

Reverence for Life

by Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.

"Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I undertake to cultivate compassion and learn ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants, and minerals. I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to condone any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, and in my way of life."

—Thich Nhat Hanh

As self-aware beings whose actions impact on other beings, we must ask ourselves about the moral implications of our actions. Ethical inquiry is a cornerstone of responsible living. In *Apologema*, Plato quotes Socrates as saying that the unexamined life (*anaxétastos bíos*) is not worth living and that the greatest good (*agathón*) for a human being is to converse daily about virtue. He made this statement before the tribunal that condemned him to death for his supposedly heretical and seditious activity. He had been charged with undermining Athens's official religion and corrupting the youth.

As Socrates amply demonstrates in his dialogues, as recollected by Plato, the philosophical life revolves around the great values of goodness and beauty. Without conscious moral choices, and giving free rein to the uncontrolled mind, we are apt to indulge in all manner of actions that follow the dictates of the unconscious and thus are likely to be injurious rather than beneficial to others. For, to cultivate the good and beautiful (*kalós*) calls for philosophical self-inspection.

Already the Hindu *Bhagavad-Gita*, written in its extant form around the time of Socrates, admits that it is difficult to determine right action from wrong action and that even abstention from action (which in the final analysis is impossible) can have negative consequences for oneself and others. And yet, we must make every effort to attain clarity in ethical matters, as indeed did Prince Arjuna, the hero of the *Gita*, who received instruction from Krishna, a king and enlightened spiritual adept.

Well over 2,000 years later—and without an illumined teacher to guide him—the German theologian-physician-organist Albert Schweitzer deeply pondered the moral foundations of human life. He relates in his autobiography *Out of My Life and Thought*, how, while making his way upstream on a meandering African river and amidst a group of hippopotamuses, he suddenly found the solution to the puzzle. It presented itself in the form of the notion of "reverence for life."

This discovery was really a rediscovery of an intuitive knowledge that Schweitzer had had as a child and that, he believed, every human likewise possesses. In his autobiography, he recollects how at the age of seven or eight a friend invited him to

shoot birds with a slingshot. He reluctantly went along out of peer pressure. Just as his friend was about to shoot a beautifully chirping songbird sitting in a nearby tree, the church bells of his hometown started to ring. They made him aware of what he had been feeling all along: that there was something profoundly wrong about taking the life of that innocent bird. He shoed it away and ran home.

Once the idea of reverence for life had crystallized in Schweitzer's mind in 1915, he went on to formulate an ethics founded on this key thought. He gave his first major lecture on this topic four years later at the University of Uppsala in Sweden. Arguably the best presentation of his ethics can be found in his 1923 book *Die Philosophie der Zivilisation* (*The Philosophy of Civilization*).

Looking for a philosophical anchorage for this concept, Schweitzer opted for the Schopenhauerian "will to live," the irrepressible urge to survive, which human beings share with all creatures, even those that do not have self-awareness. As Patanjali states laconically in his *Yoga-Sutra* (2.9), written probably around 200 A.D., "The will to live (*abhinivesha*) is rooted even in the sage." One may question whether Schweitzer succeeded in formulating a viable philosophical framework for his ethics, but with his concept of "reverence for life" he has clearly pinpointed a moral ideal that is at the core of the great religio-spiritual traditions of the world, notably Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism.

As Schweitzer observed, reverence for life is the fulcrum of a "complete" ethics: "All the goodness one displays toward a living organism is, at bottom, helping it to preserve and further its existence. . . . By ethical conduct toward all creatures, we enter into a spiritual relationship with the universe" (*The Teaching of Reverence for Life*, pp. 26–27).

Schweitzer put it differently as follows: "Reverence for life means being seized by the unfathomable, forward-moving will which is inherent in all Being" (*ibid.*, p. 32).

Thus, reverence for life takes full cognizance of the survival instinct operative in all of Nature's creatures. By extension, this ethical imperative also entails what in the Indic traditions is called *ahimsa*, or nonharming. Schweitzer seems to have misinterpreted the Indic teachings in that he assumed that they were largely life negative and that they primarily sought to guide practitioners to spiritual liberation, which he saw as a self-centered goal. He never fully appreciated those teachings, like Mahayana Buddhism, that have a full-fledged altruistic ethics, such as the conduct prescribed for the *bodhisattva*. The *bodhisattva*, who is intent on the enlightenment of all beings, is enjoined not only to abstain from harming others but to treat all living beings (throughout the cosmos and not merely on Earth) as he would his own mother, namely with the utmost kindness. In fact, Mahayana Buddhism can be said to have the most complete ethics based on reverence for life of any spiritual tradition.

Certainly, a *bodhisattva* would resonate completely with Schweitzer's understanding of reverence for life:

A man is truly ethical only when he obeys the compulsion to help all life which he is able to assist, and shrinks from injuring anything that lives. He does not ask how far this or that life deserves one's sympathy as being valuable, nor, beyond that, whether and to what degree it is capable of feeling. Life as such is sacred to him. He tears no leaf from a tree, plucks no flower, and takes care to crush no insect. If in summer he is working by

lamplight, he prefers to keep his windows shut and breathe a stuffy atmosphere rather than see one insect after another fall with singed wings upon his table.

If he walks on the road after a shower and sees an earthworm which has strayed on to it, he bethinks himself that it must get dried up on the sun, if it does not return soon enough to ground into which it can burrow, so he lifts it from the deadly stone surface, and puts it on the grass. If he comes across an insect which has fallen into a puddle, he stops a moment in order to hold out a leaf or a stalk on which it can save itself. (*The Philosophy of Civilization*, chapter 26).

To this, however, a *bodhisattva* would add virtuous conduct, especially patience and generosity, which have numerous aspects. The *bodhisattva*'s path involves vows and detailed disciplines, which constitute an exacting way of life dedicated to the grand ideal liberation *but* in kinship with all beings.

Most importantly, a *bodhisattva* approaches his altruistic conduct from the broadest possible perspective, which is the spiritual enlightenment, or liberation, of all beings. The purpose of alleviating a sentient being's present suffering or to protect its life from wanton destruction is merely the top layer of a far deeper concern, which is to work for its ultimate benefit—a notion that makes sense only in the context of an understanding that accepts re-embodiment (reincarnation). One can, however, easily rephrase this virtuous attitude in nonmetaphysical, nonreligious terms by speaking of a creature's potential, so that assisting it in whatever way could be seen as an endeavor to assist it in realizing its full potential, whatever that may be.

Clearly, to cultivate reverence for life at any level demands a degree of attentiveness, or [mindfulness](#), that few people possess naturally. Schweitzer's call for an ethical "renaissance" leading to a "new humanity" has lost none of its urgency. Yet, this transformation will not occur automatically but only as a result of voluntary personal change on the part of very many people.

References

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