, Sharon Hull, and Nancy Reller (2014). Improving the spiritual dimension of whole person care: Reaching national and international consensus. *Journal of Palliative Medicine*, 17: 642–656. Quote taken from page 643.
  9. Piret Paal, Cornelia Brandstötter, Reinhard Grabenweger, Kate Jones, and Megan Best (2023). Spirituality is “sometimes just a hug”: A conceptual analysis from the perspective of nursing students. *Palliative and Supportive Care*, 1-8. doi:10.1017/S1478951523000974. Quote taken from page 5.

10. Mehrdad Massoudi (2003). Can Scientific Writing Be Creative? *Journal of Science Education and Technology*, 12: 115-128. Quote taken from page 118.
11. Ruth Tanyi (2002). Towards clarification of the meaning of spirituality. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 39: 500-509. Quote taken from page 506.
12. Weathers, E., McCarthy, G., & Coffey, A. (2016). Concept analysis of spirituality: An evolutionary approach. *Nursing Forum*, 51: 79-96. Quote taken from page 93.

# *What is Humanism?*

The word "humanism" is ambiguous. Humanism has meant different things to people living in different historical periods. Humanism has meant different things to people from different social groups and to people with different worldviews. Different individuals may have their own nuanced and unique definitions of humanism. My only goal in this essay is to explain what humanism means to me.

## **Humanist Manifesto III**

The *Humanist Manifesto III* describes humanism in the following manner:

Humanism is a progressive philosophy of life that, without supernaturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity.

The lifestance of Humanism—guided by reason, inspired by compassion, and informed by experience—encourages us to live life well and fully. It evolved through the ages and continues to develop through the efforts of thoughtful people who recognize that values and ideals, however carefully wrought, are subject to change as our knowledge and understandings advance.

– Humanist Manifesto III <sup>1</sup>

This description of humanism is consistent with my perspective on ethics and spirituality. I am responsible for living an ethical life. I am responsible for cultivating personal qualities that improve my ability to live an ethical life. I do my best to fulfill these responsibilities in order to reduce suffering and promote well-being for the greater good of all. And, lastly, I fulfill these responsibilities without relying on beliefs about the supernatural.

## Humanism as a Belief System

Some people describe humanism by creating lists of beliefs that many or most humanists hold.<sup>2-4</sup> These kinds of lists serve as useful introductions to humanism. However, I do not wish to speak for other humanists. The list of beliefs below reflects my personal understanding of humanism. Other humanists may or may not share these beliefs.

- I believe in reverence for life in all its forms.
- I believe in the intrinsic value of every human being.
- I believe that human beings benefit by acting ethically towards one another.
- I believe that human beings depend on each other and on the world around them for their survival and quality of life.
- I believe that human beings have the potential to create a more compassionate and satisfying world.
- I believe in confronting life's problems and challenges with compassion, understanding, cooperation, and a willingness to put the common good ahead of self-interest.
- I believe in pursuing fairness for everyone and the eradication of all forms of exploitation and oppression.
- I believe in being open to new ideas, values, ways of thinking, and ways of acting.
- I believe that human beings have the ability to give their lives meaning

through personal growth and through helping reduce suffering and promote well-being in the world around them.

- I believe in focusing on life in this world, here and now, rather than focusing on the hope of a supernatural existence after death.

Please remember this list of beliefs is merely a writing technique to help other people understand what humanism means to me. These beliefs are not a creed or a doctrine.

## **Religious Humanism**

Some people identify themselves as religious humanists. Religious humanists find value in the rituals, ceremonies, traditions, songs, worship services, and supportive religious communities. Religious humanists may create their own religious organizations (e.g., Ethical Culture). Religious humanists may also attend the churches, synagogues, mosques, or temples of traditional religions.

I do not identify as a religious humanist. For whatever reason, religious rituals, ceremonies, traditions, songs, and worship services do not give me a sense of comfort or inspiration. I respect the fact that other people benefit from these religious activities. I simply do not experience the same benefit. Consequently, the term “spiritual humanist” seems to fit me better than the term “religious humanist.”

## **Where to Learn More**

The websites below provide more information about humanism from the perspective of people who identify as humanists.

- [American Humanist Association](#)

- [Humanists International](#)
- [Humanists Australia](#)
- [Humanist Canada](#)
- [Humanists UK](#)
- [Humanism \(The Pluralism Project, Harvard University\)](#)

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1. *Humanist Manifesto III* (2003). Made available online by the American Humanist Association at <https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/manifesto3/>. Downloaded 09/15/2023 from [http://americanhumanist.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/HumanismandItsAspirations\\_jefferson1.pdf](http://americanhumanist.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/HumanismandItsAspirations_jefferson1.pdf).
2. William Murry (2011). *Becoming More Fully Human*. New Haven, CT: Religious Humanism Press. List of beliefs found on pages 18-23.
3. Stephen Law (2011). *Humanism: A Very Short Introduction*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. List of beliefs found on pages 1-3.
4. American Humanist Association. *Humanism and Its Aspirations: Humanist Manifesto III, a Successor to the Humanist Manifesto of 1933*. Published online at <https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/manifesto3/>.

# Compassion



# *Loving Others as Myself*

Love the world as your own self; then you can truly care for all things.

- Lao Tsu, Tao te Ching <sup>1</sup>

People share similar needs.<sup>2-4</sup>

People need food and drink.

People need clothing and shelter.

People need physical and mental health.

People need safety from threats and dangers.

People need friendship and a sense of belonging.

People need to feel their lives are worthwhile.

When people's needs are not satisfied, they suffer. Other people want to avoid suffering, just as I do.

When people's needs are satisfied, they experience happiness. Other people want to experience happiness, just as I do.

When I help people satisfy their needs, so they are able to avoid suffering and experience happiness, I treat them in the same way that I would like them to treat me. I am loving them as I love myself.

## **References**

1. Lao Tzu. *Tao Te Ching*. Translated by Gia-fu Feng and Jane English (1972). New York, NY: Knopf. Second Vintage Books Edition (2012). Quote taken from page 15.

2. Larry Litwack (2007). Basic Needs – A Retrospective. *International Journal of Reality Therapy*, 26: 28-30.
3. Mark Koltko-Rivera (2006). Rediscovering the Later Version of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: Self-Transcendence and Opportunities for Theory, Research, and Unification. *Review of General Psychology*, 10(4): 302–317.
4. Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117: 497-529.

# *Transformation of Motivation*

I act on a variety of self motivations every day. I act on motivations to satisfy my bodily needs. I act on motivations to seek safety in the presence of danger. I act on motivations to avoid pain and suffering. I act on motivations to experience pleasure and happiness. Self motivations are natural and important to preserving my happiness, health, and life.

Care transforms my motivations.<sup>1</sup> When I care for someone, I include that person in my motivations. I still act in ways that result in positive outcomes for myself. However, I also consider how my actions affect the person I care about. I am motivated to act in ways that result in positive outcomes both for myself and for the person I care about.

## **Accommodation**

One sign of transformed motivation is accommodation. Accommodation means that I tolerate small imperfections and small mistakes made by the person I care about.

Everyone is imperfect.

Everyone sometimes makes mistakes.

Everyone sometimes falls prey to temptations.

Everyone sometimes fails to live up to their own values.

I do not expect perfection from myself. I do not expect perfection from the person I care about. I do not turn small imperfections and small mistakes into big conflicts that cause suffering and erode relationships. I instead let go of small imperfections and small mistakes.

## **Willingness to Sacrifice**

A second sign of transformed motivation is willingness to sacrifice. I willingly give up something for the benefit of the person I care about. I do not make the sacrifice because society expects me to make a sacrifice. I do not make the sacrifice because I expect to be repaid someday. Instead, I sacrifice something because I want to bring about a positive outcome for the person I care about. I want the person I care about to avoid suffering and experience happiness.

## **Forgiveness**

A third sign of transformed motivation is forgiveness. Seeking forgiveness involves three elements:

- an admission of wrongdoing
- an attempt to make amends
- an effort to not repeat the wrongdoing.

When my imperfections overtake me, and I wrong the person I care about, I seek forgiveness. I admit my mistake or wrongdoing without excuses. I try to make amends. I strive to not repeat the mistake or the wrongdoing.

When imperfections overtake the person I care about, and that person wrongs me, I forgive that person. I accept the person's attempt to make amends. I leave the incident in the past and do not bring it up again.

If a person does not seek forgiveness for harming me, or I am unable to forgive the person, then at least I do not harm that person. I do not unnecessarily interact with the person. I do not spread negative information

about the person. I do not try to disrupt the person's life.

## **Expanding Circles of Care**

People tend to have circles of care. A circle of care is an imaginary circle extending around all the individuals that a person cares for (e.g., family and friends). The individuals inside a person's circle of care receive the benefits of the person's transformed motivation. The person accommodates, willingly sacrifices, and forgives the individuals inside the circle of care. The individuals outside a person's circle of care (e.g., strangers and enemies) do not receive the benefits of the person's transformed motivation. The person might not accommodate mistakes or imperfections, make sacrifices, or forgive individuals outside the circle of care.

Like other people, I have a circle of care. My spiritual practice aims at expanding my circle of care to include a wider variety of more and more people.

People can be very intelligent, in this sense, without having wide sympathies. It is neither irrational nor unintelligent to draw the limits of one's moral community at a national, or racial, or gender border. But it is undesirable – morally undesirable. So it is best to think of moral progress as a matter of increasing sensitivity, increasing responsiveness to the needs of a larger and larger variety of people and things.

– Richard Rorty <sup>2</sup>

I expand my circle of care to others by being responsible for others. I do what I can to help other people when an opportunity arises. I am willing to help anyone who needs help. I transform my motivations to seek positive outcomes both for myself and for those around me.

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1. Caryl Rusbult, Nils Olsen, Jody Davis, and Margaret Hannon (2001). Commitment and Relationship Maintenance Mechanisms (pages 87-113). In John Harvey and Amy Wenzel (editors) *Close Romantic Relationships Maintenance and Enhancement*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
2. Richard Rorty (1999). *Philosophy and Social Hope*. London, England: Penguin Books. Quote taken from page 39.

# *Listening Carefully*

Listening carefully to another person is a form of compassion. My ability to listen carefully improves when I practice the following principles.

- **Pay Attention** — I fully concentrate on what the person is saying. I mentally screen out any distractions happening around me. I do not think about what I will say next.
- **Empathize** — I put myself in the person's shoes. I try to imagine what the person is saying. I try to understand the person's thoughts, feelings, and perspective.
- **Show Interest** — I convey my interest in what the person is saying through verbal and nonverbal cues, like nodding my head or saying "yes" to encourage them to continue speaking.
- **Paraphrase** — I paraphrase what the person has said as the conversation proceeds. I confirm my grasp of the other person's point of view.
- **Ask Questions** — I ask questions to better understand what the other person is saying. I ask the person to explain things that are not clear to me. However, I try not to interrupt. I wait for the person to pause before asking questions.
- **Withhold Judgment** — I remain open to new ideas, perspectives, and possibilities. Even when I have strong views, I suspend my judgment about what the person is saying. I hold back criticisms and avoid arguments.

- **Just Listen** — I remind myself that a person may simply want me to listen. They may not want anything more from me. I do my best to not get distracted by thinking about “solutions” or “fixes” to a person’s problems. Instead, I focus on listening to what the person is saying.



# *Caring For Others*

Aware that looking deeply at the nature of suffering can help us to develop compassion and find ways out of suffering, we are determined not to avoid or close our eyes before suffering. We are committed to finding ways, including personal contact, images, and sounds, to be with those who suffer, so we can understand their situation deeply and help them transform their suffering into compassion, peace, and joy.

– Thich Nhat Hahn <sup>1</sup>

## **Respecting Autonomy**

When I care for a person, I do my best to respect that person's autonomy. I offer my help without trying to control the results. I do not impose my own ideas about what actions should be taken or what outcomes should be sought. Instead, I follow the lead of the person who is suffering, allowing that person to guide when and how I help.

Respecting a person's autonomy requires me to learn about that person. I need to learn when the person wants my help and when the person does not want my help. I need to learn what the person needs and how the person prefers to satisfy those needs. I need to learn what abilities, strengths, and limitations the person possesses. I need to learn what might help the person flourish. This process of learning never ends. There is always more to learn about a person.

## **Taking Action**

I can care for someone through many types of actions:

- being present
- listening
- talking
- comforting
- encouraging
- accompanying
- helping
- sharing
- giving.

My actions to care for a person are most effective when I am authentic in my interactions with that person. I behave naturally, as myself. What I say and do genuinely reflects how I think and feel. Pretending to be what I am not interferes with the honest and trusting interactions necessary to effectively care for someone.

My actions to care for a person are most effective when I admit my mistakes. I sometimes make mistakes when I try help someone. When this happens, it is important for me to listen to the person's feedback. It is important for me to learn from my mistakes and to correct myself.

My actions to care for a person are most effective when I spend time caring for myself and enjoying my life. I need to satisfy my own needs, grow as a person, and nurture happiness and love in my life. Caring for myself renews the personal resources that I have available to care for others.

## **Steadfast Care**

Steadfast care means not giving up when a person makes a mistake or brings about difficult situations. I do my best to remain consistent in caring for that person. I try to be a patient and reliable companion while that person struggles to overcome obstacles or solve problems.

Steadfast care also means holding onto hope for a person. A person may doubt their ability to escape suffering and return to a more satisfying life. Yet, the present is full of possibilities for growth and positive change. I do my best to remain confident in a person's potential to create a more satisfying life—even if that person has lost this confidence.

## References

1. Thich Nhat Hanh (1998). *Interbeing, 3rd Edition*. Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press. Kindle Edition. Quote taken from page 18.

# *Loving My Enemies*

I am good to people who are good. I am also good to people who are not good, because virtue is goodness.

– Tao Te Ching <sup>1</sup>

You have heard that it has been said, “You must love your neighbor and hate those who hate you.” But I tell you, love those who hate you. Respect and give thanks for those who say bad things to you. Do good to those who hate you. Pray for those who do bad things to you and who make it hard for you.

– Matthew 5: 43-44 <sup>2</sup>

Let us live in joy, never hating those who hate us. Let us live in freedom, without hatred even among those who hate.

– Dhammapada <sup>3</sup>

Loving my enemies does not mean having affectionate or sentimental feelings for them. I do not have to “like” my enemies in order to show love for them. I show love for my enemies by extending compassion to them when they suffer, by being concerned about their basic human needs, by not seeking revenge against them, and by forgiving their wrongdoings against me. I am by no means perfect in loving my enemies. Yet, I remain committed to doing my best to love my enemies.

## **Hatred and Vengeance**

Hating my enemies does nothing to remove hatred and suffering from the world. As long as I hate my enemies, hatred remains in the world, and suffering will follow.

Hatred can never put an end to hatred.  
Only love can end hatred.  
This is an ancient and enduring principle.<sup>4, 5</sup>

Harming my enemies in the name of “justice” or “revenge” results in harm to myself. It undermines my ethical and spiritual commitments. It numbs my feelings of compassion. It accustoms me to mistreating others. I become more susceptible to mistreating people who have done nothing wrong other than irritate or annoy me. My increased susceptibility to mistreating others can even spill over to my relationships with people I love and care about.

It is easy to see the faults of others; we winnow them like chaff.  
It is hard to see our own; we hide them as a gambler hides a losing draw. But when one keeps dwelling on the faults of others, his own compulsions grow worse, making it harder to overcome them.

– Dhammapada<sup>6</sup>

Harming others in the name of “justice” or “revenge” is not something that I take lightly. It is not the kind of person I want to be. I want to be a person who does not hurt others with unkind acts, words, or thoughts.

## **How to Love My Enemies**

Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote a sermon called Loving Your Enemies.<sup>7</sup> In the sermon, he describes three ways to show love for one’s enemies.

The first way I can show love for my enemies is through my willingness to forgive them. A person who is completely devoid of forgiveness has a very limited capacity to love. It is important to understand, however, what forgiveness does and does not mean.

Forgiveness does not mean ignoring what has been done or

putting a false label on an evil act. It means, rather, that the evil act no longer remains as a barrier to the relationship. Forgiveness is a catalyst creating the atmosphere necessary for a fresh start and a new beginning. It is the lifting of a burden or the cancelling of a debt.

– Martin Luther King, Jr. <sup>8</sup>

The second way I can show love for my enemies is to not reduce my enemies to their harmful words or actions. People's harmful words and actions never fully capture who they are as human beings. All people (including me) have harmful tendencies within them. All people (including me) have loving tendencies within them. All people struggle with these opposing tendencies. To reduce my enemies to nothing more than their harmful tendencies is to not fully acknowledge their humanity.

The third way I can show love for my enemies is by not seeking to humiliate them or defeat them. Situations may arise where I have an opportunity to humiliate my enemies. Circumstances may give me the opportunity to defeat my enemies. However, humiliating and defeating my enemies does not eliminate animosity. Humiliating and defeating my enemies leaves negative feelings and sets up the possibility of renewed conflict in the future.

When opportunities to humiliate or defeat my enemies arise, the opportunity also arises to seek friendship and understanding with my enemies. Friendship and understanding builds goodwill that would otherwise be blocked by hatred and vengeance.

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2. Matthew 5: 43-44. *Bible*, New Life Version (NLV). Available online at Bible Gateway.
3. *The Dhammapada*. Translated by Eknath Easwaran (1985, 2007). Easwaran's Classics of Indian Spirituality, Book 3. Nilgiri Press. Kindle Edition. Quote taken from page 177.
4. *The Dhammapada*. Translated by Eknath Easwaran (1985, 2007). Easwaran's Classics of Indian Spirituality, Book 3. Nilgiri Press. Kindle Edition. Verses on page 106 read, "For hatred can never put an end to hatred; love alone can. This is an unalterable law."
5. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963). *A Gift of Love: Sermons from Strength to Love and Other Preachings*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press. Kindle Edition. On page 123, King writes, "Hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear; only love can do that. Hatred paralyzes life; love releases it. Hatred confuses life; love harmonizes it. Hatred darkens life; love illumines it."
6. *The Dhammapada*. Translated by Eknath Easwaran (1985, 2007). Easwaran's Classics of Indian Spirituality, Book 3. Nilgiri Press. Kindle Edition. Quote taken from page 196.
7. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963). *A Gift of Love: Sermons from Strength to Love and Other Preachings*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press. Kindle Edition.
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# Protection



## *Protecting Others from Harm*

[I vow to act] with whatever means are necessary according to the circumstances to stop someone who is doing harmful action.

...When a person or a group is causing themselves or others pain and difficulties, really unlawfully or immorally treating great numbers of sentient beings badly, we should not just accept that, saying we are Buddhists and therefore passive people. We should oppose them skillfully.

– Zopa Rinpoche 1

Stop people from harming others. Use whatever means are required by the circumstances to stop the harmful actions, but remember to care both for the people whose harmful actions are being stopped and for the people who are escaping harm.

This principle is easy to understand but difficult to practice. It requires me to find the motivation and courage to act rather than stand by and do nothing. It requires me to care about the well-being of my enemies. It requires me to avoid making excuses for my own harmful actions or the harmful actions of my allies. It requires me to learn skillful methods that stop harmful actions without resorting to force, aggression, or violence.

### **Reference**

1. Zopa Rinpoche (2000). *The Bodhisattva Vows*. Compiled and translated by the students of the Amitabha Buddhist Center in Singapore. Published by Constance Miller, Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition Education Services, July 2000. Downloaded January 23, 2022 from <https://www.fpmtabc.org/download/ebook/bodhisattva-vows.pdf>.

## *Excuses for Harm*

People do not ordinarily engage in harmful conduct until they have justified to themselves the morality of their actions. In this process of moral justification, detrimental conduct is made personally and socially acceptable by portraying it as serving socially worthy or moral purposes. People then can act on a moral imperative and preserve their view of themselves as moral agents while inflicting harm on others.

– Albert Bandura <sup>1</sup>

No disease infects the mind more easily than excuses for harming others. No illness leads to as much suffering and death as excuses for harming others.

- **Moral Justifications** — It was done for a greater good. We were defending our values. We were protecting our society. We were purifying or improving our society.
- **Comparisons to Something Worse** — Other people have done worse things. They did worse things to us. Other societies treat people much worse than we do.
- **Euphemistic Labels** — It sounds better when it is called something else. We did not get revenge; we got justice. We did not verbally assault them; we expressed righteous anger.
- **Minimized Consequences** — It was not that bad. They were not killed. They only suffered for a short time. It only happened one time.
- **Dehumanizing Those Who Are Harmed** — It was done to one of “them.” Why care what happens to them? They are sinners. They are criminals. They are savages, monsters, and animals.

- **Blaming Those Who Are Harmed** — They deserved it. It is their fault. They brought it on themselves. They got what was coming to them.
- **Passing Responsibility to Others** — We did what we were told to do. We were just walking orders. We were just doing what our leaders told us to do.
- **Spreading Responsibility** — Everyone was doing it. Why single me out? I am no different than all the other people doing it. It was what people normally did.
- **Normalizing Violence** — This is just how the world works. Violence is an effective and legitimate form of human behavior.

Making excuses for harm has two main outcomes. First, making excuses for harm allows people to avoid feeling responsible for their actions. It lets people continue to think of themselves as caring and kind people even while they neglect or hurt others. Second, making excuses for harm others prevents people from stopping their harmful actions. They see no need to stop harming others. Both of these outcomes are unhelpful.

I therefore do not take excuses for harm lightly. Little by little a person becomes filled with harmful intentions, just as a pot is filled by drops of water.

I do my best to resist and oppose excuses for harming others. If I realize that I am making excuses for harming others, or someone points out that I am making excuses, then I stop making those excuses. I reflect on how I became caught up in making excuses for harming others. I restore my mind and renew my commitment to protecting others from harm.

## Reference

1. Albert Bandura (1999). Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 3: 193-209. Quote taken from page 194.

## *Us-Them Mindsets*

Human beings generally distinguish between people who are similar to themselves (“us”) and people who are different from themselves (“them”). Once the distinction between “us” and “them” takes root, many additional distinctions begin to grow.

<b>Us</b>	<b>Them</b>
Good	Bad
Moral	Immoral
Reasonable	Unreasonable
Wise	Foolish
Forgivable	Unforgivable
Caring	Indifferent
Compassionate	Aggressive
Cooperative	Disruptive
Helpful	Harmful
Pure	Impure
Attractive	Disgusting
Loving	Hateful

Such distinctions motivate compassion and care towards people who are “one of us” but motivate aggression and indifference towards people who are “one of them.” Such distinctions evoke admiration and forgiveness for people who are “one of us” but evoke disgust and vengeance towards people who are “one of them.” Such distinctions become evil when they unleash a belief that it is acceptable—or even a good thing—to harm people who are “one of them.”

I do my best to resist and oppose us-them mindsets.

If someone points out that I am caught up in an us-them mindset, then I will stop and reflect on how I became caught up in it. I will ask forgiveness and try to make amends to anyone I may have harmed. I will restore my mind and return to upholding my ethical and spiritual commitments.

When I oppose us-them mentalities, some people may accuse me of siding with “them” instead of “us.” They may consider me a traitor. They may criticize or ridicule me. They may punish me. They may ostracize me. I willingly accept these outcomes for the benefit of everyone in the category of “us” and for the benefit of everyone in the category of “them.”

## *Use Nonviolent Methods*

People are often quick to resort to violence. The motivation to engage in violence may arise from a desire to punish or seek revenge on people who have harmed others. The motivation to engage in violence may arise from the belief that violence works faster than nonviolence, not thinking about the negative long-term consequences of violence on individuals and communities. The motivation to engage in violence may arise from a fear that nonviolent methods will put oneself at risk of being harmed.

The many motivations for resorting to violence are why the motivation to use nonviolence requires compassion, knowledge, and discipline. Reading a single essay, like this one, cannot adequately prepare a person to practice nonviolence. This essay merely provides some ideas and resources to start learning about nonviolence.

### **Six Principles**

Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote about six principles of nonviolence. The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute at Stanford University briefly describes these six principles.

King's notion of nonviolence had six key principles. First, one can resist evil without resorting to violence. Second, nonviolence seeks to win the "friendship and understanding" of the opponent, not to humiliate him. Third, evil itself, not the people committing evil acts, should be opposed. Fourth, those committed to nonviolence must be willing to suffer without retaliation as suffering itself can be redemptive. Fifth, nonviolent resistance avoids "external physical violence" and "internal violence of spirit" as well: "The nonviolent resister not only refuses to shoot his opponent but he also refuses to hate him." The resister should be

motivated by love in the sense of the Greek word agape, which means “understanding,” or “redeeming good will for all men”. The sixth principle is that the nonviolent resister must have a “deep faith in the future,” stemming from the conviction that “The universe is on the side of justice.”

– Martin Luther King, Jr. Research  
and Education Institute <sup>1</sup>

These six principles illustrate the importance of approaching nonviolence from a compassionate mindset, with the goal of eventually reconciling the entire community following a conflict. The six methods also draw a line at physical or psychological violence. I agree. I mourn the use of violent or forceful methods as a breakdown in human civility, as a source of suffering, and as an obstacle to reconciliation.

## **Sharp’s 198 Methods**

Gene Sharp created a list of 198 Methods of Nonviolent Action.<sup>2</sup> His list of 198 methods is not exhaustive. People can invent new methods of nonviolence that are not listed in the 198 methods. People have many choices when it comes to using nonviolent methods to protect others and engage in social conflicts.

Below is a sample of Sharp’s 198 methods. I divided the methods into two groups: persuasive methods, and coercive methods.

**Persuasive methods** aim to stop people from harming others by changing their minds. It educates people about the harm being done. It appeals to people’s sense of ethics, fairness, or desire to not harm others. When persuasion works, people stop harming others because they want to stop their harmful actions. Here are a few examples of persuasive methods.



- Public Speeches
- Marches
- Parades
- Motorcades
- Vigils
- Assemblies
- Teach-ins
- Walk-outs
- Refusing Awards
- Letters of Opposition or Support
- Mass Petitions
- Slogans, Caricatures, and Symbols
- Banners and Posters
- Leaflets, Pamphlets, and Books
- Newspapers, Journals, Blogs, Videos
- Lobbying
- Picketing
- Guerrilla Theater
- Humorous Skits
- Performances of Plays and Music
- Singing
- Homage at Burial Places
- Civil Disobedience of Unfair or Oppressive Laws

**Coercive methods** may be needed when people stubbornly refuse to stop harming others. Coercive methods create negative experiences and negative circumstances for the people being coerced. People are motivated to stop harming others because they want the negative experiences and negative circumstances to end. Here are a few examples of coercive methods.

- Economic or Social Boycotts
- Economic or Social Girlcotts
- Alternative Markets to Compete with Harmful Markets
- Lawsuits
- Reluctant and Slow Compliance
- Deliberate Inefficiency
- Personal Noncooperation
- Strikes
- Working-to-Rule Strikes
- Severance of Funds or Credit
- Nonviolent Obstruction
- Nonviolent Occupation
- Refusing to Disperse
- Defiance of Blockades
- Refusing to Accept Appointed Officials
- Refusing to Dissolve Organizations or Institutions
- Offering Sanctuary
- Preventing People from Escaping Accountability

Coersive methods are inferior to persuasive methods. People who are persuaded to stop harming others have a change of heart and are not likely to return the harmful actions. People who are coerced to stop harming others may hold a grudge and later return to the harmful actions.

The International Center on Nonviolent Conflict has enhanced Sharp's 198 method for the digital age. Their digital age methods of nonviolence may be found in a video called [Civil Resistance 2.0](#).

## Handbooks of Nonviolence

Several handbooks of nonviolence can be found online. These handbooks offer useful tips for practicing nonviolence. I do not agree with everything in these handbooks. However, they are a useful resource for learning about nonviolence.

- [Handbook for Nonviolent Campaigns, 2nd Edition](#)
- [A Guide to Effective Nonviolent Struggle](#)
- [Ten Ways to Fight Hate](#)
- [ACT UP Civil Disobedience Training](#)
- [Nonviolent Resistance in Power Asymmetries](#)

In addition to the free handbooks above, Michale Nagler has written a useful book called *The Nonviolence Handbook: A Guide for Practical Action*.<sup>3</sup>

## Classes on Nonviolence

Various colleges, universities, and organizations offer classes on nonviolence. For example, I completed a course on nonviolence offered by the Metta Center for Nonviolence. People are free to choose from a variety of courses offered by other organizations and institutions.

## References

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2. Gene Sharp. *198 Methods of nonviolent action*. Published online by the Albert Einstein Institution at <https://www.aeinstein.org/198-methods-of-nonviolent-action>.
3. Michael Nagler (2014). *The Nonviolence Handbook: A Guide for Practical Action*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

## *Mourning Forceful Methods*

It may be necessary in some situations to use forceful methods to stop people from harming others. These situations represent human beings acting at their worst. They represent a breakdown of human civility. They represent a fall from social well-being into social disease. The harms inflicted by using forceful methods are not “justice.” The actions taken while using forceful methods are not “heroic.”

### **Fearfulness, Forcefulness, Nonviolence**

In his book *My Non-violence*, Gandhi wrote a chapter called “The Doctrine of the Sword.” The Doctrine of the Sword begins with the following words:

I do believe that, where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence. Thus when my eldest son asked me what he should have done, had he been present when I was almost fatally assaulted in 1908, whether he should have run away and seen me killed or whether he should have used his physical force which he could and wanted to use, and defended me, I told him that it was his duty to defend me even by using violence.

But I believe that non-violence is infinitely superior to violence.

– Mohandas Gandhi <sup>1</sup>

Gandhi mentions three ways of responding to people harming others. The first response is cowardice, which means doing nothing and remaining a helpless witness to people harming others. The second response is violence, which means using physical force and threats of injury to stop people from harming others. The third response is nonviolence, which persuades people

to stop harming others and work toward community reconciliation.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was asked about Gandhi's comments during an interview. Here is a video of King's response:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=74XJJ3Tq5ew>

King also talked about three responses to injustice in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail:

I began thinking about the fact that I stand in the middle of two opposing forces in the Negro community. One is a force of complacency, made up in part of Negroes who, as a result of long years of oppression, are so drained of self respect and a sense of "somebodiness" that they have adjusted to segregation. ...The other force is one of bitterness and hatred, and it comes perilously close to advocating violence. ...I have tried to stand between these two forces, saying that we need emulate neither the "do nothingism" of the complacent nor the hatred and despair of the black nationalist. For there is the more excellent way of love and nonviolent protest.

– Martin Luther King, Jr. <sup>2</sup>

King saw himself walking between two paths. On the one hand, King avoided the path of doing nothing. Doing nothing meant fearfully cooperating and collaborating with those perpetuating injustice. On the other hand, King avoided the path of hatred and despair. Giving in to hatred and despair meant fueling animosities that could easily erupt into physical violence. King instead walked the third path of nonviolence. He wanted to win over his enemies and turn them into allies for peace, justice, and compassion.

From Ghandi and King, I learn that I can respond to people harming others in three ways:

- **Fearfulness** — I can quietly go along with people harming others because I fear provoking anger and attacks upon myself.
- **Forcefulness** — I can use various forms of force to stop people from harming others, but remembering to care both for the people inflicting the harm and the people escaping the harm.
- **Nonviolence** — I can work to persuade people who are harming others to stop their harmful actions. I can work to nonviolently coerce people harming others to stop their harmful actions.

I also learn from Gandhi and King that these three responses are not equally useful. Gandhi and King both believed that forcefulness is better than fearfulness. Gandhi and King both believed that nonviolence is better than forcefulness. I agree.

## **The Tragedy of Forcefulness**

Even if forceful methods stop people from harming others, I do not celebrate this outcome as though it were a “victory.” I am saddened by the circumstances that brought about the use of forceful methods. It is always sad when someone suffers or dies as a result of human beings intentionally inflicting harm on one another. I therefore mourn the use of forceful methods as though it were a funeral.

Weapons are instruments of fear; they are not tools of the wise. They use them only when there is no choice. Peace and quiet are dear to their hearts, and victory no cause for rejoicing. If you rejoice in victory, then you delight in killing; If you delight in killing,

you cannot fulfill yourself. ...This means that war is conducted like a funeral. When many people are killed, they should be mourned in heartfelt sorrow. That is why a victory must be observed like a funeral.

– Tao Te Ching<sup>3</sup>

Sometimes people resort to forceful methods in an attempt to bring a quick resolution to an enduring conflict. However, history is filled with examples of forceful methods failing to resolve conflicts. The use of forceful methods may continue for many years without success. Even when forceful methods result in a truce or a surrender, people on both sides often remain bitter about the suffering caused by the forceful methods, and the enforced peace ends up being unstable.

I am opposed to using forceful methods as a quick fix to an enduring conflict. I instead encourage people to “stay with” persistent conflicts.

When we stay with conflict, we remain engaged with the core issues that we care about, we continue to work on the problems or concerns that are important to us, and we continue to relate to the people with whom we are in conflict. We also continue to communicate about the conflict and to advocate for what is important to us, and we always try to deepen our understanding of how others think and feel about the issue. We develop the emotional and intellectual capacity to live with our enduring differences but also to continue to work on them, even though we know that the core conflict will likely continue for a long time. We look for areas where general progress can be made, but we do so with the full knowledge that progress does not mean final resolution.

– Benard Mayer<sup>4</sup>

Staying with a conflict, rather than resorting to forceful methods as a quick



fix, can help limit suffering and negative consequences. It can help lay a firmer foundation for peace and reconciliation in the future.

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2. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963). *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*. Available to read online at [https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles\\_Gen/Letter\\_Birmingham.html](https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html). Available in PDF format at <https://www.csuchico.edu/iege/assets/documents/susi-letter-from-birmingham-jail.pdf>.
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# Interdependence

# *Interbeing*

Interbeing refers to the interdependent existence of human beings.

## **The Cloud in a Piece of Paper**

Thich Nhat Hahn coined the word “interbeing.” He taught people about interbeing by helping them see the cloud in a piece of paper. I encourage people to read Hanh’s teaching about seeing the cloud in a piece of paper.<sup>1-3</sup>

I would like to quote Hanh’s entire teaching. However, the quote would be so long that it would violate Hanh’s copyrights. In order to respect Hanh’s copyrights, I am going to offer two smaller quotes. The first quote explains how the existence of a piece of paper depends on the existence of a cloud.

Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. So we can say that the cloud and the paper inter-are.

– Thich Nhat Hanh <sup>4</sup>

The next quote from Hanh points out that the piece of paper also depends on the existence of a logger.

And if we continue to look, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. And we see the wheat. We know that the logger cannot exist without his daily bread, and therefore the wheat that became his bread is also in this sheet of paper. And the logger’s father and mother are in it too. When we look in this way, we see that without all of these

things, this sheet of paper cannot exist.

– Thich Nhat Hanh <sup>5</sup>

The existence of the piece of paper depends on the logger, the people who prepare the food for the logger to eat, the people who manufacture the tools the logger uses, and the parents who gave birth to the logger and raised the logger.

It does not stop there. The existence of the piece of paper also depends on the people who built the papermill, the people who manufactured the equipment used in the papermill, and the people who operate the equipment to produce the piece of paper. Each of these people depend on others for the food they eat, the clothes they wear, the vehicles they use for transportation, the medical care they receive, and so on. The existence of the piece of paper would not be possible without the existence of many people, many tools, and many pieces of equipment.

I still have not listed all the people, things, and places needed to produce a piece of paper. However, I hope the point is made. The piece of paper exists because it is part of a great web of existence that brought it into being.

## **My Interbeing**

My birth reveals my interbeing. I was born because of my mother and father. My mother and father were born because of my grandmothers and grandfathers. My grandmothers and grandfathers were born because of my great grandmothers and great grandfathers. My existence depends on a line of ancestors stretching back to the beginnings of humanity. This is interbeing.

My survival during infancy reveals my interbeing. Like all human beings, I depended on other people during my infancy. I depended on other people to feed me, bathe me, clothe me, shelter me from the weather, and protect

me from dangers. If other people had not provided me sufficient care, I would not have survived my infancy. This, too, is interbeing.

My continued survival and quality of life reveals my interbeing. I rely on other people for my survival and for my quality of life.

I eat food that I did not grow.

I wear clothes that I did not make.

I drive a car that I did not manufacture.

I use a phone that I did not assemble.

I live in a house that I did not build.

I listen to music that I did not write.

I watch movies and shows that I did not create.

I receive medical care that I did not learn how to perform myself.

I rely on my family and friends for help, encouragement, and love.

Other people rely on me for their survival and their quality of life.

I drive carefully to avoid injuring other people.

I support other people by paying for the goods they create.

I support other people by paying for the services they provide.

I offer help or advice to other people when they ask for it.

I donate to charities to help people satisfy their basic needs.

I stand up for other people when they are being mistreated.

I speak up for other people when they are being ignored.

I participate in leisure activities with other people.

I give my family and friends help, encouragement, and love.

Thus, I rely on other people for my survival and quality of life, and other people rely on me for their survival and quality of life. We are all interdependent in a great web of existence. This is also interbeing.

## Implications of Interbeing

Interbeing does not mean that I give up acting in my own interest. Being motivated by self-interest is natural. Acting on self-interest is important to satisfying my basic needs, avoiding circumstances that cause me suffering, and pursuing circumstances that bring me happiness. Self-interest only becomes a problem when I focus so strongly on my self that I neglect or harm the larger web of existence of which I am a part.

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 interest lies in the welfare of everyone.

– Dalai Lama <sup>6</sup>

If I harm, mistreat, or ignore the suffering of other people, then I harm the web of existence on which I depend for my survival and quality of life. Harming or mistreating other people is like intentionally breaking my own bones. Ignoring the suffering of others is like ignoring open wounds on my own arms and legs.

If I show compassion and help others reduce their suffering, then I benefit the web of existence on which I depend for my survival and quality of life. Showing compassion and care for other people is like feeding my own body when I am hungry. Helping other people reduce their suffering is like carefully nursing the wounds on my own body.

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## *Part of the Universe*

Every object in the wider universe, everything around us, and everything we are, originated from stardust. Thus, we are not merely connected to the universe in some distant sense: stardust from the universe is actually flowing through us on a daily basis, and it rebuilds the stars and planets throughout the universe as much as it does our bodies, over and over again.

– Karel Schriver & Iris Schrijver <sup>1</sup>

An ocean wave is what the ocean is doing in a specific place at a specific time.<sup>2</sup> There is no difference between the water in the wave and the water in the ocean. The water in the wave is part of the water in the ocean. There is no difference between the activity of the wave and the activity of the ocean. The activity of the wave is part of the activity of the ocean.

Like a wave is part of the ocean, I am part of the universe. There is no difference between the atoms of my body and the atoms of the universe. The atoms of my body are part of the atoms of the universe. There is no difference between the actions of my body and the actions of the universe. The actions of my body are part of the actions of the universe.

### **My Body is Part of the Universe**

The atoms and molecules of my body originated from the world around me.

We now know that the atoms in our bodies were forged in nuclear reactions in stellar furnaces, spewed into the universe in supernovae explosions, and incorporated into our bodies through the long process of the evolution of life over the last 3.8 billion years on Earth.

– Steven Dick <sup>3</sup>



While I live, atoms and molecules continually flow between my body and the world around me. Atoms and molecules in the world around me continually flow into my body. Atoms and molecules continually flow out of my body back into the world around me. This flow of atoms and molecules makes it possible for my body to add new cells, to repair or replace damaged cells, to have the energy needed for daily activities, and to continue living.

We exchange most of what makes us—water—in a matter of at most weeks. The structures of our cells, and even the cells themselves, decay to be replaced on time scales from weeks to a few years, or at most a few decades for some organs. Even our bones are subject to replacement as the calcium and other atoms are replaced, and we leave our DNA on almost everything we touch. The only lasting parts of us appear to be our teeth, which are, ironically, not really alive at all: they are deposits of lifeless material that serve us well, sometimes throughout our lives, even as the rest of our bodies is replaced over time. Consequently, the saying that we are not the same who we were before is far more apt than we generally realize.

– Karel Schriver & Iris Schrijver <sup>4</sup>

After I die, the atoms and molecules of my body will return to the world around me.

We recognize that after death, our bodily atoms will be dispersed once again through the universe, recycled to once again become star stuff in a cycle of events that will end only with the death of the universe itself. We are part and parcel of the universe, and at the hour of our death when we return to the universe, the old phrase from the Book of Common Prayer based on Genesis and often used in burial ceremonies—“earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust”—need only be slightly altered to “earth to earth,

ashes to ashes, stardust to stardust” to be literally true.

– Steven Dick <sup>5</sup>

My body is what the atoms and molecules of the world happen to be doing at a specific place and time, just like a wave is what the ocean happens to be doing at a specific place and time. My body, in a deep and literal sense, is part of the world around me. My body is part of the universe.

### **My Mind is Part of the Universe**

Human minds—perceptions, thoughts, feelings, inner speech, reasoning, and imagination—always correlate with brain activity. If specific parts of the brain are damaged by injury or disease, then specific aspects of the mind become impaired or disappear. If the brain is dead, with no active neurons, then the mind is gone from this world. Human minds depend completely on the atoms, molecules, and cells of human brains.

We see, then, that mind is not something separate from matter; mind is a process embodied in matter. With this new perspective under our belts, it becomes impossible to maintain that the mind stands outside of nature. Instead, mind becomes a tiny fragment of nature, valued only by those who possess it. When we fully digest this idea, it radically transforms our view of the mind’s place in the universe—and our view of the universe itself. The physical universe ceases to be an unconscious object, observed and explored by conscious minds which somehow stand above or outside it. Conscious minds are part of the physical universe. As soon as we recognize this, we realize that the universe itself is partially conscious. When you contemplate the universe, part of the universe becomes conscious of itself. Similarly, our knowledge is not something separate from the universe; it is part of the universe. Thus, for

humans to know the universe is for the universe to know itself.

– Steve Stewart-Williams<sup>6</sup>

My mind is what the atoms and molecules of the world happen to be doing at a specific place and time, just like a wave is what the ocean happens to be doing at a specific place and time. My mind, in a deep and literal sense, is part of the world around me. My mind is part of the universe.

## **Opportunities**

Being part of the universe gives me the opportunity to bring love, happiness, well-being, and protection from harm into the world around me.

- When I show love to others, one part of the universe shows love to other parts of the universe.
- When I help reduce suffering and promote happiness, one part of the universe helps reduce suffering and promote happiness for other parts of the universe.
- When I protect others from harm, one part of the universe protects other parts of the universe.

Being part of the universe gives me the opportunity to make the world a more satisfying place to live for others and for myself.

If I fully appreciate being part of the universe—that my “self” and the “world around me” are a single happening like a wave and the ocean are a single happening—then I realize that harming others is like inflicting wounds on my own body. Neglecting the suffering and needs of others is like neglecting injuries on my own body. Helping and caring for others is like nourishing my own body with food and drink.

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6. Steve Stewart-Williams (2010). *Darwin, God and the Meaning of Life*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press. Quote taken from pages 151-152.

# *Respect Fashions of Living*

People understand the world and conduct their everyday lives in many different ways.

Different people speak different languages, live as different bodies, hold different faiths and play different games, inhabit and transform different climates and terrains, assemble and communicate in different ways as different selves in different social groups with their different traditions and practices and institutions, pursue different goals near and far, experience different satisfactions and justices and triumphs, and suffer different disappointments and outrages and losses. From an anthropological perspective, pluralism—these multiple differences in and among our lives—is simply a fact.

– John Stuhr <sup>1</sup>

Philosopher John Stuhr refers to these different ways of understanding and living in the world as fashions of living. The word “fashion” does not mean something shallow or something that comes and goes every few years. Fashions of living are deeply important to people. Fashions of living can remain relatively unchanged for decades or centuries. Fashions of living refer to people’s worldviews and everyday activities.

## **Responding to Variety**

Stuhr describes two different responses to the enormous variety of people’s fashions of living.<sup>2</sup>

One response is to treat fashions of living as disagreements about reality and truth. This response assumes there is only one reality and one truth. Different fashions of living are better or worse at reflecting the one reality

and the one truth. The goal of this response is to find some way of proving which fashion of living best reflects the one reality and the one truth. People endlessly debate why their own fashion of living is real and true, while all other fashions of living are mistaken and false.

A second response is to treat fashions of living as expressions of human lives. Fashions of living reflect different people doing the best they can to get through their short, complicated, and challenging lives. Different fashions of living allow people to understand the world and conduct their everyday activities in ways that suit their environments, circumstances, educations, experiences, and personalities. The goal of this response is to learn about different fashions of living, to sometimes borrow useful ideas or behaviors from other people's fashions of living, and to live in peaceful co-existence with people who have different fashions of living.

I prefer the second response for dealing with different fashions of living. I try to be very pluralistic when it comes to different fashions of living.

### **Chance Circumstances**

Chance circumstances greatly influences people's fashions of living.<sup>3</sup> Let me use my own fashion of living as an example.

My fashion of living reflects where I was born. I was born in North America. Had I been born somewhere on the other side of the planet, my fashion of living would be different. I might now be living an ordinary life similar to other people living in Tanzania, India, Malaysia, or Japan.

My fashion of living reflects when I was born. Had I been born in North America 2,000 years ago, my fashion of living would have been very different than it is today. I would have lived in an ancient Native American tribe, following their customs, and using their tools and equipment.

My fashion of living also reflects my unique life circumstances. Had I been born to different parents, received a different education, or made different choices during my life, then my fashion of living would be different than what it is today. I might have been born to Amish parents, received my education in an Amish school, never have attended a public university, worked on a farm, and not used modern technologies.

Realizing how chance circumstances influence fashions of living helps me respect each person's fashions of living. My fashion of living might have been very similar to another person's fashion of living if the circumstances of our lives had been similar—if we had been born in the same place, in the same historical period, to the same parents, receiving the same education, facing the same difficulties and limitations, and making similar choices. If I imagine walking through life in another person's shoes, then that person's fashion of living often makes better sense to me, just as my fashion of living makes sense given the circumstances of my life.

### **Criticizing Fashions of Living**

Before criticizing the fashion in which another person lives, I will do my best to keep these five promises:

1. I promise to speak in a timely manner, not too late to prevent others from being harmed.
2. I promise to speak honestly, not distorting or lying about the circumstances.
3. I promise to speak gently, not using harsh or hurtful words.
4. I promise to speak in ways that benefit others, not in ways that mislead them or cause them loss.

5. I promise to speak with a calm and caring attitude, not with feelings of anger and discontent.

If I fail to keep these promises, then I will admit not living up to my ethical and spiritual commitments. I will ask forgiveness from anyone harmed by my failure. I will try to make amends and quickly return to keeping the promises.

## **Live and Let Live**

I value the personal quality of tolerance. I strive to have a tolerant mind that appreciates peaceful co-existence in a world filled with many worldviews and many ways of living. Tolerating different fashions of living and appreciating peaceful co-existence with others is what I mean by “live and let live.”

## **References**

1. John Stuhr (2016). *Pragmatic Fashions: Pluralism, Democracy, Relativism, and the Absurd (American Philosophy)*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. Quote taken from page 34.
2. John Stuhr (2016). *Pragmatic Fashions: Pluralism, Democracy, Relativism, and the Absurd (American Philosophy)*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
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# *Intergroup Dialogue*

Intergroup dialogue uses structured conversations to help people who are different from each other achieve mutual understanding, friendlier relations, and cooperative interactions. From this perspective, intergroup dialogue has three main characteristics.

Intergroup dialogue uses structured conversations. The conversations follow guidelines and procedures that help people communicate with one another. Intergroup dialogue involves people who are different from each other. They may hold different worldviews, belong to different cultural or social groups, face very different life circumstances, or have very different life experiences. Intergroup dialogue aims to help people better understand each other, open doors to more constructive conversations, and encourage friendlier and more cooperative interactions.

Whole books have been written about intergroup dialogue. It is not practical to review these books in a short essay. I would instead like to provide some useful resources where people can learn more about intergroup dialogue.

## **Conversation Cafe**

I have attended intergroup dialogue events that follow the [Conversation Cafe](#) approach. The events were both enjoyable and successful in promoting constructive and meaningful conversations. I feel comfortable recommending this approach.

Conversation Cafés are open, hosted conversations in cafés as well as conferences and classrooms—anywhere people gather to make sense of our world. At a Conversation Café there is nothing to join, no homework, no agenda, just a simple process that helps

to shift us from small talk to BIG talk, conversations that matter.

– Conversation Cafe FAQs <sup>1</sup>

Conversation Cafe has created a [Quick How To](#) guide that gives an idea of how conversations are structured.

First, participants sit in groups of 6-8 people at tables. Too many people at a table reduces the time for each person to contribute to the conversation. Too few people at a table reduces the opportunity to learn from a variety of people.

Second, participants are asked to abide by the following guidelines during the conversations.

- **Curiosity:** Seek to understand rather than persuade.
- **Discovery:** Question assumptions, look for new insights.
- **Sincerity:** Speak from your heart and personal experience.
- **Brevity:** Go for honesty and depth but don't go on and on.

Each table has a host who is trained to remind people about the guidelines. The table host also uses an object such as a pebble or a stick to ensure that only one person speaks at a time (i.e., only the person holding the object speaks). The object is also used to ensure that everyone gets a chance to speak (i.e., the person holding the object passes it to someone else). People may always choose to not talk and simply pass the object to another person.

Third, the conversation is divided into different "rounds." Each round is timed to ensure the event ends at the scheduled ending time.

- **Round 1:** Pass around the talking object. Each person speaks briefly to the topic, with no feedback or response from others.
- **Round 2:** Again with talking object, each person deepens their own comments or speaks to what has meaning now.
- **Round 3:** The participants engage in open, spirited conversation. The talking object may or may not be used during this round. Table hosts may ask participants to use the talking object if there is domination, contention, or lack of focus in the conversation.
- **Round 4:** Each person at the table is given the talking object to briefly share what challenged, touched or inspired them.

Here are some useful resources from the Conversation Cafe website.

- [Quick How To Guide \(PDF\)](#)
- [Core Principles for Conversation Cafe \(PDF\)](#)
- [The Complete Hosting Manual \(PDF\)](#)
- [Other Resources for Conversation Cafes](#)

## Useful Books

Here are two books about intergroup dialogue that are relatively easy to read and contain practical information for hosting dialogue events.

- [The Little Book of Dialogue for Difficult Subjects](#)<sup>2</sup>

- [Beyond Robert's Rules](#) <sup>3</sup>

If someone is specifically interested in interfaith dialogue, then the following book may be useful.

- [Interactive Faith](#) <sup>4</sup>

Although I hope the books above will prove useful to people interested in learning about intergroup dialogue, I encourage people to search for other books as well. People may find other books that prove even more useful to them.

## **Other Approaches**

Other approaches to intergroup dialogue may be found online. I am less familiar with these approaches. I simply want to let people know there are options for planning and hosting intergroup dialogues.

- [The Program on Intergroup Relations](#) at the University of Michigan offers eleven useful handouts at <https://igr.umich.edu/IGR-Insight-Handouts>.
- [The World Cafe](#) offers a couple of useful resources for intergroup dialogue.
  - [A Quick Reference Guide for Hosting World Cafe \(PDF\)](#)
  - [World Cafe Checklist \(PDF\)](#)
- [Building Public Understanding](#) has a page of resources for dialogue at <http://buildingpublicunderstanding.org/deep-dialogue.html>. This includes a free book called [Fostering Dialogue Across Divides \(PDF\)](#).

## References

1. Conversation cafe FAQs (2023). <https://conversationcafe.org/faqs/>.
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3. Nelle Moffett and Richard Bowers (2015). *Beyond Robert's Rules: An Overview of Group Communication Models*. Harmony World Publishing.
4. Bud Heckman and Rori Picker Nelss (2008). *Interactive Faith: The Essential Interreligious Community-Building Handbook*. Woodstock, VT: Turner Publishing Company.

# *Non-Duality*

Non-duality is a philosophical understanding of the interdependence of “self” and “other.” I lack the skill to explain the philosophy of non-duality in a short essay. Yet, learning about the philosophy of non-duality has helped me understand the concepts of [interbeing](#) and [being part of the universe](#). I would therefore like to let people know about the concept of non-duality in case anyone wants to learn more.

## **An Oversimplified Introduction**

Non-duality is an awareness of what is happening in the present moment without the normal filtering of words and concepts.

My mind normally adds a layer of words and concepts to everything I experience. For example, when I look around my “office,” I see a “chair” next to my “desk.” I know that I can “sit” in the chair to “work” at my desk. But what if I were a six-month-old infant? My eyes would still see the same things. However, I would not be able to say the words “office,” “chair,” “desk,” “sit,” or “work” let alone explain what they mean. My awareness of what is happening in the present moment would be free from the layer of words and concepts that my adult mind now adds to all of my experiences.

Although it is impossible for me to experience the world as a six-month-old infant again, I can practice being aware of what is happening in the present moment while diminishing the influence of words and concepts. Scott Kiloby describes this as basic awareness.

Awareness is the basic capacity to be aware. It's as simple as that. If you try to understand that intellectually, you miss the simplicity of it. Before you think about it, are you aware right now? That is awareness. Stop for one moment and bring your full attention to

this basic awareness. It is what allows the present moment to effortlessly be as it is. Notice that when you are not thinking, this basic awareness simply allows, for example, the wall to be as it is. It naturally allows a table to be as it is. It naturally allows the air in the room to be as it is. It takes no effort to let everything be as it is. Discover this for yourself. Stop thinking for long enough to get one glimpse of the fact that there is a basic awareness already here. All you have to do is notice that it is here. Then notice that when a thought arises, this basic awareness allows even that thought to be as it is.

– Scott Kiloby <sup>1</sup>

Joan Tollifson describes an exercise to practice basic awareness. This is a quick and easy exercise that anyone can practice.

For a few minutes, after you read this paragraph, put the book down and simply be present without doing anything special. Feel the breathing. Notice the sounds of traffic, wind, birds singing, children playing, planes flying overhead, whatever you are hearing. Feel the sensations in the body. Enjoy the shapes, colors and movements that are appearing as pure visual sensation without labeling them and trying to make sense of them. Whenever you notice you are thinking, if you can, let the thoughts go and return to this simple, bare, naked experiencing of the present moment. Allow your experience to be exactly the way it is, however it is. You're not trying to get rid of anything, or accomplish anything, or understand anything. You're simply being here, which is effortless. You can't not be here, exactly as you are, so you don't need to do anything or not do anything. Let yourself simply be. Stay with this bare being for a few minutes—breathing, hearing, seeing, sensing, awaring—simply being alive. Can you sense the difference between the bare actuality of present moment breathing–hearing–seeing–sensing–awaring–being and

any attempt to capture this happening in words, concepts or metaphysical formulations? Can you see that reality itself (bare experiencing) is at once inconceivable and utterly obvious?

– Joan Tollifson <sup>2</sup>

## Learning More About Non-Duality

The [article on Nondualism](#) in Wikipedia and the [interview with David Loy](#) by *Insight Journal* offer a broad overview of non-duality. A broad overview of non-duality may be all that some people seek. Anyone interested in a deeper understanding of non-duality may wish to consider the following books.

- [Nothing to Grasp](#) by Joan Tollifson
- [Living Realization](#) by Scott Kiloby
- [Oneness](#) by John Greven

## References

1. Scott Kiloby (2014). *Living Realization: A Simple, Plain-English Guide to Non-Duality*. Salisbury, U.K.: Non-Duality Press. Kindle Edition. Quote taken from pages 4-5.
2. Joan Tollifson (2012). *Nothing to Grasp*. Salisbury, U.K.: Non-Duality Press. Kindle Edition. Quote taken from pages 11-12.



# Existence

# *Impermanence*

The one close to me now,  
even my own body –  
these too will soon become clouds,  
floating in different directions.

– Izumi Shikibu <sup>1</sup>

Everything changes. Nothing lasts.

Every object disappears.  
Every memory fades.  
Every attachment ends.  
Every person goes away.

Everything is here and gone,  
like a morning star that fades into sunlight,  
like a flash of lightning in the night,  
like a flickering candle burning out.

How do I embrace a life so short and fragile?

## **Reference**

1. Izumi Shikibu. *The Ink Dark Moon*. Translated by Jane Hirshfield with Mariko Aratani. New York, NY: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group (Vintage Classics). Kindle Edition. Quote taken from location 727.

# *Birth, Death, and Oblivion*

...in emptiness there is no form, no sensation, no perception, no memory and no consciousness;  
no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body and no mind;  
no shape, no sound, no smell, no taste, no feeling and no thought;  
no element of perception, from eye to conceptual consciousness;  
no causal link, from ignorance to old age and death, and no end of causal link, from ignorance to old age and death;  
no suffering, no source, no relief, no path;  
no knowledge, no attainment and no non-attainment.

– The Heart Sutra <sup>1</sup>

## **Oblivion Before Birth**

Where was I before my parents were born? Where were the atoms of my body before my parents were born? What did I perceive, feel, or think before my parents were born? What memories did I form before my parents were born?

Oblivion before birth is an utter lack of having a body. It is an utter lack of perceiving, feeling, thinking, moving, and remembering. Any words I use to describe oblivion before birth are empty because they do not refer to any experiences or any memories in my mind. Any words I use to describe oblivion only reflect what my imagination invents to “fill in” the void of oblivion.

## **Thrown into Existence**

Out of oblivion, I was thrown into existence.

- I was thrown into existence without my consent.
- I was thrown into existence with neverending needs for food, drink, shelter, and help from others.
- I was thrown into an existence full of pleasure and pain, happiness and suffering, compassion and aggression, cooperation and conflict, creative imagination and destructive imagination, insights and mysteries.
- I was thrown into an existence of enormous plurality, with many ways to understand and live in the world.
- I was thrown into an existence that continually and inevitably changes.
- I was thrown into an existence where death is inescapable.

The conditions of human existence continually challenge me—as they challenge other people, sometimes in much more difficult ways compared to me.

### **Return to Earth After Death**

After death, the atoms and molecules of my body will be reabsorbed by the world around me. I do not know exactly how the atoms and molecules of my body will be reabsorbed. There are too many possibilities. However, I know that it will eventually happen. The world around me will eventually reabsorb all the atoms and molecules of my body.

Sling me under the sea.  
Pack me down in the salt and wet.  
No farmer's plow shall touch my bones.  
No Hamlet hold my jaws and speak  
How jokes are gone and empty is my mouth  
Long, green-eyed scavengers shall pick my eyes,  
Purple fish play hide-and-seek,  
And I shall be song of thunder, crash of sea,  
Down on the floors of salt and wet.  
Sling me... under the sea.

– Carl Sandburg <sup>2</sup>

## **Return to Oblivion After Death**

For all I know, death returns me to the same oblivion as before my birth. I will not experience pleasure or happiness, but I also will not experience pain or suffering. I will not get to engage in my favorite activities, but I also will not toil with labor or struggle through difficult and upsetting situations. I will not get to interact with the world, but I also will not have a mind or consciousness capable of missing these interactions.

Perhaps fearing death is like leaving home and dreading to return. I left oblivion when I was born. I return to oblivion when I die.

Oblivion is neither empty nor full.

Oblivion is neither restful nor busy.

Oblivion is neither peaceful nor chaotic.

Oblivion is neither lonely nor shared.

Oblivion is neither suffering nor happiness.

Whatever quality of oblivion I might fear, oblivion is not that. Whatever quality of oblivion I might desire, oblivion is not that. I neither fear oblivion nor seek oblivion. Oblivion will come again for me in its own time and manner.

## References

1. Red Pine (2004). *The Heart Sutra: The Womb of Buddhas*. Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard. Quote taken from pages 8-9.
2. Carl Sandburg (1920). *Bones*. Originally appeared in *Others for 1919; An Anthology of the New Verse* compiled by Nicholas Brown. This poem is in the public domain and available online at <https://poets.org/poem/bones>.

# *Attachment and Grief*

Grief is a common human experience. Social scientists and news reporters have documented people experiencing grief in cultures across planet earth. Writings from ancient times to modern times have described people experiencing grief. Grief has followed human beings to every corner of the earth and through every moment in history.

## **Attachments Bring Grief**

My mind forms attachments to other people, to objects, to places, and to ideas or values. Some of these attachments are stronger than others. Some of these attachments last longer than others.

Yet, my attachments bring grief. Attachments bring grief in three ways:

- **Separation** — Being separated from that to which I am attached brings grief. For example, I experience grief when I am separated by a great distance or a long period from a close loved one.
- **Loss** — Losing that to which I am attached brings grief. For example, I experience grief when I lose a cherished object, or when my childhood favorite store or movie theater is torn down.
- **Death** — Losing a loved one to death brings grief. For example, I experience grief when a family member or a friend dies. Confronting my own death can also bring grief. My own death represents an end to all of my attachments.

Every time I form an attachment, I commit to grieving at some point in the future.

Why am I willing to grieve for the sake of attachments? The attachments I form contribute greatly to the quality of my life and to my sense of meaning in life. I cannot enjoy the benefits of attachments without paying the price of attachments. I therefore choose to form the attachments and accept the grief. As the poet Alfred Lord Tennyson once wrote, "Let Love clasp Grief, lest both be drown'd." <sup>1</sup>

## **Symptoms of Grief**

People often report the following symptoms of grief:

- intrusive thoughts
- rumination
- crying
- sadness or depression
- anxiety
- anger
- loss of appetite
- sleep disturbances
- loss of desire for sex
- loneliness
- restlessness
- absent mindedness
- disorganization
- emotional numbness
- social withdrawal
- loss of clear sense of self

This is not a complete list of all symptoms of grief. It is simply a list of commonly reported symptoms. People may experience other symptoms of grief as well. It is important to let people grieve in their own ways.



## **Coping With Grief**

“Recovery” might not be a useful way to think about coping with grief. Grief is not a disease from which people recover. Recovery suggests people will experience healing and return to their old selves and their old lives.

People’s worlds can be forever changed as a result of an attachment being broken by separation, loss, or death. They may never “recover” their old selves and their old lives. They must instead learn how to live in a world that no longer contains the attachment that contributed so importantly to their lives. Adapting to this changed world may require personal growth or finding new sources of meaning in life.

Grief provides an opportunity for growth as I adapt to a loss in my life. I did not want this opportunity. I may experience challenges and setbacks as I grow and make changes in my life. Nevertheless, feeling that I have grown as person while working through my grief sometimes helps.

Finding new sources of meaning in response to grief also helps. For example, my grief may motivate me to join a worthwhile cause or to strengthen my relationships with others. This can give me a sense that something positive managed to grow out of painful and difficult circumstances. However, it is completely okay if I do not find meaning in the circumstances that bring me grief.

## **When to Seek Help**

Most people cope with grief without talking to professional counselors. However, it is always acceptable to talk with professional counselors when struggling with grief or when feeling overwhelmed by grief. There is no need to struggle alone.

Speaking for myself, I would talk with a professional counselor if I

experienced three or more of the following symptoms *with little or no improvement after a few months*.

- Persistent, intense yearning or longing for the loved one.
- Frequent feelings of intense loneliness or emptiness.
- Recurrent negative thoughts about life without the loved one.
- Preoccupying thoughts about the loved one that impair daily functioning.
- Rumination about circumstances of the separation, break up, or death.
- Frequent disbelief or inability to accept the loss.
- Persistent feelings of being shocked, stunned, or emotionally numb.
- Recurrent feelings of anger or bitterness regarding the loss.
- Difficulty trusting or caring about others since the loss.
- Literally hearing the voice of the loved one (who is not there).
- Literally seeing the loved one (who is not there).
- Intense emotional reactions to memories of the loved one.
- Excessive avoidance or preoccupation with things related to the loved one.

Remember, though, there is no magic formula for deciding when to talk with a professional counselor about my grief. I can always meet with a counselor and ask if counseling would be helpful.

## References

1. Alfred Lord Tennyson (1850). In Memoriam A.H.H.. Downloaded 10/22/2023 from <https://poets.org/poem/memoriam-h-h>. Quote taken from Section I of the poem.

# *Two Types of Happiness*

This essay explores two types of happiness: hedonic happiness, and eudaimonic happiness.

Hedonic happiness comes from the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain, whereas eudaimonic happiness comes from the pursuit of authenticity, meaning, virtue and growth. In short, hedonia comes from doing what feels good, and eudaemonia comes from doing what feels right.

– Econation <sup>1</sup>

Before going further, it seems useful to learn how to pronounce the words hedonic and eudaimonic. Here is a link that provides the pronunciation of the word hedonic:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gi-fK\\_x0Yos](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gi-fK_x0Yos)

Here is a link that provides the pronunciation of the word eudaimonic:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8fwTg9TlyOY>

## **Hedonic Happiness**

Hedonic happiness emphasizes pleasures of the body and the senses. The body and the senses are capable of giving rise to an enormous variety of pleasures. A few examples of bodily pleasures include sitting in comfortably warm water, holding hands, hugging, receiving a massage, and sex. A few examples of sensory pleasures include listening to a favorite song, eating a delicious meal, or gazing at a beautiful or interesting work of art. Every person has their own favorite bodily and sensory pleasures.

People throughout history have written about seeking happiness through hedonistic pleasures.

Aristippus, a Greek philosopher from the fourth century B.C., taught that the goal of life is to experience the maximum amount of pleasure, and that happiness is the totality of one's hedonic moments. His early philosophical hedonism has been followed by many others. Hobbes argued that happiness lies in the successful pursuit of our human appetites, and DeSade believed that pursuit of sensation and pleasure is the ultimate goal of life. Utilitarian philosophers such as Bentham argued that it is through individuals' attempting to maximize pleasure and self-interest that the good society is built. Hedonism, as a view of well-being, has thus been expressed in many forms and has varied from a relatively narrow focus on bodily pleasures to a broad focus on appetites and self-interests.

– Richard Ryan and Edward Deci <sup>2</sup>

Hedonistic pleasures can bring happiness to people's lives. However, moderation of hedonistic pleasures is the key to lasting hedonic happiness. Engaging in hedonistic pleasures too often can dull the senses and potentially harm the body through exhaustion or poor health. Over-indulgence makes pleasurable activities seem less enjoyable and less satisfying. Moderation of pleasurable activities is essential for sustainable hedonic happiness.

Another risk of hedonic happiness is selfishness. Hedonic happiness achieved at the expense of other people's happiness or well-being is unethical. All people equally deserve to avoid suffering and to experience happiness. All people equally deserve to be treated with respect and dignity. Thus, when seeking hedonic happiness, I do my best to care for the people around me and ensure their happiness as well as my own.

## Eudaimonic Happiness

Eudaimonic happiness does not refer to feelings of pleasure or a positive state of mind. Eudaimonic happiness refers to a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment from engaging in activities that help people realize their individual potentials.

Eudaimonism is an ethical theory that calls people to recognize and to live in accordance with the daimon or “true self.” The theory extends at least as far back as classical Hellenic philosophy, where it received its most notable treatment in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. The daimon refers to those potentialities of each person, the realization of which represents the greatest fulfillment in living of which each is capable. These include both the potentialities that are shared by all humans by virtue of our common specieshood and those unique potentials that distinguish each individual from all others. The daimon is an ideal in the sense of being an excellence, a perfection toward which one strives and, hence, it can give meaning and direction to one’s life.

– Alan Waterman <sup>3</sup>

Living well entails actively and explicitly striving for what is truly worthwhile and is of inherent or intrinsic human worth, and it contrasts with the pursuit of crass endeavors such as materialism or pleasure seeking that pull one away from virtues. Eudaimonia is characterized by reflectiveness and reason. Finally, eudaimonic pursuits are voluntary, and are expressions of the self rather than products of external control or ignorance. Together, Aristotle’s eudaimonia is thus characterized as living well, and entails being actively engaged in excellent activity, reflectively making decisions, and behaving voluntarily toward ends that represent the

realization of our highest human natures.

– Richard Ryan, Veronika Huta,  
and Edward Deci <sup>4</sup>

Eudaimonic happiness is embedded in my spiritual humanism. My spiritual commitment to cultivate personal qualities and values that help me reduce suffering and promote well-being are a process of self-realization. I am cultivating qualities and values that I feel are worthwhile. I am realizing my potentials by making an effort to become the kind of person that I would like to become.

Spirituality is not the only path to eudaimonic happiness. People can pursue eudaimonic happiness through many different types of activities. Each person must decide for themselves which activities have the potential to bring eudaimonic happiness. Each person has a unique personality, a specific set of abilities, and a complex set of life circumstances. It is good that eudaimonic happiness can be pursued in many different ways.

### **Valuing Both Types of Happiness**

Some worldviews consider hedonic happiness to be inherently wrong, bad, or sinful. People who hold these worldviews may believe that only eudaimonic happiness can contribute to a meaningful and satisfying life. They may believe the hedonic happiness has little value and frequently leads to a less meaningful and less satisfying life.

I hold a different worldview. I believe that hedonic happiness and eudaimonic happiness can both contribute to a meaningful and satisfying life. I believe that hedonic happiness and eudaimonic happiness are both valuable.

Remember, I do not expect other people to believe what I believe. There

may be individuals for whom it makes sense to avoid hedonic happiness—or, at least, certain forms of hedonic happiness. Avoiding hedonic happiness may better suit their personalities, life experiences, and life circumstances. I am simply saying that a balance of hedonic happiness and eudaimonic happiness better suits my life.

## **The Hedonic Paradox**

If a person only seeks hedonic happiness, and neglects eudaimonic happiness, then that person may eventually experience a less meaningful and less satisfying life. This is known in the social sciences as the hedonic paradox or the hedonistic paradox.

The hedonic paradox occurs for a number of reasons.

One reason for the hedonic paradox is that people who strongly desire hedonistic pleasures can set their expectations too high. Their strong desires are accompanied by high expectations of pleasure and happiness from their hedonistic activities. When their hedonistic activities do not result in the anticipated levels of pleasure and happiness, people feel disappointed. Such disappointments can paradoxically decrease hedonic happiness they more people desire it.

Another reason for the hedonic paradox is that people can grow habituated to hedonistic activities. People engage in hedonistic activities so frequently that their senses become dulled to the pleasures. Or they engage in hedonistic activities so frequently that the activities become routine or boring. Paradoxically, as people increase the frequency of their hedonistic activities seeking to get more pleasure, they only grow more dulled and more bored by the activities that once gave them happiness.

The hedonic paradox occurs for other reasons as well. The main point is that becoming obsessed with hedonistic pleasures can actually decrease

happiness overall.

How does a person avoid the hedonic paradox? A person avoids the hedonic paradox by also seeking eudaimonic happiness—especially eudaimonic happiness that involves helping other people achieve happiness and well-being.

The “Hedonistic Paradox” (or, rather, one version of it) states that the person who seeks pleasure, or happiness, for him- or herself will not find it, but the person who helps others will (or has a greater chance of finding it).

– James Konow and Joseph Earley <sup>5</sup>

Those only are happy (I thought) who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness; on the happiness of others, on the improvement of mankind, even on some art or pursuit, followed not as a means, but as itself an ideal end. Aiming thus at something else, they find happiness by the way.

– John Stuart Mill <sup>6</sup>

A balance of hedonic happiness and eudaimonic happiness helps people avoid the hedonic paradox. What balance of hedonic and eudaimonic happiness works best depends on the individual. Each person is unique. Each person has their own “best” balance of hedonic and eudaimonic happiness.

## References

1. Econation (2023). Hedonism or Eudaimonism. Downloaded 10/1/2023 from <https://econation.one/blog/hedonism-or-eudaimonism/>. Quote taken from the opening paragraph.



2. Richard Ryan and Edward Deci (2001). On Happiness and Human Potentials: A Review of Research on Hedonic and Eudaimonic Well-Being. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52:141–66. Quote taken from pages 143-144.
3. Alan Waterman (1993). Two Conceptions of Happiness: Contrasts of Personal Expressiveness (Eudaimonia) and Hedonic Enjoyment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 64:678-679. Quote taken from page 678.
4. Richard Ryan, Veronika Huta, and Edward Deci (2008). Living Well: A self-determination theory perspective on eudaimonia. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 9:139-170. Quote taken from page 145.
5. James Konow and Joseph Earley (2008). The Hedonistic Paradox: Is homo economicus happier? *Journal of Public Economics*, 92:1-33. Quote taken from page 2.
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# *Meaning in Life*

I am agnostic about the supernatural. I do not believe in a universal meaning in life based on a supernatural being, supernatural design, or supernatural plan. I instead believe that people create meaning in their own lives. This essay describes how I create meaning in my own life.

## **Fulfilling Existential Needs**

One way that I create a meaning is by fulfilling six existential needs.

1. I need to have a system of ethics and a commitment to live according to those ethics.
  - How should I conduct my life?
  - Why do people show so much anger, hatred, and aggression?
  - How should I respond to people who harm others?
  - How should I respond to people who harm me?
2. I need to change and grow as a person in order to achieve personal potentials.
  - What do I value in life?
  - What kind of presence do I want to be?
  - How do I become the presence I want to be?
3. I need to feel connected to other people, to nature, and to things greater than myself (e.g., social movements or social causes).
  - How should I interact and relate to others?
  - How should I respond to people who are different from me?

- Where do I belong in the world?
  - How do I contribute to worthwhile movements or causes?
4. I need for strength, courage and hope in the face of adversity.
- Why are pain and suffering unavoidable in this life?
  - Why is there so much pain and suffering?
  - How do I cope with pain and suffering?
  - How do I cope with a world that continually changes?
  - How do I cope with the loss of loved ones?
5. I need to have a sense that my life has purpose and is worthwhile.
- Why is my life important or valuable?
  - What makes my life worth living?
6. I need to cope with the inevitability of death.
- What happens to me after I die?
  - Will some part of me exist forever?
  - What if nothing but oblivion awaits me after death?

I do not need absolute, universal, or eternal answers to the questions above. It is only necessary for me to have “good enough” answers or to be actively searching for answers.

### **Spirituality as a Source of Meaning**

Practicing ethics and spirituality contributes to my sense of meaning in life.

One way that practicing ethics and spirituality gives me a sense of meaning is by living according to my values.

Clarifying and connecting with your values is an essential step for making life meaningful. Your values are reflections of what is most important in your heart: what sort of person you want to be, what is significant and meaningful to you, and what you want to stand for in this life. Your values provide direction for your life and motivate you to make important changes. ...A rich and meaningful life is created through taking action. But not just any action. It happens through effective action, guided by and motivated by your values. And in particular, it happens through committed action: action that you take again and again, no matter how many times you fail or go off track.

– Russ Harris <sup>1</sup>

My core value is the reduction of suffering and the promotion of well-being. My secondary values are the personal qualities that I cultivate to improve my ability to reduce suffering and promote well-being. These values reflect who I want to be. They reflect what I want my life to be about. Living according to my values gives me a sense of living an authentic life—a life of personal integrity.

A second way that practicing ethics and spirituality gives me a sense of meaning is by doing my part to make the world a less miserable and more satisfying place to live.

The belief that it is good to give, to be useful to others, to make the world better for others, is a powerful source of meaning.

– Irvin Yalom <sup>2</sup>

While I am committed to helping reduce suffering and promote well-being for everyone, I am not naive. I do not believe that my actions can bring about a perfect world free of suffering and filled only with happiness. There will always be pains, diseases, accidents, natural disasters, disappointments, losses, and deaths. However, I do not worry about imaginary standards of

perfection. I do what I can to reduce suffering and promote well-being here and now. This is enough.

## References

1. Russ Harris (2008). *The Happiness Trap*. Boston, MA: Trumpet Books. Quote taken from page 34.
2. Irvin Yalom (1980). *Existential Psychotherapy*. Basic Books. Quote taken from page 434.

There is nothing in this life but mist,  
and we will only be alive  
but for a short little while.

– Aisling's Song, from the  
movie *The Secret of Kells*

