

Ethics, Meditation and Wisdom

An Introduction to the series 'Not About being Good' at the Hornchurch Buddhist Group September 2014 by Saddhabhaya



Many people, including myself, take up meditation with an idea that it will help them to become calmer, happier, kinder and perhaps even wiser, and this can indeed be the case. However in order to achieve these goals we need to change ourselves. We cannot simply add these states to ourselves just as we are, well perhaps we can in a limited way but the results will be frustratingly temporary.

Perhaps *the* foundation teaching of Buddhism, of the Dharma, is that everything, including ourselves, *is* change, *is* not fixed, *is* potential, which means that we *can* become calmer, happier, kinder and wiser, in short more like the Buddha, and in time can attain what the Buddha attained.

Building upon this foundation teaching, the next key teaching is that this change is not random, rather it happens in accordance with supporting conditions. In reality the web of conditions supporting any event or state is far too complex to fathom but here *are* trends which the Buddha pointed out that we can observe for ourselves, within our own experience.

Very simply, these are that actions stemming from mental states of greed, hatred and delusion result in suffering, whereas actions stemming from contentment, kindness and wisdom result in happiness. These processes are natural, there is no question of judgment or punishment, rather, as the first two verses of the Dhammapada point out, our positive and our negative experience of life stems from our states of mind and the actions that follow from those states of mind.

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).

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.

When we talk about actions we are referring to actions of body, speech and mind. It might seem unusual that we regard thoughts as actions but if consider the effects of dwelling on anger or some other negative state we can see that it does contribute to and sustain our mental states. Similarly dwelling on the positive such as in the metta bhavana meditation has a positive effect upon our states of heart and mind. Both are in fact decisive actions, with mindfulness we can nip, for example, anger in the bud, especially as we become more familiar with its effect upon ourselves and upon those around us.

So, if we could just abandon the harmful kind of actions, which we'll call unskillful and adopt the beneficial kind of actions which we'll call skillful, we'll attain our goal of becoming become calmer, happier, wiser and more kind. Sounds simple but is it?

The problem is that we are very complex beings, impermanent and dynamic we may be in body and mind but it certainly doesn't feel like that most of the time. In reality we are a complex bundle of hopes, fears, habits, views, opinions, likes, dislikes and so on. Traits laid down and ingrained by many years of conditioning. We may be able to stretch our behaviour in a positive direction for a certain amount of time but when we are not careful, when we are not mindful, we kind of ping back to our former shape.

So this brings us back to change, to really change ourselves we need to get at the roots of these habits, responses, opinions and so on and see what they stem from. We need to become wise to our own nature and with it the nature of reality, as we do this, little by little, we can become free of conditioned responses, more able to act from wisdom, from clarity of mind, to live skillfully.

An important facet of the Dharma is that we are able to see and know change and potential for ourselves, we become able to see for ourselves the results of our actions, those which bring us freedom, happiness and contentment and those which cause us, and others, suffering.

So, pausing for a moment, I have mentioned skillful and unskillful actions, observing our own processes of mind and learning from that observation, three things which together make up the fundamental formula for Buddhist practice, for the Dharma life:

Ethics – Meditation – Wisdom

Just as each of the elements of the Triratna, the Three Jewels or Refuges, Buddha, Dharma and Sangha are essential, such is the case with Ethics, Meditation and Wisdom

One could try to just practice meditation and indeed it can be beneficial to a degree but if one were to try to do this in the context of an unskillful life, a life in which unethical actions predominate, then the likely result is greater discomfort since meditation will shine a light on one's inner landscape whatever that landscape may look like. This will in fact be the case for all of us from time to time, until Enlightenment our ethical practice will always be a work in progress.

Looking at this the other way round, the more skillful life becomes, the more ethically sound, the more positive our experience of meditation will be, to quote Ratnaghosa (<http://ratnaghosa.fwbo.net/>)...

"If we lead an ethical life we will have a clear conscience and a clear conscience is a basic condition for making progress in meditation. According to Buddhism ethics are a description of the intelligent way to behave. Buddhism speaks of skillful and unskillful actions rather than in terms of right and wrong. To be ethical then is to be skillful, to be intelligent"

So the relationship between ethics and meditation is hopefully clear, the relationship with wisdom follows in that it is with a clear and calm mind that we begin to see the patterns in our action and experience, without this clarity we are unable to see clearly. So wisdom isn't just a case of acquiring knowledge and views, it is the result of a direct seeing into, insight into our experience, into its dynamic nature and the effect of the conditions that we place ourself in.

The threefold path of Ethics, Meditation and Wisdom could be seen as a virtuous circle where effort and progress in any area influences the others. It is certainly an iterative process rather than a hierarchy, you don't for example wait until you have perfected skillful action before commencing meditation, if we did we might never take up the practice!

I haven't mentioned anything about rules or even about right and wrong, as I mentioned previously, the Buddha taught that our intentions and actions can either lead to happiness for ourselves and others or to suffering for ourselves and others based upon the natural phenomena of conditionality.

The guidelines for skillful, ethical action in Buddhism are communicated in the form of precepts, or training principles, and it is important to note that it is not just about suggestions of what one should refrain from, e.g. killing, lying, stealing and so on, but just as importantly, perhaps even more importantly, it is about the behaviours that one should cultivate, kindness, generosity, mindfulness and so on. Ethics in Buddhism are not about repression or stifling our humanity, rather they are about expansiveness, vitality, connection with all that lives and fulfilling our potential as self-aware beings. In short they are a training programme for becoming a Buddha

Whether we decide to take up and test this teaching for ourselves, the latter being something that the Buddha exhorted his followers to do, is entirely up to us, indeed one way in which the Dharma is described is that it is of the nature of a personal invitation.

We could of course spend a lot of time discussing what is, in our view, right and wrong in the world and what should be done about it, what should be our attitudes and responses, but that is not immediately pertinent to matter at hand or to our engagement with the Dharma life.

I hope that has given an introduction to the nature and the flavour of what we mean when we talk about ethics in Buddhism, what we are going to be doing over the coming weeks, using Subhadramati's book 'Not About Being Good' is to explore the practical implications of this in some detail.

