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Going Further with Buddhism

Week 4 – Perfect Action



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Last week we looked at Perfect Speech, which is the first of the ‘limbs’ of the Noble Eightfold Path concerned with ethical behaviour. This week we stay within the ethical dimension with Perfect Action. If you attended the ‘Introduction to Buddhism’ classes you probably already studied Buddhist ethics and the formulation of the Five Precepts, but here we shall look a little more closely at what constitutes the Buddhist view of ethical behaviour.

It is important to understand that Buddhism has a very particular emphasis on the meaning of ethical behaviour. This emphasis is arguably very important for us in our time and culture. Some would say that the old, Judaeo-Christian ‘morality’, interpreted in terms of prohibition by a higher being, is no longer relevant for most people in the west. At the same time, we are constantly made aware of the consequences of having no constraints on our behaviour, and believing that being free to express our ‘lifestyle’ is all that is important. This is a very topical area, as we hear so much about the tensions between the ‘rights of the individual’ and the need to protect other people, the coherence of society and the environment. As individuals, we might have real difficulty in identifying which of our actions are ‘right’ and which ‘wrong’, so we might either stop trying altogether, or appeal to some higher authority to tell us in ‘black and white’ and remove the dilemma. It can all seem very confusing and contentious – so what do Buddhist ethics have to offer?

The key point about Buddhist ethics is that they are simply a reflection of reality – the way things really are. If we are completely inter-connected with others, and with the world around us, there just isn’t any point in acting selfishly, and every reason to behave ethically. We can understand this more easily by referring to Sangharakshita’s illustration of the three possible explanations for acting in an **apparently** ethical way. One individual does so because he fears that he will be found out and punished if he doesn’t. The second person considers acting selfishly, but overcomes the temptation because she recognises the bigger consequences for others, and decides to ‘do her bit’. These two positions probably account for most of the people we know – or, more to the point, for most of the ethical choices we ourselves make. The third position, however, is quite different, even though it only occurs fully in an enlightened person! For this person, there is never any choice – his or her ethical behaviour occurs **spontaneously**, as an expression of the wisdom that comes with enlightenment. For the rest of us who are not yet enlightened, there is an intimate connection between the **degree** to which we have Wisdom (i.e. our possession of Perfect Vision and Perfect Emotion) and our behaviour in terms of Perfect Action.

The **Five Precepts** are effectively an ethical code for ‘lay’ Buddhists, especially in the Triratna Buddhist Community (members of the Order try to observe 10 precepts, and men and women ordained into more eastern

traditions may have as many as 157!). Despite what is sometimes thought, these precepts should not be seen as commands or prohibitions. Far from this, one useful way of interpreting them is as ‘training principles’. This means that our efforts in meditation and the development of wisdom are more likely to be successful if we succeed in the observance of the precepts. Also, if we make a determined and genuine effort to observe them at first, they will eventually just become our normal behaviour, with the benefits that this will reap. In this respect we can see ethical behaviour as a learning process like any other, and the precepts as no more than practical tools; a means rather than an end.

We shall take another look at the individual precepts, noting that each can be stated in both a negative and a positive sense, and that each works directly on at least one of the **three poisons** – craving, hatred and ignorance. If we can counteract these human tendencies that are the roots of our **suffering**, we shall advance on the **path leading to the cessation of suffering**. The figure below summarises the 5 precepts in order, with both their ‘negative’ forms from which we might undertake to abstain (in black) and their corresponding positive aspirations (in red):

Perfect Action

- Abstention from killing or harming living beings
Deeds of loving kindness
- Abstention from taking what isn’t given
Open handed generosity
- Abstention from sexual misconduct
Stillness, simplicity and contentment
- Abstention from harmful speech
Truthful communication
- Abstention from taking intoxicants
Mindfulness clear and radiant

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The first concerns **not harming** or, stated positively, acting with ‘deeds of loving kindness’ (*metta*). This is the precept which governs all other ethical considerations – to put it simply, we try to ‘do as we would be done by’. As we have already noted, causing harm has its origin in hatred – it is the physical manifestation of hate. Similarly, *metta* needs to have a physical manifestation in deeds in order to be meaningful and effective.

The second precept concerns **not taking the not-given**, addressing behaviour which has its origin in craving. This doesn’t have to be blatant theft—most of us are more likely to misappropriate others’ precious time or energy. The positive statement is acting ‘with open-handed generosity’ – this quality has a close relationship with *metta*, which can be seen as ‘giving oneself’.

The third precept requires us **not to indulge in sexual misconduct**. Here there is none of the anxious obsession with natural sexuality that occurs, all too often, in many religions. The point is that sexual behaviour, if unskillful, can be destructive and harming. The extreme example is rape, but infidelity and sexual exploitation are obviously also issues here. The positive formulation is interesting – acting with ‘stillness, contentment and simplicity’. These qualities are developed when we free ourselves from a reliance on sexual activity to satisfy our neurotic needs, including a perceived need for change.

Fourthly, we try **not to indulge in false speech** or, to state the precept positively, to act with ‘truthful communication’. This is, of course, a further reference to Perfect Speech. False speech may be based in craving and hatred, but also in ignorance, often manifested as fear.

Lastly, we attempt **not to depend on intoxication**. The positive counterpart, to act ‘with mindfulness, clear and radiant’, perhaps clarifies the significance of this precept. It isn’t really a case of never having a beer, or anything else that may genuinely bring pleasure and relaxation. Like the third precept, it has much more to do with reliance, to the extent that we feel that we need certain crutches in our lives. It’s also important that these might not just be in the area of drink and drugs – we can, all too easily, be intoxicated by things like money, possessions, status, reputation and even our technological ‘toys’.