

Ethics in Spiritual Traditions and Philosophy

The Value of Attention, Intention, Self Awareness and Conscious Speech—from Antiquity to the Modern World

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There is a tendency in the world today to pursue spiritual freedom and liberation through escaping challenges and responsibilities of daily life, the tough realities of contemporary existence, the norms and rules of society— attempting to find personal freedom by evading any restraints and restrictions one could encounter in their way. Unfortunately, many people striving for such freedom and for escaping societal norms are also striving for escaping ethics and the ‘right doing’. Their actions are often harmful, not only towards others but often towards themselves. As one’s spirituality practice matures, however, this impulse to escape ought to lessen; these practitioners — once reasonably mindful and aware — should open up to a new and deeper perspective. Although it might not be exactly what they have hoped for, or looked for, seekers of spirituality need to reach the acceptance of the necessity to cultivate some level of moral restraint, ethical conduct and conscious living. Eventually, serious practitioners should begin to appreciate that it is impossible to truly awaken their wisdom without awakening their conduct, that establishing unbroken ethics is truly essential on the path towards enlightenment and liberation. Unavoidably, this process of transformation often requires deep reflection, exploration, discipline, correct practice, courage, resilience and endurance, readiness to meet the challenges of life and the rawness of every moment. It takes persistence in observing ethical virtues and the cultivation of willingness to avoid the ‘wrong doing’— harmful actions and unwholesome attitudes toward themselves and others. Negatively impacting their own bodies and minds, through the connection between the nature of their actions and their mental state, unwholesome choices create the mental restlessness and instability which hinder their own progress in practice. In the long run, by fostering a more ethical and mindful pursuit of meaning and purpose in life, a new way of living would express their new awakening and, ultimately, would bring a positive impact to the world.

Living with Clarity

We should more often talk about actions and the consequences of actions. The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali teach us that the actions started with a clear mind will lead to positive outcomes. In other words, the consequences of our actions will be positive consequences if the actions were initiated with mind clarity [1]. That pursuit doesn’t have to contradict the idea of enjoying the sweetness of the present moment, the aspiration of ‘living in the heart’, the emotions of love and being in love. It just requires bringing them in harmony with the pure awareness of self and others. As much as we care about enjoying the moment, about surrendering and letting be, about loving and being loved, at all cost and by all means — whether we like it or not — there will be consequences to every action. If there is pain, there will be consequences of pain, if there is wrong-doing, there will be consequences of wrong-doing, if there is

slander, there will be consequences of slander, if there is indignity, there will be consequences of indignity, if there is abuse, there will be consequences of abuse. We can't solely talk about conscious love without recognizing how significantly it requires integrating conscious action, pure speech and lucid thought into every relationship.

Temporary pleasure, the illusion of happiness and the infatuation of love won't annul the consequences of actions, and won't eradicate suffering in the world. If one sends out negativity, this causes more negativity in the world, which will inevitably boomerang its way back to the sender. One may seem to be getting away with it, but that's merely an illusion. The boomerang effect will return that negativity to the sender with much amplified effect, manifested immediately, or eventually, throughout the sender's course of life. Denying consequences won't neutralise the consequences. Denying the natural laws of action and reaction won't straighten out people's immaturity and confusion. In the end, living in denial and self-delusion won't do anybody any good.

In this view, why not try, for a change, to work towards preventing the negative outcomes? Why not try to cultivate, instead, those attitudes that would, eventually, lead humanity to that state of clarity where there is enough conscious action, pure speech, pure intention, lucid thought and discernment that would allow people to transcend the realms of suffering and reach the liberation they so vividly hope for? What would be the cost of it? Maybe, a bit less temporary pleasure. Maybe, a bit less superficial satisfaction of the senses and the flesh. Maybe, a bit less self-glorification when serving one's ego-purpose is confused for 'being in the heart'. And, what would be the benefit? Mind clarity could allow people to engage in actions that lead to positive outcomes. The right living and maturity of people could allow happiness to be more stable, enduring, long-lasting. People could 'live in the heart' with the understanding that open heart and clear mind can only manifest as one, as inter-related, can only truly be experienced if they are in harmony, and can't manifest without each other. 'Surrendering' and 'being in oneness' can't truly be achieved, in an authentic spiritual way, without discernment and awareness.

Attention, Watchfulness, and Pure Intention Foster Ethical Living

In Christianity, the Ten Beatitudes are the teachings and blessings offered by Jesus in his iconic Sermon on the Mount and are regarded as the heart of his preaching. The Beatitudes emphasised inner qualities and virtues — such as mercy and purity of heart, humility, compassion, righteousness — offering a glimpse into the vision Jesus intended for a transformed world. Of all Beatitudes, the ones that particularly touched my heart have always been the teachings on Righteousness— highlighting the hunger and thirst one might feel for it and the humble acceptance that, while one might likely be persecuted for living with the drive for righteousness, one might still have the hunger and thirst for it (as presented in Matthew 5:3-12, "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them.*" [2]) Undoubtedly, for some people, rather than the craving for social status and illusory life pleasures, the dedication to righteousness makes life satisfying. Over and above, people with commitment to purity and righteousness tend to refuse to compromise and manifest behaviour patterns that progressively and persistently counteract any attempt of limiting or blocking their freedom of choice— in practical life, in their career, in their relationships with people, in spirituality and religion. They cannot be persuaded, influenced, corrupted or forced to do anything they don't want to do, anything that doesn't agree with their principles, their value system or authenticity.

In Hinduism and Yoga philosophy, the Yama and Niyama are a series of ethical, ‘right living’ rules established within, the series of ‘do’s and don’ts’, the moral imperatives which appear as either commandments or, simply, as goals to set in life. As presented by the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali [3], they generally address the observance of self-control and discipline, restraints, restrictions, duties or obligations that should be adopted by a spiritual aspirant or community. While the Yama comprise the ‘shall-not’ in our dealings with the external world, the Niyama comprise the ‘shall-do’ in our dealings with the inner world. As I reflect on self observance and watchfulness, the first Yama that comes to my mind is the virtue of ‘Satya’— the truthfulness in thought, in word, and in deed, or the absence of falsehood, the virtuous restraint from the distortion of reality in one’s expressions and actions. The first ‘Niyama’ that comes to my mind is Shaucha— the vigilance on what one allows to come into their body and mind, the cleanliness of the body, mind, and thought, one’s sustained efforts to attain and maintain their physical, mental, and emotional purity. In Hinduism, ‘satya’ is seen as the truth that has no distortion, the benevolent truth which equals love, the truth that liberates. The essence and a central theme of the Vedas, when regarded as the ‘absolute truth’, ‘satya’ is *“that which is beyond distinctions of time, space, and person... that which pervades the universe in all its constancy...”* [4, 5]

In Buddhism, intention (‘cetana’, in Sanskrit and Pali) is an omnipresent mental factor which is part of each moment of consciousness and, therefore, moral behavior begins by purifying intentions. In this context, intention is regarded as the driving force behind karma. In Buddha’s words, *“Intention, I tell you, is kamma. After having intended something, one creates action through body, speech, and mind”* (Anguttara Nikaya 6.63 [6]). Also, in Buddhism, ‘satya’ is translated as ‘reality or truth’ in the context of the Four Noble Truths.

In Buddhism, ethical conduct (‘sila’ in Pali) is one of the three great practices on the Buddhist path to liberation— which requires the conscious practice of moral restraint. Classically, the term ‘ethics’ is somewhat preferred over the term ‘morality’. Nevertheless, since the immoral mind is unstable, the practice of ‘sila’ is regarded as essential and it begins with taking a close look at one’s conduct— at the three ethical conduct aspects of the Buddha’s eightfold path: right action, right speech, and right livelihood [7]. Ethical conduct (‘sila’) requires uninterrupted attention and mindfulness (‘sati’), so that it gradually becomes clear what is wholesome and unwholesome in our body, speech, and mind. When the meditation practice settles the mind enough to develop awareness of the necessity to change some aspects of conduct, long meditation sessions quite commonly lead the practitioner to experience remorse for things done or said in the past for which, at that time, there was an alleged justification. While remorse triggers a change in their conduct, meditation becomes more effective, then they continue to steadily shape their conduct, and the virtues come through. By cultivating virtues, we can live ethically in the world while deepening our meditation and insight.

A natural way of working with Buddhist ethics is to reflect on how some areas in your life where you encounter resistance might be linked to ethical conduct [8]. Someone might engage in harmful behaviours (to themselves or others) simply as a way or distract themselves from facing their own pain or dissatisfaction, or to avoid a personal situation. For example, engaging in the non-virtue of gossip, which is harmful to others, may have its underlying motivations in the arising pain within the one that gossips. By becoming mindful of the urge to gossip, by investigating and cultivating a deeper understanding of the nature of their own pain and suffering, one can confront these challenges and — through self-awareness and the practice of ethics — empower themselves to make a change. Through this process, Buddhist ethics are more than just a moral code or a set of rules for good behaviour, but rather tools for helping us to realise awakening.

The Shaolin monks' orders and other traditional schools of martial arts historically approached the study of martial arts as a system of ethics, besides being a means of self-defense or mental training. The 'martial morality' ('Wude' in Chinese) essentially emphasises respect, humility, trust, virtue, and honour. When respected, Wude comprehends two aspects: the morality of deed, concerning social relations, and the morality of mind, concerning the cultivation of inner harmony between the emotional mind (Xin) and the wisdom mind (Hui) [9]. Founded on a series of virtues of the deed and of the mind, the ultimate goal of 'Wude' is attaining 'Wuji', similar to the Taoist 'Wu Wei', which brings wisdom and emotions in harmony with each other. The "Echoes of the Past" of the 4th century Chinese philosopher Yan Yanzhi tells us that "*The great man grows the many myriad things... Breaking away from the military arts, He promotes fully the cultural mandates.*" [10]

Chinese philosophy offers the wisdom phrase 'Yi Dao Qi Dao', which means 'Where attention goes, energy flows,' or 'When the intent arrives, the Qi arrives.' As a core principle in Chinese martial arts and traditional Chinese medicine, it primarily implies that focused attention and intention activate and direct the body's vital energy, the flow of Qi, throughout the body. However, along with tapping into energy awareness, this piece of wisdom ultimately taps into the subtle realms of consciousness— as we, consciously or subconsciously, constantly invest energy in the thoughts and ideas we focus on and we cause them to grow.

In feudal Japan, Bushido, the Samurai's code, also known as the way of the Samurai, comprised the attitudes of respect, honour, honesty, justice, loyalty, courage, and compassion. The Samurai held a strong belief that one should never leave 'the way', and should never stop training for 'the way', as its mastery required uninterrupted practice of attention, intention and awareness. Buddhism and Shintoism coexisted as belief systems during that time, almost all Japanese being Buddhist and Shintoist at the same time, and therefore, values and attitudes from both philosophies influenced and contributed to the path of the Samurai in their lifetime martial arts training and combat [11].

Moving our quest for wisdom to the Americas, we should first look at the wisdom traditions of the Potawatomi indigenous people, a North American tribe of the western Great Lakes region which endured, prevailed over time, and their nation still thrives in the present days. Their Seven Grandfather Teachings emphasizing wisdom, respect, love, honesty, humility, bravery, and truth toward each other and all creation have always been a part of the Native American culture, affecting every aspect of life. [12] The Seven Grandfathers instructed children on human responsibility and how to live their best life, each of the teachings being fully integrated with the others. In particular, the value of 'honesty' talks about "walking through life with integrity, truthfulness, and trustworthiness" and maintaining "straightforward communications", as "being honest with oneself leads to being honest with others", while living a life in 'truth' leads to "understanding, speaking, and feeling the truth in the world." [13] Furthermore, in the Native American tradition of the Great Sioux Nation of the Great Plains area, 'tawacin' (a Sioux word), translated as 'intent' or 'will', is almost synonymous with 'attentiveness', or sometimes 'wisdom' or 'cognition'. Rather than a passive quality, intent is regarded as a creative power that helps us fulfil our life mission, while attentiveness is also considered a necessity for 'waableza', meaning 'clear minded understanding'. In other words, with both intent and attentiveness, one could live a vision and manifest it into reality. In this mindful tradition, the command of the spirits is thought to have been 'Be attentive!'

Farther in the south, the Toltec culture of the ancient Americas, a pre-Columbian Mesoamerican culture, was an epitome of civilization, later considered by the Aztecs to be their intellectual and cultural predecessors— with substantial influence in the surrounding region. The esoteric ancient knowledge of the Toltec was passed on by different lineages of 'naguals' ('women and men of knowledge' in Southern

Mexico), through generations, concealing the ancestral wisdom and maintaining its secrecy for hundreds of years. Toltec wisdom — while not being a religion, but rather a way of life — expressed the same fundamental unity of truth as many other sacred esoteric traditions around the world. Based on the ancient Toltec knowledge, “The Four Agreements” book by Don Miguel Ruiz [14] reveals the source of self-limiting beliefs that keep people in ignorance and suffering, offering a code of conduct with the power to break stereotypical limitations and help people attain personal freedom. The existence of its secrets remained in obscurity for a long time, in the tradition of the Toltec. According to Don Miguel, “European conquest, coupled with rampant misuse of personal power by a few of the apprentices, made it necessary to shield the knowledge from those who were not prepared to use it wisely or who might intentionally misuse it for personal gain.” [14] Two of the Toltec wisdom ‘agreements’ I would like to talk about are “*Be impeccable with your word*” and “*Don’t make assumptions*”. [14] The first of them is presented as the most important and also the most difficult to honor, as the action of the misuse of the word always produces a like reaction. While the truth is the key that sets one free, and using the power of the word in the direction of truth is the most important part of being impeccable with one’s word, this ‘agreement’ teaches about speaking with honesty and integrity, and avoiding talking against people or gossiping. The other ‘agreement’ I’ve chosen emphasises the importance of clear and straightforward communication, asking questions instead of making assumptions and expressing yourself in a forthright, nondeceptive way— in order to avoid misunderstandings, unfounded injurious assertions, and destructive choices. First of all, the text points out that gossiping has become habitual in human communication, most often with a harmful intent. “Gossip is black magic at its very worst because it is pure poison. [...] You feel the poison come up inside you and you don’t realise you see [someone] through the eyes of the person who gave you that gossip.” [14] While we might not be aware of a gossip’s motivation in speaking about someone, they could be simply expressing their anger or making assumptions based on their own fears and prejudices. When one gossips, they give an opinion which is nothing more than their own point of view— possibly coming from their biased beliefs and their ego. Someone’s point of view is not necessarily true, as people often see what they want to see and hear what they want to hear, they don’t perceive things as they really are, and — even with no apparent intention of lying — they might wrongly believe they are right in their assumptions. People have a tendency to make assumptions when it suits their bias or when they are reluctant to ask for clarifications, and often persist in believing they actually speak the truth. “The problem with making assumptions,” the text underlines, “is that we believe they are the truth. We could swear they are real.” [14] Nevertheless, breaking free from the habit of gossiping and the pattern of making assumptions is, undoubtedly, a critical step in paving the way towards clarity and lucidity.

To educate children about the power of speech, the logos, and how we should use it with discernment, with ethical and moral conduct, with authentic spiritual attitudes and pure intention— that should be a priority. To build a better world without gossip, rigmarole, deceitful speech, inconsiderate statements and abusive assertions— that should be a purpose.

We should finally take a thorough look at the Western ancient philosophy and its lessons on ethics, inquiry, and truth. Although the works of the early fathers of philosophy were written in the 4th century BCE, the teachings they have transmitted and the legacy of their wisdom still provide guidance to human society today. The philosophical Socratic Method, developed by the renowned Greek philosopher Socrates about 2,500 years ago, is a form of argumentative dialogue and reflection, a method of questioning, exploring, and inquiring— which teaches people how to develop a whole new way of thinking, how to seek for the truth and achieve a deeper understanding of life situations. [15] Socrates

teaches people to ask questions and he explains the reasons why they should do so — thorough inquiry, patience, rationality — in order to discover underlying implicit beliefs, to uncover hidden assumptions, to challenge their own assumptions, to rigorously analyze arguments and ideas, to reveal contradictions in beliefs, to value better thinking and active learning. People are encouraged to create ‘Socratic questions’ on their own— clarification questions, questions for probing assumptions, evidence, reasons, or consequences, and for questioning viewpoints. Sometimes leading to acknowledging one's own ignorance, to revealing faults in one's thinking habits, it enables people to make sense out of life and enhance their ability of correcting themselves. Coming from the ancient times, this invaluable method fosters critical thinking and guides people, as an everyday activity, on a path to wisdom and a more reflective, authentic life. [15]

Plato was a student of Socrates and became a renowned Athenian philosopher as well. In Plato's best-known work, “The Republic” [16], a world's most influential philosophical work dating around 375 BCE, Plato wrote a set of dialogues of Socrates (the so-called Socratic dialogue), depicting Socrates in conversation with various Athenians and foreigners. In “The Republic”, Plato discusses the four cardinal values, the virtue ethics he believed to be essential to define the moral character of an individual and of a society— wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice. [17] Central to Plato's philosophy, the four virtues form a unified moral system, each one relying on the others— overall offering valuable guidance for ethical living, moral direction, maintaining self-control, perseverance, flourishing in life, and attaining harmony in society. The virtue theory in the Western philosophy originated, therefore, in ancient Greek philosophy; founded by Socrates, it was further developed by Plato and Aristotle, and further by the Greek and Roman school of Stoics. Bridging Socrates's and Aristotle's viewpoints, Plato's virtue ethics theory is the foundation of classical moral philosophy, with the three philosophers defining three stages of ethical evolution— virtue as knowledge in Socrates's view, virtue as harmony guided by reason in Plato's view, and virtue as practice and balance in Aristotle's view. Nevertheless, there is a general agreement that the ethics of life are revealed by the practice of virtues.

The obvious conclusion, across cultures, should be that intention is not just a passive state of mind or an inertial spiritual attitude. Pure intent, on that account, is a creative power that — if maintained with vigilance — has the potential to build, develop, generate a positive vision with the inner force to manifest itself and propagate in chains of positive outcomes and consequences for self and the world. For all that, without accurate awareness of our inner world, without attentiveness and watchfulness, the intention might not be pure in its depth and profoundness. If the intention is not genuinely pure, but merely a delusion, thoughts and intent won't build a pure vision and won't serve a truly positive goal. In the view that what we feed is what we grow, if we feed the ego, we'll grow the ego; we'll build a shelter and a mask for the ego, we'll nurture ego actions and endeavours; rather than contributing to fulfilling a positive cause, a chain of undesired consequences will fire back with negative outcomes— and much of the original spiritual purpose will be lost. For one's vision to stay true, it calls for one's attention and awareness of the self to maintain a pure intent. It is worthwhile to measure the attainment of the ultimate truth in balance with the immediate egoistic satisfaction of worldly goals, self-centredness, and the temporary illusory sensorial perception of happiness. When harmony is established, truthfulness may be in the heart, but it can't be found in the absence of the clarity of the mind— a condition and prerequisite for realizing the truth.

As saints of all traditions emphasised the importance of inner purity as the driving force on one's spiritual growth and the discovery of the divine spirit within, they often highlighted the purity of the mind as a cornerstone of all progress on the path towards enlightenment and self-realisation. Hence, the process

of cleansing the mind, of bringing the light of the spirit out of the darkness of confusion, delusion, ignorance and greed is regarded — in spirituality and religion — as going above and beyond the ritualistic practices of devotion. Most significantly, while undergoing a profound inner transformation, this is a way to reassure that heart openness is joined with mind clarity in manifesting our thoughts, emotions, motivations, and purpose. While requiring some effort and personal discipline for the constant training of one's attitudes in watchfulness and observance, the positive outcomes of this transformation are far higher than individual growth. It crucially contributes to the elevation of society to a new level of awareness, clarity, discernment, it has the potential to reduce the bias between groups and different populations, it boosts the progress we need in the evolution of humanity.

Into the Modern World

For thirty years, in my pursuit of finding my purpose in life, seeking answers and following my quest on a spiritual path, I have attended schools of thought and meditation and I have visited a large variety of spiritual retreat centres, driven by my genuine enthusiasm and hopeful expectations. Over and above, I have taught and mentored students in such communities and, time and again, I brought my contribution as a traveling teacher, trainer, writer, journalist and researcher. In view of this, I envisioned a community life where spiritual undertakings would bring about honesty, truthfulness and kindness in the relationships between people, and would thereby foster a righteous, unhypocritical environment for people's self-fulfilment and self-realisation. Most importantly, I followed my hopes for an awakened human environment where abounding virtues and authentic spiritual attitudes would thrive and flourish. Nevertheless, the reality I found was worrisome and controversial. While some of these schools and communities have remained a lasting memory of uplifting positive impact, quite a few of them — as a painful realisation — remained a lasting source of disappointment, unsettling memories and distress. Above all, what I found most troubling were the alarming acts of unkindness, unethical attitudes, wrongful behaviours and harassment I have witnessed over the years, a disregard for human rights and dignities, for gender equality and non-bias— revealing a severe lack of understanding of the essential role that truth, ethics and righteousness play on the path towards spiritual enlightenment and self-actualisation.

On numerous occasions, in these communities, I ran across the novel philosophical belief that 'if something feels right, it must be right...', or 'if it feels good, it must be good...' — and so many people lived by it! The delusion of feeling right about doing wrong has gained too much space and acceptance in this largely disseminated environment within spiritual communities. Time and again, I found it disturbing that the shallow, superficial sensation of a harmful action feeling right — its mindless and careless acceptance, the drive to follow it blindly and to justify any tendency, or personal urge, by the indulgence of 'feeling good about it' — this trap of hallucination quite often led people to cause harm to themselves and others.

Moreover, when combined with the praised longing for 'living in the heart' (while significantly lacking mindfulness and self vigilance) the resulting inner attitude becomes dangerous and overall confusing, hindering the attainment of clarity and discernment. While easily giving the illusion of 'being in the heart', a misleading sensation that something feels right can trigger the urge for an action that is either inappropriate or harmful. It is in fact possible that such sensation comes from clinging on personal 'mind stuff', built on deep-rooted negative tendencies and subconscious inclinations that arise from them (the so-called 'samskaras and vashanas' in yoga and Hindu philosophy), which the person might not be aware of when 'feeling right' about doing something wrong. Furthermore, if such an urge occurs as a

repetitive pattern of behaviour, of speech, or thought in the person's conduct, entangled in internal distortions, that is a clear indication that the person's speech or actions arise from their inner tendencies, hidden under the veil of illusion— and certainly not from the 'Spiritual Heart'. In the next stage of their inner delusionary indulgence, that 'feeling right about doing wrong' becomes a 'vasana' in itself, an inclination— which will likely influence and shape that person's attitudes and behaviour for their lifetime.

Undoubtedly, it is quite intuitive to understand that tolerating such attitudes and consequent behaviour patterns in a community will gradually escalate to shaping the entire community life, will generate negative outcomes and, eventually, a cascade of harmful consequences. In contrast, while a community might genuinely be intended to be spiritual, it requires advocating for awareness, lucidity, and discernment, as well as a constant reminder and encouragement to people to pursue their introspective reasoning and an honest dialog with their inner self— to ensure balance and harmony, authenticity, unbroken peace and serenity in the community life.

Above all, I keep my hopes up that unveiling and elucidating the causes of the troublesome 'status quo' in the world today has the potential to call for reinstating the ideals and values of true spirituality and justice our spiritual ancestors and the fathers of philosophy once stood for, to re-establish a trust system based on authentic principles and attitudes. By cultivating virtue ethics, people could live ethically in their surroundings and thoroughly reflect on the essential role that truth, righteousness, conscious living and conscious speech indisputably play in the true development of humanity.

Ultimately, in the words of The Prologue to the Gospel, in the Bible, "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was fully God...*"

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