

Sila, Ethics, Skilful Activity

Perhaps the two most commonly known formulations of the Buddhist path are the Noble Eightfold Path and the Threefold Path of Ethics, Meditation and Wisdom which can be overlaid upon it. We have covered a lot about meditation in the past weeks and would now like to take step back and look at the topic of ethics as understood in Buddhism. Indeed ethical observance can be seen as the foundation of Buddhist practice.



As one can see from the arrangement of the Threefold Path above left, ethical observance or *Sila* in Pali and Sanskrit, forms the foundation of the structure and wisdom the pinnacle with meditation linking them.

In order to realise **wisdom** in the Buddhist sense, we need to cultivate a mind that is clear and aware, a mind that is progressively free of ego, selfishness, fixed views, fear, craving and aversion, a mind that is able to reflect the truth of our experience like a perfect mirror, or like perfectly still clear water, free of obscuration and defilement, a mind where **skilful mental states** predominate.

We cultivate such a mind, determinedly and patiently over time through the practice of **meditation**, cultivating awareness, calm, clarity, positive emotion and open heartedness, whilst also becoming more aware of our own internal landscape of mental and emotional habits, views, hopes, fears and so on. In time, with self knowledge and positivity, we are able to cleanse the murky mirror, or if you like, calm the turbulent waters, of our mind, so that we can see and understand more clearly.

Underpinning all of this is our behaviour, our **action and communication** in the world. Buddhism teaches that if we act in ways that stem from craving, selfish desire, hatred, aversion and mental and emotional confusion, then suffering will inevitably follow, for ourselves and for the world around us. This may be quite subtle, to the degree that until we take a step back and maybe learn to meditate we may not see this for ourselves. Maybe some sense of this is what has brought us to meditation and Buddhism, although we might not have realised that at the time. On the other hand it might be quite gross and very apparent to us, manifesting in anger, deceit, greed, hatred and many others ways that we could name.

Happily, the reverse is also true! If we act in ways that do not stem from such states of mind and instead flow from kindness, generosity, compassion, courage, patience, clarity and so on, then happiness and contentment follow, for ourselves and for others.

Buddhism doesn't class these poles of behaviour as good or bad, nor does it issue commandments regarding them, rather Buddhism speaks in terms of **skilful** and **unskilful** states of mind and activity. **Skilful actions** (Pali - *kusala*) stem from positive states of mind and conduce towards happiness, wisdom and Enlightenment. **Unskilful actions** (Pali - *akusala*), stem from negative and confused states of mind and conduce to suffering. This principle may be found in the first two verses of a famous Buddhist text known as the Dhammapada (loosely translates as *Path of the Dhamma*).

1. Experiences are preceded by mind, led by mind, and produced by mind. If one speaks or acts with an impure mind, suffering follows even as the cartwheel follows the hoof of the ox (drawing the cart).

2. Experiences are preceded by mind, led by mind, and produced by mind. If one speaks or acts with a pure mind, happiness follows like a shadow that never departs.

As you know, we salute the **Three Jewels of Buddhism** at the start of each evening, the **Buddha**, **Dhamma** and **Sangha**. This teaching is a fundamental expression of the Dhamma, both in its sense of the teaching of the Buddha and as an expression of the nature of reality, this *is* the way things are and it is a truth that is observable in our own lives. Through such observation and realising this for ourselves we can become happier, wiser and so develop confidence and faith in the path.

So just to relate this back to the **Threefold Path** for a moment, we meditate in order to cultivate the qualities of mind needed to apprehend truth, to realise **wisdom**. However in order to progress in **meditation** we need to condition our mind and emotions through **skilful action**. If we are acting unskilfully, particularly grossly so, it *is* going to inhibit our ability to meditate and to progress in meditation. If we think back to the similes for mind affected by the hindrances to meditation we can perhaps reflect upon this, the angry mind, heated and bubbling, the mind affected by craving, coloured and obscured and so on.

This cultivation or conditioning does not move only in one direction, nor do we have to always act perfectly before we can begin to meditate, or similarly be able to meditate at some profound height before we even begin to gain wisdom. Rather, our efforts and experience in meditation will begin to affect our actions and communication for the better and, if we are mindful, we will begin observe this, take note and gain a little wisdom through it. So the three aspects of the path are in a constant dynamic relationship as illustrated by the arrows on page one.

So what constitutes skilful activity? Well, for lay Buddhists at least (ordained or monastic Buddhists undertake additional precepts) there are five very clear principles to follow and these are listed below.

The Five Precepts

I undertake the training principle of abstaining from taking life

I undertake the training principle of abstaining from taking the not-given

I undertake the training principle of abstaining from sexual misconduct

I undertake the training principle of abstaining from false speech

I undertake the training principle of abstaining from intoxication.

Positive Counterparts

With deeds of loving kindness,
I purify my body

With open-handed generosity,
I purify my body

With stillness, simplicity, and contentment,
I purify my body

With truthful communication,
I purify my speech

With mindfulness, clear and radiant,
I purify my mind

At the beginning of this paper I stated that 'ethical observance (*Sila*) can be seen as the foundation of Buddhist practice' and indeed it is undertaking these Precepts in the context of wholeheartedly Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels that makes one a Buddhist.