

The Equivalence
Of Ethics and Enlightenment
In
The Teachings of the Buddha

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Chapter 2 -Where There is Wisdom, There is Virtue: The Centrality of Ethics in the Teachings of the Buddha

Where there is virtue there is wisdom;
Where there is wisdom there is virtue.
- the Buddha¹

One common function of religions is to provide guidelines and teachings for how to live one's life. Equally, religious people commonly look toward their religion for teachings on how to live. Traditionally, Buddhism and Buddhists are no different. Buddhism offers an abundance of teachings on how to live a wise life and Buddhists have guided their lives by these teachings. Most prominently, Buddhist teachings have included such instructions as to not kill, steal, cause harm with sexuality, or lie. These are fairly universal standards of ethical behavior, not unique to Buddhism. Less obvious is that the Buddhist path to liberation, including enlightenment itself, can also be seen as an ethical path in that a central element of both path and liberation is the reduction of harm and the increase in states of well-being.

Buddhism is sometimes known as a "wisdom tradition" with its emphasis on attaining transformational understandings and insights. Wisdom, as a foundation of the Buddha's teachings and the key to the attainment of spiritual liberation, is not abstract knowledge disembodied from how we live. Rather, Buddhist wisdom is inseparable from behavior and therefore inseparable from ethics. For the Buddha, as quoted above, to be wise is to be virtuous; to be virtuous is to be wise. Just as the left hand washes the right while the right hand washes the left, so – the Buddha said – an ethical life purifies wisdom and wisdom purifies one's ethical life.² The two go hand-in-hand.

¹ DN 4.21

² DN 4.21-22

If one of the central features of an ethical life is avoiding causing harm and doing what promotes welfare, then the close connection between wisdom and ethics is seen in how the Buddha describes someone who has great wisdom:

“Wise people of great wisdom do not intend for their own affliction, for the affliction of others, or for the affliction of both. Rather, wise people think of their own welfare, the welfare of others, the welfare of both, and the welfare of the whole world. It is in this way that one is a wise person of great wisdom.”

- The Buddha (Numerical Discourses 4.186)

The Pali word for “affliction,” *byābādha*, also has the dictionary definitions of “evil,” “wrong,” or “hurt”. The Pali word for “welfare” is *hita*, which can also mean “beneficial,” “blessing,” or “friendly.” The connection the Buddha makes between great wisdom (*mahāpaññā*) and being concerned with the wellbeing of oneself and others highlights the wide-ranging pragmatic thrust of early Buddhist teachings. For oneself, these teachings are not just to be believed; they are to be practiced and experienced so that one can attain “welfare and happiness for a long time.”³ Interpersonally, the Buddha’s ethical teachings include a concern for the welfare of all.

“Ethics”

In the contemporary English-speaking world, it is common to interpret the ancient Buddhist word *sīla* in terms of the concept of ethics. However, we should keep in mind that the English and Pāli words are not necessarily a perfect fit. Not only might the English word “ethics” not be the best translation for *sīla*, some Western concepts of “ethics” do not match well in representing Buddhist teachings.

The Pali-English dictionary defines *sīla* first as “nature, character, habit, behavior” and then as “moral practice, good character, Buddhist ethics, code of morality.” Similar to the first two dictionary definitions given above, the 5th Century Buddhist teacher Buddhaghosa explained *sīla* as *pakati*, a word meaning “nature” and “disposition.” This suggests that “virtue” may be a better translation for *sīla* rather than

³ *dīgharatta* hitāya sukhāya (AN 4:193)

“ethics” and that traditional Buddhism is concerned with being virtuous, i.e., having an ethical character.

By understanding *sīla* as a quality of a person’s disposition, we can understand that one important source for an ethical life is a person’s inner life. While living by ethical rules has an important role in cultivating an ethical disposition, once this disposition is well developed it becomes the primary guide for living an ethical life, i.e., a life based on *sīla* or virtue.

This does not mean that we should avoid using the English word “ethics” in discussions of Buddhism. Instead, in the Buddhist context it suggests four things. First, it might be useful to use the word sparingly. Second, using the abstract word “ethics” may incline a person to talk about ethics in abstract ways which may or may not be accurate. Third, when we do use the word we should remember “ethics” is a word with which we may inappropriately project Western concepts onto our study of Buddhism. Fourth, there may be other Pāli words that are a better match for the English word “ethics.” A prime candidate, as will be discussed in a later essay, is *kusala*, often translated into English as “skillful” and “wholesome”. As an adjective *kusala* has the benefit of grounding ethical discussion in the specifics of what is actually “ethical” as opposed to an abstract moral philosophy.

In our social and cultural context, the concept of “ethics” can have wider-ranging meanings than usually found in Buddhism. It can refer to well-considered professional and institutional codes of conduct. It can also refer to the principles and reasoning used by hospital staff, public safety workers, social workers, politicians, economists, military personnel, and voters in making decisions that may affect others more than oneself. In our complex, interconnected modern world we are faced with much more complicated ethical issues, choices and dilemmas than the Buddha probably could ever imagine. For modern Buddhists– i.e., the wise people concerned for “the welfare of the whole world” – to address these issues requires a capacity for moral reasoning built on both Buddhist principles and freedom from self-centered and biased thinking. While compassion is invaluable for participating in our social life, compassion is not enough if we wish to address the wider issues of society. We must also learn to think ethically.

The Simplest Early Buddhist Ethical Instruction

The following four-line verse is often seen as encapsulating the essence of early Buddhist ethics. The tradition refers to the instruction given in this verse as the *Ovāda Pātimokkha*. We could translate this as “Advice in the Discipline” as *pātimokkha* refers to the monastic code of discipline. In the verse it refers to three broad areas of spiritual practice. The first line is traditionally interpreted to refer to restraint through the ethical precepts; the second to cultivating virtuous and beneficial states of mind – i.e., positive dispositions. The third line concerns freeing oneself from all afflictive and non-virtuous aspects of the mind. These three instructions are sometimes seen as progressive. One starts with the first, proceeds to the second, and then practices the third on the foundation of the first two.

Doing no evil,
Engaging in what is wholesome,
And purifying the mind:
This is the teaching of the Buddhas. (Dhp v. 183)

The background for these instructions is a humanistic approach. That is, rather than originating from supernatural or theistic sources, the Buddha’s teachings are based on what early Buddhism claims humans can experience, know, and reason for themselves. This humanistic orientation is represented by the Buddhist belief that human life provides the best opportunities for spiritual liberation. Sometimes called “awakening” or “enlightenment,” this liberation is often described in human terms with no recourse to supernatural or transcendent realities. One of the most common descriptions of liberation – the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice – uses psychological concepts to describe it as “the destruction of greed, hatred, and delusion.”⁴ As will be discussed later, the Buddha taught that the very human impulses to greed, hatred, and delusions are the basis for all unethical behavior. The absence of these three states is the basis for all virtuous behavior.

⁴ e.g. SN 45.20

The core wisdom of the Buddha aims at the attainment of this ethical goal, i.e., the destruction of greed, hatred and delusion. Cultivating this wisdom is integrally connected to decreasing the influence these three states have on us. Conversely, decreasing the influence of these states is how one develops the pragmatic wisdom of the Buddha. While a Buddhist may engage in practices and develop insights not directly or explicitly connected to ethics, we know these practices and insights are working when we grow in ethical sensitivity and orientation.

Wisdom is purified by virtue, and virtue is purified by wisdom: where one is, the other is, the virtuous person has wisdom and the wise person has virtue, and the combination of virtue and wisdom is called the highest thing in the world.

The Buddha (DN 4.22)

Chapter 3 - Reflections on Ethical Sensitivity

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 freedom and love. Ethical maturity for Buddhists has less to do with moral values or codes than with enhanced moral sensitivity. In fact, I believe that adhering to moral values alone can actually hinder the development of ethical maturity. Buddhism certainly does put great importance on moral values, including the precepts, and it is true that 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 both to 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 either with 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. To relax and unfetter the heart is to align the heart with its own purity. One of the most challenging and important 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 empathetic 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, like any other kind of 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 growing ethical sensitivity help us to find that nourishment.

Questions for Reflection

Reflective Question 2:

What function or role does ethics have in your life?

How has this changed over your life?

Reflective Question 3:

What are three of the major influences on your own understanding and concern with ethics and living an ethical life?

Chapter 4 - The Foundation of Early Buddhist Ethics

I teach suffering and the cessation of suffering.

The Buddha (MN 21.38)

“This is the bliss of renunciation, the bliss of seclusion, the bliss of peace, the bliss of enlightenment. I say of this kind of pleasure that it should be pursued, that it should be developed, that it should be cultivated, that it should not be feared.”

The Buddha (MN 66.21)

Direct Experience as the Basis for an Ethical Life

The foundation of the Buddha’s liberation was his direct insight into the “what is visible here and now”, i.e., what can be known in the present.⁵ In claiming this was the basis for his understanding, the Buddha differentiated himself from those who relied on scripture or faith in their own power of thinking and consideration.⁶ And just as he relied on direct experience, so he taught others to do the same.

While it can be useful to study Buddhist scriptures and to engage in personal reasoning, the Buddha pointed to particular aspects of direct experience that are the basis for both liberating knowledge and for guiding our actions. Without understanding these aspects, reliance on what is assumed to be direct experience can easily be reliance on interpretations, opinions and reactions.

The particular experiences that are the cornerstones of all the Buddha’s teachings are those that fall into the broad categories of pain and suffering (*dukkha*) and pleasure

⁵ *diṅṅha dhamma* literally means “the *Dhamma* that has been seen” and in usage in the suttas refers to this life opposed to a future life. Bhikkhu Bodhi translates this phrase as “here and now”. Thanissaro Bhikkhu translates it as “in the present”. *Diṅṅha* is the past participle of *dassati*, “to see”.

⁶ MN 102

and happiness (*sukha*). What all experiences that can be included in these general concepts have in common is they can be personally experienced and known. No external authority is needed to know if we are experiencing pain, suffering, pleasure or happy. By recognizing and knowing how our actions of body, speech and mind bring either *sukha* or *dukkha*, we can choose actions that avoid the former and promote the latter. Even when we consider the possible suffering and happiness our actions might bring about in the future, both for ourselves and for others, it is our familiarity with and wisdom about suffering and happiness that can guide our actions.

The distinction between suffering and happiness is a common theme through much of the Pali scriptures. As quoted above, the Buddha claimed emphatically “I teach suffering and the cessation of suffering” (MN 22.38). The concept of suffering (*dukkha*) is prominent and explicit in the Four Noble Truths. The importance of happiness (*sukha*) is well represented by the Buddha’s claim that he has appeared in the world “for the good, welfare, and happiness of gods and humans” (MN 4.21).⁷ The purpose of the teachings is also described as leading to one’s “welfare and happiness for a long time” (MN 22.11). In addition, the Buddha claimed he had “reopened” a course of practice that is a “safe path to be traveled joyfully” (MN 19.26). It is a path culminating in *nibbāna*, also known as “noble happiness” and “happiness of liberation.”⁸

The Buddha’s own path of practice is presented through the contrast of suffering and happiness. Prior to his Awakening, the Buddha pursued an ascetic path of self-denial and suffering to the most extreme degrees before finally rejecting it (MN 36). It was the memory of meditative-like rapture and happiness he had at a young age that suggested to him an alternative path to liberation (MN 36.31). In having then followed this path, the Buddha claimed he had access to “the peak of happiness” for days at a time.⁹

In the Buddha’s teachings the concepts of suffering and happiness are closely tied to the experiences of pain and pleasure. In fact, the connection is so close that the same Pali words are used for both pairs. The English “pain” and “suffering” are both

⁷ Good (*attha*), welfare (*hita*), and happiness (*sukha*).

⁸ Noble happiness (*ariyasukha*; AN 2.69) and happiness of liberation (*vimuttisukha*; AN 5.180; MN 86.18; SN 8.12).

⁹ MN 14.22; “peak of happiness” translates *ekantasukha*.

translations of *dukkha*. Similarly, “happiness” and “pleasure” both translate *sukha*. The context in which these words appear determines how they are translated. Bhikkhu Bodhi variably renders *sukha* as ‘pleasure’, ‘happiness’, and ‘bliss’. When used as an adjective he often translates it as ‘pleasant’. As the Pali word *sukha* alone does not differentiate between happiness and pleasure, and *dukkha* does not differentiate between suffering and pain, it might be useful to consider other English ways to convey their range of meanings well enough to span their range of meaning. The words “ease” and “unease” might be adequate candidates if understood to function as a “middle way” that can encompass both physical and mental experience, as well as weak and strong forms of *sukha* and *dukkha*. Or, if “pain” is understood as including both physical and mental pain, perhaps the useful pairing is “pain” and “happiness.”

Perhaps the closest Western parallels to the Buddha’s teachings on pain and pleasure, suffering and happiness are found in the philosophy of the good life championed by Epicurus. This third-century Greek philosopher believed that the gods have no role in human life. He relied on the human experience of pleasure and pain to build a philosophy championing a happy life free of pain and fear. He advocated a simple, self-sufficient life in the company of good friends. Epicurus believed over-involvement with some forms of pleasure result in suffering and so counseled moderation in pleasure in order to attain a happy and peaceful life. He also suggested that one choose pain over pleasure if the pain leads to a greater pleasure. Somewhat similar to how the Buddha defined the highest good as the peace that comes with the cessation of suffering, Epicurus viewed the greatest pleasure as the absence of physical pain and mental suffering, found in a state of *ataraxia*, translated as ‘imperturbability, equanimity, or tranquility.’

A major difference between Epicurus and the Buddha is that the former did not believe in rebirth; for the Greek philosopher, after death a person is no more. Another difference is that Epicurus did not seem to know or practice the *jhānas*. These deep states of concentration may well provide a stronger reference point for happiness and equanimity than Epicurus’ *ataraxia*. Finally, the teachings of Epicurus do not describe anything analogous to the Buddha’s experience of *nibbāna* and awakening.

Reflecting on Consequences of Actions

We have one remarkable early discourse purporting to be the Buddha's teachings to his young son Rāhula (MN 61). Here the evaluation of what to do or not do is based only on what can be known in one's current lifetime; there is no reference to rebirth or consequences in a subsequent lifetime. In response to his son telling a lie, the Buddha provided Rāhula with the following teaching for how to consider one's actions:

[A]n action with the body should be done after repeated reflection; an action by speech should be done after repeated reflection; an action by mind should be done after repeated reflection. "Rāhula, when you wish to do an action with the body, you should reflect upon that same bodily action thus: 'Would this action that I wish to do with the body lead to my own harm or to the harm of others, or to the harm of both? Is it an unwholesome bodily action with suffering consequences, with suffering results?' When you reflect, if you know: 'This action that I wish to do with the body would lead to my own harm, or to the harm of others, or to the harm of both; it is an unwholesome bodily action with suffering consequences, with suffering results,' then you definitely should not do such an action with the body. But when you reflect, if you know: 'This action that I wish to do with the body would not lead to my own harm, or to the harm of others, or to the harm of both; it is a wholesome bodily action with happy consequences, with happy results,' then you may do such an action with the body.

Middle Length Discourses 61.8-9¹⁰

The Buddha repeats this teaching for acts of speech and acts of the mind. What one thinks and intends is not inconsequential in terms of harm or benefit caused to oneself or others. The Buddha also continues this teaching by instructing Rāhula to do the same forms of reflection both while he is engaged in and after he has completed activities of body, speech and mind. This is an instruction to have an ongoing evaluation of one's behavior based on distinguishing between what causes harm and what does not, what is

¹⁰ Translated by Ñanamoli and Bodhi with "happiness" substituted for their rendering of *sukha* as "pleasant", "suffering" for their "painful", and "harm" for their translation "affliction".

wholesome and what is not, and what causes suffering and what brings happiness. The reason the Buddha may have told Rāhula to continue this form of evaluation even after an action is completed is because one cannot always know the consequence of an action before it is done; sometimes it is only in seeing the consequences that we realize the effect of our actions.

Three paired concepts are involved in the ethical instructions given to Rāhula. These are harm and non-harm (*byābādha* and *na byābādha*), wholesome and unwholesome – often translated as “skillful” and “unskillful” (*kusala* and *akusala*) – and suffering and happiness (*dukkha* and *sukha*).¹¹ Using these paired concepts to evaluate what to do or not to do is a means by which one can live an ethical life in all circumstances if ethics is understood as avoiding harm and promoting welfare. Equally important, this is also the approach to finding one’s way along the Buddha’s path of liberation. Awakening is a process of decreasing and ultimately ending even the most subtle forms of suffering, and, instead, experiencing the most sublime forms of happiness.

Partly because Rāhula was a child when he received these teachings, we can assume that these concepts refer to things simple enough for a person to know for oneself without reference to anything outside of one’s own experience. Among the simplest and most obvious experiences one can recognize for oneself are physical pain and pleasure (*dukkha* and *sukha*); no one else can fully know how anyone else experiences these. Because emotional and mental pain and pleasure tend to be more complicated than physical affect, in English translations of the suttas *dukkha* and *sukha* are often translated as “suffering” and “happiness”. These are personal and subjective experiences that can only be known through mindfulness and introspection. One person’s experience of suffering and happiness is something that others cannot fully know or experience. Whether they are physical, mental or both, knowing *dukkha* and *sukha* does not depend on sources of knowledge outside of personal experience. If one uses these affective qualities as a guide, then one relies on one’s own personal experience to determine what to do and not to do.

¹¹ Bhikkhu Bodhi translates *byābādha* as “affliction”.

Conclusion

“I assert the non-doing of bodily, verbal, and mental misconduct. I assert the non-doing of the numerous kinds of bad unwholesome deeds. It is in this way that one could rightly say of me: “The ascetic Gotama is a proponent of non-doing who teaches his Dhamma for the sake of non-doing and thereby guides his disciples.”

“I assert the doing of bodily, verbal, and mental good conduct. I assert the doing of numerous kinds of wholesome deeds. It is in this way that one could rightly say of me: “The ascetic Gotama is a proponent of doing who teaches his Dhamma for the sake of doing and thereby guides his disciples.”

- the Buddha (AN 8.12)

The Buddha made these statements about what he asserts in response to a military general – a person depicted as a proponent of action – who asks if the Buddha teaches inaction. The Buddha’s clear declaration that he teaches the non-doing of misconduct (*duccarita*) and unwholesome deeds and the doing of good conduct (*succarita*) and wholesome deeds can be seen as the message to avoid the unethical and to engage in what is ethical.

It is perhaps because he was speaking to a general that the Buddha used the vague language of “misconduct” and “good conduct.” More commonly his evaluation of conduct relies on the more specific and embodied experiences of pain and pleasure, suffering and happiness, affliction and non-affliction, harm and welfare. It is these paired feelings that are the basis for determining what is wholesome and unwholesome, what causes affliction and what does not. As such, good conduct is not determined by social conventions, traditions, philosophy, logic or preferences. Rather it arises from the deep human instinct to move away from pain and move toward pleasure. It is a valuable instinct that can motivate a person to avoid causing harm, both to oneself and to others.

Questions for Reflections

Reflective Question 4:

Do you have some foundational criteria to help you decide on what to do and say? Do you use different criteria in different circumstances?

Reflective Question 5:

Do you see for yourself any universal applicability for utilizing *sukha* and *dukkha* to guide your actions?
What might be the greatest potential or consequence coming from being guided by avoiding *dukkha* and moving toward *sukha*?