

# 1. General introduction to ethics

*(Incorporates edited excerpts from Sangharakshita's lectures: "perfect vision", "right action", "karma and rebirth", and his seminar on the Metta Sutta)*

## A context for ethical practice

Suppose one day we catch a glimpse of a snow capped mountain peak. It is so beautiful that we deeply desire to go there, to be on the virgin snows of the mountain. Even though it is far away we decide to begin the journey to it.

As we travel along for most of the time the peak is out of view. But every so often during our long journey we catch new glimpses of the peak. Each time this happens Once it fills us with confidence and inspiration. We re-affirm that however long the journey, how difficult the terrain, we will never give up.

This story is an allegory for spiritual life. The glimpses of the beautiful snow capped peak are like profound glimpses of aspects of reality. They correspond to the first "limb" of the Buddha's "eightfold path" (perfect vision).

The process of travelling towards the peak corresponds to the collective practice of the remaining seven limbs of the eightfold path. [The remaining seven limbs are (2) perfect resolve/emotion, (3) perfect speech, (4) perfect action, (5) perfect livelihood, (6) perfect effort, (7) perfect mindfulness and (8) perfect meditation.]

Although all allegories and similes have their shortcomings, and should not be pressed too far, this story of journeying to the mountain illustrates well how spiritual life has two aspects:

- the process of clarifying and deepening our wisdom (ie. cultivating "perfect vision", the first "limb" of the eightfold path); and
- the process of transforming all aspects of ourselves in accordance with our deepest vision or wisdom (ie. practicing the remaining seven limbs).

These two aspects support one another, as the story illustrates. Some vision of the peak was essential to get us started on our journey, and subsequent glimpses enabled us to get our bearings and provided inspiration for the journey. On the other hand, it was only by actually making the journey that we came closer to the mountain and were therefore able to see it

more and more often, in greater detail, and from different angles.

The practice of ethics is part of the second of the two aspects of spiritual life. It is something that will transform our mind. In a narrower sense it corresponds to the fourth stage of the "eightfold path" - which is sometimes translated as "perfect action" or "right action". However some of the other limbs of the eightfold path could also be considered part of ethical practice.

## What makes one action ethical and another unethical?

What is it that makes some acts ethical and others unethical? Is there any such universally valid criterion in the light of which we can say this is ethical, that is unethical? This is a very practical and important question, because whether we like it or not we all have to act every hour, almost every minute.

Ethics is not primarily about acting in accordance with an external set of rules (although rules may have a value as guidelines). According to Buddhism actions are skilful (*kusala*) ie. ethical, or unskilful (*akusala*) ie. unethical, according to the state of mind with which performed. In other words the criterion for ethics is not theological, the criterion is psychological. As far as Far Eastern ethics is concerned, whether Buddhist, Taoist or Confucian, this criterion is the only one, and it is universally applied.

It is significant that the terms skilful and unskilful - not good or bad - are used because it suggests that morality is a matter of intelligence, and not just one of good intentions and good feelings. You can't be skilful unless you've got some sort of practical intelligence, unless you understand, unless you can explore possibilities. We've been told that "the path to hell is paved with good intentions", but you could hardly say that "the path to hell was paved with skilfulness".

Unskilful actions are those which are rooted in craving (selfish thirst), in hatred (antagonism) and/or mental confusion (ignorance). These are the three "root poisons", represented respectively by the cock, snake and pig at the centre of the Wheel of Life.

On the other hand skilful actions are those that are free from craving, hatred and mental confusion, or

positively speaking those motivated by the impulse to share, by love and by understanding. Perhaps the defining characteristic of skilful action is its freedom from narrow self-interest. If you are a morally skilful person, you see the suffering and disappointment that arise from narrow and deluded self-interest, especially your own; and you try to act, speak, and think accordingly.

The ethical life is therefore a matter of acting from what is best in us; from our deepest understanding and our most all-embracing love.

### **External actions do not in themselves indicate ethical behaviour**

Different people's patterns of external behaviour may be identical, but the mental states behind their behaviour may be quite different. For example, suppose three people abstain from theft. The first person may like to steal but doesn't out of fear of the police. This is not really ethical activity, although no doubt society does need such deterrents as the police and the law. The second person has an inclination towards dishonesty but restrains himself because they are trying to lead a spiritual life. The restraint has a positive effect on them. The third person has no inclination to dishonesty.

### **Karma**

The law of karma underpins ethics. Literally karma means "action": it is what we do by our own effort. (It is not what fate just happens to deal up to us.)

The law of karma says if we act skillfully we will become a better and happier person, and if we act unskillfully the converse will happen. According to the law of karma, even what we think will have consequences. But obviously it is better not to act out unskillful ideas as this will reinforce them.

The term karma is distinguished from the fruit of karma. The fruit or consequence is known as karma-vipaka.

The law of karma is a sub-set the law of conditionality. It is conditionality operating in the realm of volition. (Volition occurs when we choose to do something, or not to do something. The impulses that drive this may be a type of yearning, ambition, aspiration, determination, will or desire. The impulses may be skilful or unskillful). Incidentally choosing not to give

attention to something, like not bothering to pay attention to the date when the warrant of fitness on our car expires, has its own karmic consequences.

### **Irrational guilt**

Sometimes following ethical standards gets mixed up with feelings of irrational guilt. Irrational guilt is a very negative thing. It is quite a complex phenomenon, even though it is so pervasive in our Western culture. It involves:

1. doing or feeling something that somebody else (or God, or some group of people) do not approve of; and
2. fear that if you are found out the person(s) who does not want you to do or feel that thing will punish you by withdrawing their love; and
3. emotional dependence on the person(s) who you think will disapprove. (Because of the emotional dependence the threat of the person(s) withdrawing their love seems terrible.)

Somebody can feel guilty about something (such as a homosexual impulse) even though they do not rationally consider it is wrong.

### **Ethical guidelines**

Having a set of ethical guidelines to live by is very helpful to most people. Without them we tend to get lost in a maze of self analysis about whether particular impulses are coming from a predominantly skilful or unskilful state of mind.

There are various different sets of ethical guidelines in the Buddhist tradition. Some guidelines do not seem applicable today, or may only be helpful to certain types of people in certain types of environment. A distinction can be made between "conventional morality" (based on the customs of a society or group) and "natural morality" based on the principle of karma. Conventional morality may or may not coincide with natural morality.

Perhaps the best known set of precepts in Buddhism is the set of five recited after the third verse of the Monday evening ritual (puja). These will be studied in detail next week.

Although some ethical precepts/guidelines were recommended by the Buddha, they were never laid down authoritatively in the way the ten commandments of the Old Testament were laid

down by God. The Buddha said that:

- to the extent that you are Enlightened you will naturally behave according to the guidelines; and
- observance of the guidelines will help you experience the state of mind of which the guidelines are the natural expression.

For example, a Buddha is free from craving, but perhaps we have a craving for a certain type of food; perhaps it's plum cake. Suppose, as an experiment, we stop eating the food we crave. We close the food cupboard and resist temptation. If we do this we may suffer for a while, but if we stick it out those visions of plum cake will eventually subside. The craving is gradually reduced. Eventually we may never think of that particular thing. So our abstention becomes no longer a self-imposed disciplinary measure, but an expression of the state of non-craving to which we have attained.

It is important not just to concentrate on what we should avoid but also on what is to be encouraged. The five precepts have both a negative and a positive formulation. The negative form provides guidance on what is to be avoided, and the positive form provides guidance on what is to be encouraged.

The ethical life is not something that can just be learnt from following a book of rules. Although study of ethical principles is helpful, most people also need to learn from the example of others.

### **Playfulness**

In Indian literature if you are compared with an elephant it is highly complimentary. They say for instance of a beautiful woman that she walks just like an elephant. This does not mean that she is clumsy or a bit well built, but that she has a graceful, stately movement. It is a great compliment.

Shantideva says the bodhisattva (the spiritually advanced person) is also like an elephant because the elephant is very playful. Elephants love to bathe in lotus ponds and squirt water over themselves and trumpet gaily, and pluck up great bunches of lotus flowers to eat. As soon as the elephant has finished playing and sporting in one pond they plunge into another pond with equal pleasure. In this way they pass the day very happily. Similarly the bodhisattva joyfully moves

from one endeavour to the next. The bodhisattva spontaneously (yet mindfully) expresses their selfless energy. Sometimes the bodhisattva's activity is spoken of in the Indian languages as a "*lila*", which means it's a game, its play.