

Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras – Foundation Year

Part 2: Exploring Buddhist Practice – The Five Precepts

Week 1: Why be Ethical?

Introduction

As we saw in the first part, this course is designed to help us explore the three declarations we make when we become a mitra:

- I think of myself as a Buddhist
- I am trying to practice the Five Precepts
- The Triratna Buddhist Community is the context in which I want to practice, at least for the foreseeable future

In this second section of the course we move on from looking at what it means to be a Buddhist, to looking at what it means to practice the Five Precepts. This week we will look at why ethics is such an important part of the spiritual path. Then in the next five weeks we will look at each of the Five Precepts one by one. In later parts of the course we will broaden the way we look at the second declaration, to include other ways we put Buddhism into practice in daily life, including the practice of meditation, and the practice of applying Buddhist ideas to the way we think about life.

The Threefold Path

The simplest traditional description of the Buddhist path divides it into three stages:

- The stage of ethics
- The stage of meditation
- The stage of wisdom

Practising the precepts belongs to the stage of ethics, so according to tradition it is logical that we should look at this first, before we look at meditation or wisdom. But although this approach is logical according to tradition, it does not fit with the way many of us in the West start to practice Buddhism. Many of us start with meditation, and only begin to think about our ethics as a result of our experience of meditation. Some of us start with a fascination for Buddhist ideas, and only later start to put these into practice in our lives.

With this in mind it is important that we don't see this threefold path too rigidly. We should not take it to mean that we can't make progress with our meditation until our ethics are perfect, or that we can't align ourselves more closely with

reality until we are great meditators. We might be better to see our progress as less like following a path – where you must finish one section before setting foot on the next – than like the unfolding of the petals of a flower, where the different petals open together, but the inner ones cannot open faster than the outer ones allow.

But although it is true that many people can make good progress with meditation for some time without paying much attention to their ethics, most people who have been practising for longer come to see that the idea of the threefold path contains an important truth. There is not much point in trying to develop positive mental states for an hour or so each day in meditation if we are developing negative states in most of the other hours of our lives by the way we act and speak. And often the way to improve our meditation is not so much to look at what we do in meditation, as to look at what we do outside it, in the rest of our life. Unless we take our positive mental states off our meditation cushion and start expressing them in our daily activities, after a while our meditation will hit a plateau – or even a brick wall.

The problem with ethics

Many people in the West have negative associations with the whole idea of ethics, because this has become mixed up with ideas of ‘good’ behaviour that can limit our individuality and be unhelpful for our development. But a true practice of ethics is not about limiting our individuality – it is about expressing it. The word ‘ethic’ is derived from the Greek word ‘ethos’. To be truly ethical is to live by our ethos: to live by a set of principles and values we have freely chosen, because they reflect our deepest aspirations and sense of meaning. For many of us this idea has become confused with distorted versions of ethics, the most obvious of which are authoritarian ethics and conventional ethics.

In an authoritarian system of ethics, a code of behaviour is imposed on us from outside – rather than springing from our own sense of the deep meaning of life – and then enforced by a system of reward and punishment. Any ethical system based on the idea of a judging, punishing God, who demands that we obey his commandments (or else!) is bound to be authoritarian. This is not to say that all Christians, Jews, or Muslims practice ethics at this low level, but many of us have been exposed to a crude version of theistic religion in childhood, and this has affected our perceptions of what ethics is about.

Another distortion of true ethics is what we might call conventional ethics. These are rules about how we should behave that are mainly about conforming to what is normal in a particular culture, rather than about spiritual values. Such rules are not universal, and will differ from place to place and time to time, but because they are so widely accepted by everyone around us it is easy to take them on them unthinkingly. Examples of conventional ethical values in the Anglo-Saxon and Northern European cultures include the ‘Protestant work ethic’, the extreme importance given to money and livelihood, beliefs about the sanctity of marriage and the nuclear family, aspects of political correctness, and many of the

unconscious taboos that prevent us from expressing our individuality, creativity, zest for life, and warmth for others.

Authoritarian ethics and conventional ethics often go hand in hand. Society persuades us to conform by rewarding us when we do so, and by punishing us when we don't – usually by the approval or disapproval of the people around us. We all get a necessary dose of this socialisation in childhood, before we have developed much of an ethical sense of our own. But later in life, when we are trying to develop our individual identity, we often need to rebel against the rules that have been imposed on us. And because the rules we reject are connected with what we think are religious ethics, many of us are wary of anything that goes by the name of ethics.

Buddhist ethics

We therefore need to be clear that the Buddhist idea of ethics is very different from our normal Western view. Buddhist ethics are not about restricting our freedom. They are about liberating ourselves from the slavery of unhelpful habits, conditioning, and ways of being, and becoming potent individuals with control over the direction of our own lives. They are about behaving in ways that encourage positive emotions, and calm negative states. They are about acting in a way that gives us a sense of wholeness and self-esteem, because we are honestly trying to live up to our vision of what we could become.

In the absence of a judging God we must obey, the words 'right' and 'wrong' are inappropriate to the Buddhist idea of ethics. Instead Buddhism classes actions as either 'skilful' or 'unskilful'. Skilful behaviour is intelligent behaviour, in that it contributes to our own happiness and the happiness of others. Unskilful behaviour has the opposite effects, but it comes about because we do not see reality as it is, not because we have disobeyed some cosmic authority figure, or because we are 'bad'.

The law of karma

In traditional Buddhism, the need for ethics and the idea of karma go hand in hand. The Sanskrit word 'karma' means simply 'action'. The law of karma extends the idea of cause and effect into the area of ethics, pointing out that all our actions have consequences, for us and for others. To the extent that we behave in skilful ways, our experience in the future will be happier and brighter. To the extent that we behave in unskilful ways, our experience in the future will be unhappier and darker. Traditionally this idea of karma is connected with the idea of rebirth, so that a skilful life is seen as leading us to be reborn in beautiful, pleasant states of existence, whereas an unskilful life leads to rebirth in painful states of suffering. These effects do not happen as a reward or punishment, but simply because the world we experience around us is a reflection of our state of being. If we make ourselves into a heavenly being, we will experience a heavenly state; if we make ourselves into a hellish being, our experience will literally be hell.

Many Western Buddhists accept these traditional ideas of karma and rebirth as embodying important truths that transcend our present understanding of the world. However others find it difficult to accept the idea of rebirth, so it is important to be clear that we don't have to believe in rebirth to accept the idea of karma. It is easy to show that the law of karma operates just as much in this life as in future lives. Even in this lifetime the way we act now determines the world we will experience in the future.

We all have many strands in our being. Sometimes our thoughts are skilful, sometimes they are unskilful, and usually we have a jumble of different thoughts coming up almost at the same time. If, for example, someone asks us for money for a good purpose, we are likely to have a range of thoughts and feelings. Sometimes there will be generous thoughts, and we will have the impulse to give. Sometimes, even though we can afford to give, our thoughts will be stingy, and we may resent the fact that we have been asked. These two strands in our being may seem to pop up of their own accord, like mental weather. They are the result of our past actions and conditioning, and we have no choice about which comes up at any one time. But we do have a choice about which type of thought we put our will behind, which we identify with, which we give our energy to, and which we act upon. If we give our energy to the generous strand, this will become stronger, and the stingy strand will become weaker. If on the other hand we put our will behind the stingy strand, this will become stronger, and our generous impulses will become weaker in the future.

We are making this sort of choice – and forming our future selves – all the time. Our minds constantly throw up all sorts of thoughts and feelings. We constantly choose which of the many strands in our being we identify with and act upon. In the process we are constantly choosing to make ourselves either larger, more expansive, and more whole, or else smaller, more cramped, and more fragmented. We are constantly forming the person we will be in the future, and this in turn determines the sort of world we will experience, just as surely as if we were choosing a realm in which to be reborn. We all see the world through the spectacles of our mental states. Even though we humans apparently all inhabit the same physical space, and are subjected to the same range of pleasant and painful experiences, we experience this very differently according to the nature of our being. If we make ourselves into a larger, more positive and expansive being, then we will experience a deep happiness which does not depend on outer circumstances. But if we make ourselves into a smaller, more negative being, then we will have a cramped, dark, unhappy experience, even if our outer circumstances are very pleasant.

It will be obvious from this discussion of the law of karma that the practice of ethics is a crucial part of our path. Choosing skilful rather than unskilful actions is an essential part of the way we change in positive ways, so that we come to express more and more of our spiritual potential. Meditation without a conscious practice of ethics is not enough to allow us to do this, and nor is even the most sophisticated understanding of Buddhist philosophy.

Aspects of Ethics

Beyond the terrible trio

In fact the importance of ethics is so central to the path that it has many different aspects, and can be expressed in many different ways – although in a sense these are all just different ways of saying the same thing. One way of putting it is simply to say that when we act skilfully we encourage skilful mental states in ourselves, whereas when we act unskilfully we encourage negative states based on ill-will, craving, and delusion. As the whole point of the Buddhist path is to move beyond this terrible trio, it is obvious that acting skilfully is not an optional extra.

Acting ‘as if’

Another way of putting it is to say that part of the way we become an Enlightened being is to act as if we were already an Enlightened being. A Buddha is spontaneously skilful, naturally living on the basis of solidarity with others, generosity, freedom from craving, straightforward integrity, and clear awareness. For us these qualities don’t yet always come naturally, although we all carry the seeds of them inside us. So at the moment we often need to make a conscious effort to act on these qualities – acting as if we were Enlightened – to help these seeds to grow. In this way over time it becomes more and more natural and effortless for us to act skilfully, as we grow towards our own Enlightenment.

Connecting with our higher self

Another way of putting it is to think in terms of acting on the impulses of our higher self, so that in acting skilfully we strengthen our connection with our own deepest nature. Many people have a sense of having a sort of higher self, which can act as a guiding voice and a source of strength and wisdom. When we are in contact with this higher aspect of ourselves we feel supported and on the right track, whereas when we are cut off from this source of strength we feel adrift and out of harmony with ourselves. Some schools of Buddhism speak in terms of us all having ‘Buddha Nature’, which is usually covered over by the grime of our unskilful habits. When we act unskilfully we cut ourselves off from this higher self, which leaves us weak and miserable. But when we express more of our higher self – when we act skilfully – we strengthen our connection with what is best in ourselves, so that we naturally feel stronger and happier. By consistently acting skilfully, we gradually come to express more and more of this higher self, so that over time it comes to be a larger and larger part of our being.

Ethics, self-transcendence, and wisdom

So far in considering why we need to practice ethics we have talked mainly in terms of how we ourselves benefit. Acting ethically promotes enjoyable positive states, protects us from painful negative states, and helps us to grow and develop, which is the ultimate source of happiness. But this explanation is one-sided, and could give the impression that Buddhism encourages a self-centred attitude to the

spiritual path. We do not avoid harming others – for example – because this would harm us. We avoid it because it would harm others! Acting ethically is not just about our own happiness, our own development, or our own mental states. It is about expressing – and therefore strengthening – our sense of interconnectedness and empathy with other beings. This sense of deep connection with the universe around us is an integral part of the experience of Enlightenment.

To see with the eyes of wisdom is to see that we cannot separate ourselves from others and the world around us. We are all part of each other. When we hurt another we hurt ourselves, and when we benefit another we benefit ourselves. Ultimately Buddhist ethics are about cultivating and expressing self-transcending wisdom in our daily lives, which means rising above our own small personal point of view, and acting from a more universal, more spacious, less self-centred perspective. This is to express our ‘higher self’. It is to act in the best interests of our own real self, and in the best interests of other beings and the universe as a whole.

The five precepts

To help us act skilfully in the hurly-burly of everyday life we need some simple guidelines we can carry constantly in our mind. The simplest and most general set of ethical guidelines in Buddhism are the Five Precepts. These are guides to how an Enlightened being would behave, which we can follow in order to act as if we were an Enlightened being, and therefore to develop our own potential for Enlightenment.

The Five Precepts express a set of fundamental spiritual principles: kindness, generosity, contentment, integrity, and awareness. Obviously they are not ‘commandments’, and it is important that we don’t take them on as though they were imposed on us from outside. We need to think for ourselves about the principles involved, and to decide whether we agree that they express our own deep values. In doing this it might help to think about what it would be like to aim for the opposite – cruelty, stinginess, craving, dishonesty, and escapism. It is possible that someone might take one of these as a guiding value, but it is very difficult to see how such a person could be a Buddhist! In fact the principles behind the Five Precepts are so basic to any sort of spiritual life that they probably seem self-evident. Accepting these principles as reflecting our own deep values is fundamental to becoming a Buddhist.

Each of the Five Precepts has a ‘positive’ and a ‘negative’ form. The negative forms advise us what not to do – they set alarm bells ringing when we are about to do or say something unskilful. The positive forms express the general principles we should be aiming for, and are the more general and important of the two sets.

Pitfalls

There are at least two dangers we need to watch for as we practice ethics. The first is importing concepts of obedience and ‘sin’ from other religious traditions, which

can feed a sense of guilt and unworthiness. The second is being unrealistically hard on ourselves. The Precepts are guidelines about how an Enlightened being would behave. We are not Enlightened, and until we are it is impossible for us to keep the Precepts perfectly. (Imagine, for example, what it would be like to be totally generous, with no sense of anything being ‘mine’.) The Precepts are sometimes called ‘training principles’ and it is important that we see them in this spirit – as practices we train ourselves with, so that we gradually get better at them. Acting ethically is a skill. If with any other skill – say playing the piano – we expected to be perfect from the start, and then mentally beat ourselves up whenever we hit a wrong note, we would soon give up.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What first interested you in Buddhism – ethics, meditation, or wisdom? Which did you practice first?
2. What were your associations with the word ‘ethics’ before you started this course? How had this been influenced by authoritarian or conventional versions of ethics?
3. Do you believe that whether we act skilfully or not now determines whether our future experience is bright or dark? What other factors might contribute?
4. We could see ethics as about developing positive states and avoiding negative ones, about acting ‘as if’ we were Enlightened, about connecting with our ‘higher self’, or about expressing our interconnectedness with others. Which explanation appeals to you most? Do you think they are connected?
5. Do the principles expressed by the Five Precepts reflect your own values? Are there any you don’t relate to? Are there any other principles you would add to make your own set of precepts? (In thinking about this you might bring to mind someone you admire for their spiritual qualities, and think about what qualities they exemplify.)
6. Do you know the Five Precepts by heart? Do you think this helps us practice them?