

The Fourth Noble Truth - Morality - Sīla

Bhante Bodhidhamma · A Foundation Course in Buddhism · 20:08

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 on to 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 practiced by one who has gone forth from the world. What are these two? That which is to do with passions and pleasure, 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 *nibbāna*. What then is this middle path? It is the noble eightfold 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 and desires leads to liberation.

The middle path lies between these two in this sense, that 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 the body's 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, contented.

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 *nibbāna*, then we can say that by destroying the very roots of our discontent, the path now completely transcends the other two. And indeed, that is one way of describing the Buddhist saint or *arahant*, one who is beyond self-indulgence and self-mortification.

The Noble Eightfold 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 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 North India, around 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 formulae.

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 aspect. Positive morality, virtue, will be dealt with next time.

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, realizing 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. 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 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 and others. The second is the positive morality, what we ought to do for our 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 understanding or knowing the law of kamma. In this negative morality, this means that unskillful 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've got away with some unskillful 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 whinging, complaining, bored, empty, rattling mind.

There is a quaint story attached to one of the verses spoken by the Buddha in the Dhammapada, which is the collection of the Buddha's sayings. A certain Tambadatika had been the king's executioner for 45 years. He had retired and had asked one of the Buddha's 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 Dharma, but he could see that Tambadataka was very agitated and unable to concentrate.

Tambadataka 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 that had been the king's work, and that he himself had never really 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. Tambadataka 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 Tambadatika 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 Dharma. Better than a thousand words that are senseless and unconnected with the realization of Nibbāna 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 programs, the serials, soap operas and 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 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 sex on demand. Interestingly, the occasion of AIDS has brought about a rethink of sorts. One can only hope it is not going to result in a vindictive witch hunt and a return to the bad old days of repression.

In traditional Buddhist countries, sexual activity is seen as something limited within the bonds of marriage. In the West, since there is no general consensus, it is best left to the individual to decide what is unskillful and what is skillful 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 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 to 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 will 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 traits which he said ought not to be practiced. 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 also include here the whole drug trade—and finally dealing in poisons, including chemical and germ warfare of today.

If we find ourselves doing such work, it is good to refer to the story of Tambadatika, 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 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 kamma, 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 comes in the fact that once we have left such unwholesome work, upon the leaving, no more unwholesome kamma is being created.

Finally, a word about lay practice in Theravāda tradition. All lay Buddhists take what's called the Five Precepts as training rules. It is important to remember that the Buddha was not prescriptive. These aren't commandments with attached penalties. These are rules of conduct, which are the first step on the path leading to the purification of the mind. They are training rules lay Buddhists take upon themselves. They try to keep them as best they can, though of course there will be times lack of attentiveness or lack of willpower will cause them to break the training rules. They are phrased as follows. I undertake the training rule to refrain from harming any living being, taking what is not freely given, misusing the senses, wrong speech, taking drugs or drinks that tend to cloud the mind.

Finally, it is necessary to discuss the role of guilt, sorrow and penance in Buddhism. Guilt is simply the knowledge that we have done something wrong and usually accompanying this insight are the feelings of shame and fear of the consequences. This in Buddhism is quite proper. Feeling sorry, however, is only wholesome if it leads to the resolution to put right what is wrong and to resolve not to do such a thing again.

If, for instance, I've given somebody a bad name, I'm guilty of doing harm. I'm afraid the person will find out. I'm ashamed of what I've done. Acknowledging this, I tell others I was wrong to say what I said. I might even feel it necessary to tell the wronged person. Having done this, I resolve not to slander again. If shame and fear keep on arising, I should just observe this, especially in meditation, and remind myself that these feelings are the unwholesome results of unskillful action. In that way they become great teachers for us. I should remind myself that I have done what I can to put things right, that I will without doubt have to accept the consequences of what I've done. Indulging these feelings of shame or fear produces neurosis. It is best not to give them any importance.

Now as for penance, if it means piling more suffering on top of myself as punishment, then according to the Buddha, this is not only unnecessary, it could be harmful, in that it might develop cruel and

self-destructive tendencies. Whether I like it or not, because of the law of kamma, I will reap the sour fruits of my action. Isn't that enough? What I must do to sweeten these fruits a little is to put an end as best I can to the effects of my wrong speech, determine never to slander again, and resolve to cultivate an attitude of seeing the best in people.

In this way the Buddha has given directions as to how to start on the Noble Eightfold Path, leading to the end of suffering. We need to purify our habits. This moral code is a set of guidelines that help us to rid ourselves of such unwholesome habits of thought, speech and action. We need to couple this with the practice of positive morality virtue, and this is formulated in Buddhism as the Ten Perfections. In this way, the foundation is laid for mental development and insight wisdom, the experience of the end of suffering, nibbāna.

Well, I hope you found this talk useful, interesting and helpful. May all of you be happy and peaceful. May all of you attain the nibbānic peace within.

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