

1. How do we know how best to behave?

A very important aspect of the Buddha's teaching lies in the area of **ethics**. Let's be clear – this isn't the same thing as what might be called 'morality' in other faiths – it doesn't have anything to do with our being told how we should behave. Instead, Buddhist ethics are an application of the law of 'Dependent Arising and Cessation' that we met last week, in the specific area of human relations. We can summarise the Buddhist ethical code in the maxim "actions have consequences". Just as all things arise in dependence on pre-conditions, so every human action – absolutely without exception – has its resulting outcomes.

This ethical dimension of Dependent Arising and Cessation is often described as the **law of karma**. *Karma* generally means action, but specifically an action that is a matter of human choice. In other words, *karma* is concerned with our **intentions**, so we can say that Buddhist ethics are the 'ethics of intention'. It's very important to recognise that there are various *other* sorts of actions that also have consequences. For example, being exposed to a virus can cause us to become ill, but this is unlikely to have anything to do with our intentions or the way we exercise them. It's therefore important to remember that the law of *karma* is only one aspect of the wider law of Dependent Arising and Cessation.

In considering how *karma* affects us, we can simply say that an ethical action (in other words, one carried out as the expression of ethical intentions) is one that results in happiness, for oneself and for others. An unethical action is one that results in suffering.

There are three kinds of ethical action, according to Buddhist thought – physical action, speech, and acts of the mind. The relevance of the last of these is that an ethical thought will result in happiness, while an unethical thought will result in suffering. Wishing someone well, for example, makes us feel happy, and we'll probably do things to try to help that person. If we wish harm to someone, however, such a state of mind is an unpleasant one, and if we act from that state, we'll cause more suffering.

The mind is in fact the most important of the three areas of action, because our physical actions and our speech are expressions of our mental states. One of the most famous Buddhist writings, the *Dhammapada*, begins with the words:

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 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.

2. The terminology of ethics

Buddhism doesn't speak in absolute terms of good and bad, but in terms of **skilful** and unskilful actions. This means that our actions are not judged to be good or bad (much less still wicked or evil) but only relatively skilful or unskilful. This also means that with practice we can become more and more skilled in action.

As we've seen already, there are three roots of unskilful behaviour – **greed, hatred and ignorance**. All unskilful mental states grow from these roots, so it's important to understand them. They are unskilful because when we act from these states of mind we suffer, or we cause others to suffer.

1. **Greed** is the desire for experiences and possessions that you don't need for your continued well-being and happiness. Hunger is not greed, but is a natural bodily function that lets you know that you need to eat. If we didn't obey the feeling of hunger, we would eventually die. The same is true for thirst. We also experience desires for communication, beauty, truth and freedom, which are all, according to Buddhism, healthy desires that don't result in suffering. Greed is a response to feelings of inner emptiness, and we often try to 'fill' this emptiness with new possessions or experiences such as food, drink or drugs. Greed is unskilful, not because it's evil or wicked, but simply because it leads to suffering.
2. **Hatred** is an attitude of hostility towards others, often because they obstruct the gratification of our greed. Sometimes we feel hatred towards someone or something that threatens our well-being in some way. Whatever the reason for our hostility, it tends to make the situation worse, causing more suffering.
3. **Ignorance** is the sum total of our deluded beliefs – beliefs that cause suffering when acted on. Examples are the belief that happiness will be achieved if we can somehow get everything we want, or that our best interests are served by 'looking after number one'. Such beliefs cause suffering - again, not because they are evil, but because they are based on a mistaken notion of reality.

The opposites of these three unskilful roots are (1) contentment and generosity; (2) friendliness and kindness; and (3) awareness. When we act from these states we are more likely to bring about happiness, both for ourselves and for others.

This, then, is the basis of the language of ‘unskillful’ and ‘skillful’ actions – the first type add to the total of suffering (for ourselves and others), while the latter add to the total of happiness (again, for both ourselves and others). As we saw a little earlier, this distinction has nothing to do with passing judgement – that, in itself, could be seen as an unhelpful, unskillful action. Rather, it’s to do with weighing up the options before us and doing our best to understand which of these is most likely to reduce suffering and increase happiness. Another sort of language that helps in this scheme of things is that of ‘reactive’ and ‘creative’. When we act relatively unthinkingly, merely in a reflexive response to something that has been done to us, we are being reactive and therefore (usually) fairly unskillful. On the other hand, if we think about the various conditions that contribute to a situation and try to add to that situation with intelligence, we are being creative and (hopefully) more skillful. Of course, it can be very hard to spot the most skillful, creative response in some situations (about which we shall say more next week!).

3. The *mettā bhāvanā* meditation – more challenging relationships

The *mettā bhāvanā* is meant to work on all of our relationships, not just ourselves and our friends! In the third and fourth stages we move into progressively more difficult types of relationship – both of which we can be sure we have, even if the examples whom we choose might change over time.

Stage 3: the ‘neutral’ person

This is an important stage because so many of the people with whom we interact are just ‘acquaintances’ rather than people that we have any strong connection with (either positive or otherwise). For this reason, we sometimes refer to stage three as the stage of the ‘neutral person’. By its very nature, for this stage we could choose a wide range of people; examples might be friends of friends; neighbours whom we don’t know all that well; colleagues with whom we don’t work very directly; or people who provide services to us, such as serving us in a shop, working at our doctor’s or dentist’s surgery, delivering the post, or similar. There should be plenty of scope in this stage to bring in different people at different times (although we should really stick with just one example in a single meditation session).

The challenge, in bearing this sort of person to mind, is to connect with them as a human being, instead of regarding them in a purely utilitarian way. They are a complete person, just as we are, not just a means of delivering something that we want or need! We could try to recognise the gratitude we feel for whatever it is that they do for us. More than this, we could consider that, although we don’t know much about their lives, the most important things for them are probably very similar to the things that matter most to us. Just like us, what they care about most probably includes their loved ones, their health, being relatively comfortable and gaining some sort of fulfilment.

Stage 4: the person whom we find difficult

It's important to remember, in this stage in particular, to choose someone we can manage. In other words, choose someone who mildly irritates you, not someone who causes you to feel a lot of anger or deep feelings of resentment. As we build up the practice over time, we can then work with the stronger and deeper emotional tendencies involved with people who challenge us more seriously.

As with the previous stages, we are trying to contact the humanity that we share with the chosen person. For example, we can be sure that, just like ourselves:

- they experience pleasure and pain;
- they have hopes and fears;
- they want to love and be loved;
- they don't want to suffer.

The basic stories of our lives may be different but the emotions that we experience are the same. Seeing this, we can experience a sense of connectedness and a desire can emerge for them to be well, to be happy, not to suffer and to learn from life. If this sounds all too easy, we need to consider what stops us from experiencing a sense of connectedness with this person. There may actually be many contributing factors, but some examples may be:

- They have hurt us in some way.
- They are not acting in a way that we think they should.
- Pride – we think they are better than us or we are better than them.
- Jealousy – they have something that we want.
- Blame – we blame them for negative feelings that are really our own.

In beginning to change our attitude toward this person it is important to remember that we have sole responsibility for our emotional states - **we create them and we can change them**. This may be a very challenging statement to hear, so it's good to examine our experience to see if it is true.

4. What you could do in the week ahead

- Try to meditate six out of seven times a week. This week you might choose to concentrate on the first four stages of the *mettā bhāvanā*.
- Look for examples, in your everyday life, of choices that could be described as 'ethical' – in other words giving you a choice between unskilful or skilful, reactive or creative. Your examples could range from the trivial to the life-changing – but they're all valid!