

# The Fourth Noble Truth — Morality (Sīla)

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Bhante's Essays · 10 min read

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## THE FOURTH NOBLE TRUTH

Morality❖❖

(Sila)

### QUESTION

If you wanted to create social harmony and peace, what rules or laws would you recommend people to follow?❖

Try to limit your number to four❖or five.

The manner in which the Four Noble Truths were formulated was that of the physicians of the time❖ concerning any illness. Firstly, the illness was described and named.❖ The cause was then stated.❖ Then, the prognosis or likely outcome of the disease and finally the treatment. So if we were following the normal course, we should go onto the Third Noble Truth, The Truth of the End of Suffering.❖ But for clarity's sake, we shall instead go on to the treatment of our dis-ease, the Fourth Noble Truth, in which the Buddha lays down the Path that leads to the perfect cure for life's sufferings.

This is how it is put, in the first ever talk, the Buddha gave after his Enlightenment - The Discourse on the Turning of the Wheel of the Law.

These two extremes, O Disciples, should not be practised by one who has gone forth from the world.❖ What are these two?❖❖ That which is to do with passions - low, vulgar, coarse, ignoble and useless.❖ And that which is to do with mortification - painful, ignoble and useless. Avoiding these two extremes, the Tathagata has attained the knowledge of the Middle Path which gives perception❖ and knowledge and leads to peace, to insight, enlightenment and Nibbana.

'What, then, is this Middle Path?

It is the Eightfold Noble Path, namely, Right Understanding, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration.

Buddhism is often called the Middle Path or the Middle Way : that between self-indulgence, governed by desire for pleasure and by the passions, and self-mortification, involving penances and self torture. The path of self-indulgence is the way of those who believe happiness is to be found in pleasure.❖ The path of mortification is the way of those who believe that the destruction of the physical appetites leads to liberation. The Middle Path lies between these two in this sense. Bodily appetites are natural to human life.❖ We need to eat and our appetite depends on tasty food.❖ However, once we begin to indulge these

appetites, indulge the delights of taste, caring little for what the body actually needs, our appetites grow 'coarse and vulgar'. We become gluttons. ❖ This tightrope, distinguishing between what the body needs as opposed to what the mind greeds, is the Middle Path. ❖ It helps us to purify the mind of gross appetites and emotions and to establish a peaceful disposition. ❖ But this Middle Path also suggests a hierarchy, an apex of a triangle which transcends the two points on either side of the base. ❖ When insight is gained into Nibbana, then we can say that by destroying the very roots of our discontent, the Path now completely transcends these two options of indulgence and mortification. Indeed this is one way of describing the Buddhist 'saint' or Arahant as one who is beyond self-indulgence and self-mortification.

The Eightfold Noble Path, The Middle Path, is laid out in this order. The first two, Right Understanding and Right Intention come under the division of Wisdom. ❖ Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood come under the ❖ division of Morality. ❖ Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration come under the division of Mental Development. However, in the later talks, the Buddha turns his presentation around to show how the theory is put into practice. ❖ There is a passage cropping up time and time again at the end

of the Discourses. ❖ We have to remember those were the days before cassette recorders, videos and even books. ❖ News travelled by word of mouth and slowly. ❖ As the Buddha wandered around the area of India north of the Ganges, ❖ he had to constantly repeat the message. ❖ All discourses have some nuance to add to the teaching, but many of them end with what must have been one of his most well known formula.

'Such is morality, such is mental development, such is wisdom. ❖

Mental development when based on morality is rich in result and of great effect. ❖ Wisdom, based on mental development, is rich in result and great in effect.'

In the Buddha's understanding, morality is the key to further development, so we shall concentrate on the meaning of morality and ❖ its importance. Here we will deal with the negative side. ❖ Positive morality, virtue, will be dealt in the next talk.

Morality these days is still something of a dirty word with heavy Victorian overtones. ❖

Behind this sits the notion of an angry deity who judges and punishes every transgression. ❖ To understand Buddhist morality, we have to keep in mind that first there is no such concept of a punishing or rewarding god. ❖ And secondly, that morality is bound up with the Law of Cause and Effect, Kamma, which states that what is wholesome produces wholesomeness and what is unwholesome produces unwholesomeness. ❖ So on one level, morality is about our actions in the world, realising that our actions are producing effects all the time. ❖ If this is so we need to know what sort of action brings about a good result and happy, peaceful situations and what sort of action brings about painful situations, unhappy results. On another level, morality is about our state of mind within. According to

the law of Kamma, it is our wills that produce our states of mind. ❖ It is by willing to think about and ❖ so to produce acts of generosity and compassion that loving states of mind arise. ❖ It is by willing to think about my personal benefit at the expense of others that brings about the selfish, jealous, anxious states of mind.

On one level, then, the moral laws in Buddhism are about creating a peaceful and caring society. They are the basis for real social harmony. On the other hand, they are laws of mental health which when followed create a mind full of compassion, joy and peace.

The simplest formulation made by the Buddha is recorded in the discourses in verse:

Cease from harm.

Do good.

Purify the mind.

This is the teaching of all the Buddhas.

We can call these three, the Primary Precepts. ❖ The first is the negative morality - what we ought not to do by way of harm to ourselves others. The second is the positive morality - what we ought to do for our own benefit and the benefit of all beings. ❖ The third is to do with clearing out all negative tendencies in the mind and replacing them with positive attitudes.

So what is the Buddha's formulation of 'Cease from evil' in detail? What are those thoughts, words and actions which produce unwholesome states? They are known as the Ten Wrong Actions and they are split into three divisions: wrong thought, wrong speech and wrong action.

Wrong thought takes up the first three of the ten: avarice, ill will and wrong views. ❖

Avarice is to do with all those fantasies and mental projects we indulge that have their motivation in greed. ❖ Self-indulgent, lustful, selfish thoughts. ❖ Fantasies of wealth, fame and power. ❖ It's the mentality of accumulation, of acquisition. ❖ Ill will includes all those thoughts based on hatred, from jealousy to anger, from grudge to revenge. ❖❖ Wrong views here means our tendency to indulge in what is harmful, kidding ourselves that it isn't so. ❖ It means especially not to understand or know of the law of Kamma. In this negative morality, this means ❖ that unskilful behaviour necessarily brings unhappy results. ❖ It

includes the conceit that our opinions are always right even when they are obviously getting us into trouble. ❖ It demands we check all our opinions in ❖ the light of our own experience and the experience of others. ❖ The kernel of wrong view in terms of the Ten Wrong Actions is to believe that since we have got away with some unskilful behaviour, that that's the end of the story.

Wrong Speech takes up the next four of the Wrong Actions. ❖ The first is lying, saying anything untrue. For those of finer conscience, it includes what is often euphemistically called exaggeration. ❖ The second is malicious talk which only furthers backbiting and

disharmony. Slander often joins together lying and malicious talk. ❖ The third is coarse speech, the use of four letter words and so on. ❖ We need to ask what sort of mental state lies behind the use of such words. ❖ Finally useless talk, idle gossip. Again we are looking at the state of mind indulged in, the whingeing, complaining, bored, empty, rattling mind. There is a quaint story attached to one of the verses spoken by the Buddha in the Dhammapada, a collection of the Buddhas sayings. ❖ A certain Tambadathika had been the king's executioner for forty-five years. ❖ He had retired and had asked one of the Buddhas chief disciples, Sariputta, to receive alms food at his home. Sariputta was one of the two chief disciples of the Buddha. ❖ He was known as the General of the Dhamma. ❖ After he had eaten, the Elder gave a talk about the Dhamma, but he could see that Tambadathika was very agitated and unable to concentrate. ❖ Tambadathika explained that memories of all the deaths he had caused as executioner was the reason for his agitation. ❖ Sariputta asked him if he was the one who had decided they had to be executed. ❖ He said that had been the king's work and that he himself had never wanted to kill anyone. ❖ He had done so because he was ordered to. ❖ He had had no option. ❖ Sariputta told him that if that were so, he was not guilty of murder as such since it had never been his intention to execute the condemned. Tambadathika ❖ was greatly relieved in his heart. ❖ That same afternoon, it seems, he was accidentally killed by a cow. ❖ When the Buddha heard of this, he said that although Tambadathika had followed an unwholesome profession, because of the Dhamma he had heard, he had been reborn in a place where he would be able to handle the results of his actions much better. ❖ Then he uttered this verse concerning the teaching of the Dhamma:

Better than an thousand words that are senseless  
And unconnected with the realisation of Nibbana,  
Is a single word of sense  
If upon hearing it, one is calmed.

These days, this concept of useless talk is very much overlooked. ❖ If we examine our media: the TV programmes, the serials and soap operas, the newspapers, ❖ so much of it is filling our minds with hogwash. ❖ Don't you think?

Finally there's wrong action, the final three. ❖ The first is not to kill any living being and it also includes not doing them any harm. ❖ The second is not to steal which is phrased as 'not taking what is not freely given'. The third is sensual misconduct such as gluttony, drunkenness and ❖ self-indulgent sexuality. ❖ These days the whole area of sexuality is very confused. There are fundamental Christian sects for whom sex is a bad thing in itself. And there is the libertine view that their personal freedom to satisfy any desire means virtually a right to have sex on demand. ❖❖

In traditional Buddhist countries, sexual activity is seen as something limited within the bonds of marriage. ❖ In the west, since there is no consensus, it is best left to the individual

to decide what is unskilful and what is skilful in such behaviour. ❖ These are some of the questions that a Buddhist perspective would want to ask. ❖ What is the reason for the sexual pleasure? ❖ Is it just for self-indulgence? ❖ Is there any real affection involved in the relationship? ❖ Is it just habitual? ❖ Are the factors of reproduction being taken into account? The fundamental guiding principle is that of not doing harm. ❖ No matter how important sexual pleasure may have become for us in our culture, we need to investigate and see what is the outcome of all this sexual activity. ❖ What is the effect both within the mind and between people? We need to be quite truthful about it to ourselves. ❖ We need to be prepared to change if our experience and understanding asks for a change in behaviour. ❖ It is surprising, for instance, how many smokers until fairly recently would still say that the link between tobacco and cancer is not yet proved conclusively. ❖ Surely a warning signal should be enough, but such is the dependency, the craving, that people will kid themselves along ❖ - even to death!

These Ten Wrong Actions give us in some detail what the Buddha meant by Right Speech and Right Action in the Noble Eightfold Path. ❖ There is also included here part of Right Intention. ❖ And all of it naturally is included in Right Livelihood. ❖ It is interesting that the Buddha was all too aware of how much our jobs and work dominate our lives, how they affect our minds and social relationships. ❖ Wrong Livelihood is really an extension of Wrong Speech and Wrong Action, but it did give the Buddha the opportunity to pinpoint some trades which he said ought not to be practised. ❖ They will not come as any surprise to you. ❖ Dealing in arms and lethal weapons; dealing in animal slaughter; dealing in human beings (these days we might consider slave wages); making and selling intoxicating beverages (we can include here the whole drug trade); and finally dealing in poisons (including chemical and germ warfare of today). ❖ If we end up doing such work, it is good to refer to the story of Tambadathika so that we are not worried by false guilts and anxieties. ❖ If we find ourselves doing any job of work which we come to realise is harmful and we wish to leave, it is good to take into account all the consequences of such a move, such as effect upon income and family. ❖ It may mean we have to stay on in such work until other opportunities arise. Our search for other occupation must be vigorous, mind. ❖ And in the meantime we can take solace in the fact that our intentions are no longer to do harm. ❖ This takes patience. ❖ It means accepting one's karma, one's actual situation. It's of little help to take a lofty moralistic position, which, of course, is what people outside the situation often do. The relief lies in the fact that once we have left such unwholesome work, upon the leaving, no more unwholesome kamma is being created.

❖ May the Teachings of the Buddha shed light into your life!

May you quickly attain the Supreme Goal!

SUMMARY

