

Buddhist Ethics – Introducing the Five Precepts - Feb 2016



In Buddhism, actions of body, speech and mind are not so much judged good or bad (or even evil) but rather are referred to as skilful or unskilful. Skilful actions conduce to wellbeing and unskilful actions to suffering, in both cases for ourselves and for others.

Buddhism teaches that all actions and the content of our experience stem from our states of mind, states of mind characterised by greed, hatred and delusion result in unskilful action and hence suffering, states of mind characterised by contentment, kindness and wisdom (note: not necessarily intellectual brilliance) result in skilful actions and hence wellbeing. We can find this in the first two verses of the Dhammapada.

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. Dhammapada Trans. Sangharakshita.

Hence the emphasis in Buddhist practice upon meditation, observing our own mind and transforming our habitual mental states to be ever more positive. However Buddhist practice is not just meditation, rather it is a **Threefold Path of Ethics, Meditation and Wisdom**, each successively supporting the other. We find this relationship explained in one of the last teachings of the Buddha.

'Such and such is morality (sila),' he (the Buddha) is reported as saying, 'such and such is meditation (samadhi), such and such is wisdom (panna). Great becomes the fruit, great the advantage of meditation, when it is set round with morality. Great becomes the fruit, great the advantage of wisdom, when it is set round with meditation. Maha Parinibbana Sutta Trans. Sangharakshita

The relationship is multi faceted with wisdom (each little personal realisation) informing our meditation and ethics, meditation informing our ethics and so on. So it is very clear that if we wish to make progress in meditation and cultivate the wisdom that will bring us (and others) wellbeing we need to continually reflect upon our ethics, our everyday actions of body speech and mind.

The fundamental formulation of the Buddhist approach to ethics is given below, note especially the term 'training principle', this connects us back to the concepts of skilful and unskilful. It is not about following rules, rather it is about learning to live ever skilfully.

The Five Precepts (Silas)

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 (Dharmas)

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

