

Ethical Sensitivity

By Gil Fronsdal

The ethical core of the Buddhist path is one of its most important features. Maturing on this path goes hand in hand with developing and strengthening this core.

Ethics is about both behavior and motivation. Regarding behavior, ethics addresses some of the most challenging, interesting, and at times confusing aspects of our lives, including sex, money, security, power, truth, and questions of life and death. As for motivation, ethics addresses some of the most beautiful aspects of the human heart; in particular, our capacity for love and freedom. Ethical maturity for Buddhists has less to do with moral values than with enhanced moral sensitivity. In fact, I believe that adhering to moral values alone can hinder the development of ethical maturity. Buddhism certainly does put great importance on moral values, including the precepts. Buddhism's cardinal ethical principle is to avoid causing harm. However, these values are often understood to be expressions of goodness flowing from a responsive heart, not rules of behavior originating in external sources of authority.

Stressing ethical sensitivity makes it easy to see the importance mindfulness has in Buddhist ethics. The greater our capacity for being present and attentive to both the world around us and to ourselves, the greater will be our understanding and empathy. Mindfulness also helps us to deal wisely with our fear, hate, greed, and other forces that impede our ethical judgment. As these forces are purified from the heart, its good qualities increasingly guide us in making ethical decisions.

Among the most important of these guiding qualities are freedom and compassion. Faced with an ethical choice, we can ask whether it both expresses compassion and helps move the heart to greater freedom. If we act from only one of these, however, our actions may be imbalanced by being too concerned with either others or with oneself. The presence of both protects us from this imbalance.

A liberated heart is an ethically pure heart. The impulse to cause harm brings with it a tightening, a limiting, a darkening of the heart. Relaxing and unfettering the heart is aligning the heart with its own purity. One of the most challenging Buddhist teachings is that nothing whatsoever is worth the cost of a contracted heart. Inner virtue is more valuable than anything we might gain from actions that will contract our heart.

A compassionate heart is an empathic heart. Empathy is heightened sensitivity to the suffering of others and concern for their welfare. Compassion not only connects us to others; it is a channel for the beautiful parts of ourselves that live in relationship to others. To dampen our compassion is to diminish ourselves.

Just as compassion and liberation support each other, so do ethical sensitivity and ethical strength. A strong commitment to ethical values and decisions can be dangerous if we haven't seen and felt deeply what is happening in the moment. And to be sensitive but powerless to act appropriately can lead to frustration, disappointment, and a sense of personal weakness and possibly to cynicism or despair.

Ethical strength is developed by exercising it. In some circumstances this means restraint; in others, action. Sometimes it entails learning to say no; sometimes it is saying yes. And in situations where it is not clear how to act, strength may take the form of remaining present and committed to understanding. Ethical sensitivity is developed by practicing mindfulness in all situations, but especially when an ethical choice is required. Buddhist teachings say that ethical decision-making holds the possibility of nourishing what is the best within our hearts. May our ethical sensitivity help us find that nourishment.