

Perfect Action

I am going to start the main part of the talk this evening in a moment by quoting directly from Sangharakshita in his book *The Noble Eightfold Path or Vision and Transformation* if you have an older edition.

First though I would like to recount a short tale from the Buddhist tradition of an exchange between a famous Buddhist teacher monk called Bodhidharma and the Emperor of China.

The Emperor was desperate to know the deep and complex teachings of Buddhism and had asked him to travel many miles to learn from him. The Emperor had prepared the finest foods and waited for some time for the teacher to speak. Finally Bodhidharma said 'The essence of Buddhism is...

... cease to do evil, learn to do good, and purify your heart.'

The Emperor was outraged and said 'but a child could understand that!!' to which the teacher laughed and said, 'yes, but even an old man of eighty is unable to put it into practice!'

So now on with the talk and to quote Sangharakshita...

According to Buddhist tradition there are two kinds of action, skilful and unskilful.

Unskilful actions are defined as those which are rooted in craving or selfish desire; in hatred or aversion; and in mental confusion, bewilderment, spiritual obfuscation, or ignorance.

Skilful actions are those which are free from craving, free from hatred, free from mental confusion; positively speaking they are motivated instead by generosity, or the impulse to share and to give, by love and compassion, and by understanding.

This very simple distinction at once places the whole question of morality in a very different light. The moral life becomes a question of acting from what is best within us: acting from our deepest understanding and insight, our widest and most comprehensive love and compassion.

We are now in a position to begin to see what is meant by Perfect Action. This is not just action which accords with some external standard or criterion, but action which expresses Perfect Vision and Perfect Emotion.

For those who have not been here on previous weeks..

Perfect Vision - more than just an intellectual grasp of the nature of reality as communicated by the Dharma but a personal, direct experience and recognition of the nature of existence which affects us deeply

Perfect Emotion - the integration of this vision into our emotional life, into our depths, transforming us in the process and giving us the will and motivation to wholeheartedly engage with the spiritual life

But what if we don't yet have Perfect Vision or Perfect Emotion? How can our actions be perfected? Well this is where the Buddhist Precepts or 'training principles' come in, they give us a set of guidelines for behaviour, including of course speech which we looked at last week. Examples as it were of how we would act *if we were* free from greed, hatred and delusion and if we possessed to a high degree the qualities of a Buddha - wisdom, compassion, patience, courage, clarity and so on.

One could argue that by practising generosity for example, knowing that one's motives are not entirely pure, knowing that one's mental states are not entirely purified then to that degree one is not acting skilfully. This is likely to be the reality of our actions for quite a long time but it is important to recognise the skilful aspect of trying, of trying to practise the Dharma, of trying to act in ways that are beneficial to ourselves and others. It is only through trying in this way that we gradually begin to reshape our habitual feelings thoughts and actions, and we *will* reshape them if we persevere.

As our states of mind condition our actions, so our actions condition our mental states, as Sangharakshita says....

...to the extent that you are not Enlightened, then the observance of the Silas or Precepts will help you to experience for yourself the state of mind of which they are, normally, the expression.

...the Silas (Precepts) are, in reality, just patterns of ethical behaviour. They are the natural expression of certain skilful mental states. Since they are the natural expression of skilful mental states, we can find out to what extent we have developed those states by checking our behaviour against the Silas.

(we have previously explored this area a little on a previous evening and there are some notes on the web site entitled 'Sila, Ethics, Skilful Activity' which may be useful to refer back to at some point)

So perhaps we can see how the term 'training principles' is quite an apt one to apply to the precepts. If we want to do anything in life we have to learn, have to train, if we want to become Enlightened, free of greed, hatred and delusion and possessing the qualities of the Buddha, we need to train and this in a sense is the training regime.

So let us now take a look at the five precepts undertaken by lay, that is to say non-ordained Buddhists.

A very important point to note is that for each kind of action that we are undertaking to abstain from there is a corresponding positive activity to cultivate, to aspire to. Often it is only the stopping that is communicated, don't do this, don't do that and so on and it is essential to know and understand the cultivation of positive qualities is of equal importance. Again, coming back to reshaping our habitual tendencies, our volitional energy, we need these positive counterparts to develop into, to engage our energy, all that Perfect or at least positive emotion with.

The Five Precepts (Silas)

Positive Counterparts (Dharmas)

I undertake the training principle of abstaining from taking life

With deeds of loving kindness, I purify my body

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

With open-handed generosity, I purify my body

I undertake the training principle of abstaining from sexual misconduct

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

I undertake the training principle of abstaining from false speech

With truthful communication, I purify my speech

I undertake the training principle of abstaining from intoxication

With mindfulness, clear and radiant, I purify my mind