

# Why Everyone Should Be an Ascetic

Most of those familiar with the term “asceticism” associate it with the type of severe bodily discipline engaged in by religious persons. However, the term has a much more broad meaning and application, and refers to something that all human beings should practice.

“Asceticism” comes from the Greek word *askesis*, which is translated as “exercise” or “training.” It was primarily used by the ancient Greeks to refer to the training that athletes underwent in preparation for competitions such as the Olympics.

However, as Seattle University philosophy professor Dr. Daniel Dombrowski [has pointed out](#), the term *askesis* also has a relation to the idea of ethics:

*“The very word ‘ethics’ in English is derived from a Greek word for training or habit that is closely related to askesis: ethos. It is unfortunate that this connection has so infrequently been noticed. Plotinus makes it clear that the soul must be trained (ethisteon) in order to ascend. That is, even in Plotinus, who is often mistakenly thought of as advocating the flight of the soul away from the body, the ascetic life of athletic training and the ethical life are closely intertwined.”*

The Greek tradition (and many other traditions around the world, for that matter) understood that living an ethical life required the same kind of dedication and training as athletics. Consistently doing the good required disciplining one’s body lest one become intemperate with food and sex. It required focused attention to overcome passions such as anger and envy.

Today, we are surrounded by impressive examples of asceticism for the sake of winning a sports championship, losing weight, or preparing for a marathon. Let us hope that we will see more examples of dedication to an ethical asceticism, as well.