



Manchester
Buddhist
Centre

Buddhism Level 1 Course

Week 6 – The Five Ethical Precepts



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1. What we've covered on the course

As we reach the final week of our short, introductory course, it's a good point at which to take stock of what we've covered over the last 5 classes.

Throughout the course, we've gained a taste of the **Three Jewels** (Buddha, Dharma and Sangha) through following aspects of the story of Siddhartha Gotama and how he became the Buddha – the Awakened One. In parallel to this, we've practised traditional approaches to **meditation** as the 'practical' side of the Dharma – grounding our awareness in our physical bodies, cultivating that awareness through the Mindfulness of Breathing and exploring our ability to express kindness to ourselves and others in the Metta Bhavana. There's a little more about approaches to this last practice further on in this document.

By way of recap, the starting point for Siddhartha's world-changing quest was his profound realisation of how **suffering** is inescapable for human beings, as experienced in his first three 'sights' of ageing, sickness and death. However, the fourth sight, of **a seeker after the truth**, provided him with the impetus to look for a reality that went beyond suffering itself – even though he initially had little idea along which path that impetus might take him

As it turned out, Siddhartha initially chose to move between the polar opposites of ease and pleasure on the one hand, and very marked hardship and self-punishment on the other. This extreme approach, far from leading to the liberation he was searching for, came close to killing him. His real breakthrough came when he realised two things: firstly, the importance of a balanced, pragmatic approach – the famous '**Middle Way**'. The second was that he'd had earlier experiences of insight quite spontaneously – in fact, this possibility exists for every one of us.

In the immediate run-up to his Awakening, Siddhartha still suffered **doubt**, as symbolised by Mara and his various attempts to undermine Siddhartha's imminent encounter with Reality. However, the latter had **confidence** in his well-established practice – symbolically, Mara was defeated and Siddhartha broke through to Awakening. In asking what this might be like, we recognised that it's essentially beyond verbal communication, and this was the problem that the newly-awakened Buddha now pondered. Fortunately for us, he decided that there was a chance that others could be pointed towards Reality through indirect teachings. Probably the most important **conceptual** teaching is that concerning **Dependent Arising and Cessation**.

We heard some examples of how the Buddha's combination of wisdom and compassion affected people who were suffering in various ways – his **skilful means** touched their hearts through the various messages they needed to hear in their various situations. We also heard one of the most famous formulas that has come down to us from the Buddha's teaching – the **Four Noble Truths** of (1) suffering; (2) the causes of suffering; (3) the ending of suffering and (4) the path leading to suffering's end. Finally, we looked into the important area of Buddhist ethics, based on the law of Dependent Arising and Cessation and the recognition that we have the freedom to make skilful (or creative) choices – in other words, choices that bring more happiness, rather than more suffering, for both ourselves and other living beings. This ethical dimension of Dependent Arising and Cessation is often known as the **Law of Karma**.

2. The practicalities of Buddhist ethics – the Five Precepts

However, life can obviously be complex and it's not always easy to know the skilful thing to do in every situation. As we've already heard, Buddhism in no way lays out laws that we must obey. After all, no laws could possibly fit all the ethical complexities that we might find ourselves in.

Fortunately, the Buddhist tradition does provide us with a practical ethical framework. This serves to remind us of those areas of behaviour in which we can easily find ourselves acting unskilfully or (to take the opposite view) where we can positively undertake to try to be more skilful. The Five Precepts can be regarded as 'training principles', which are stated in both negative and positive forms (in the following section, the positive forms are set out in *italics*). Notice that the emphasis is on your own voluntary choice, as suggested by the repeated phrase "I undertake...":

1. I undertake to abstain from harming living beings.
With deeds of loving-kindness, I purify my body.
2. I undertake to abstain from taking the not-given.
With open-handed generosity, I purify my body.
3. I undertake to abstain from sexual misconduct,
With stillness, simplicity and contentment, I purify my body.
4. I undertake to abstain from false speech.
With truthful communication, I purify my speech.
5. I undertake to abstain from taking intoxicants.
With mindfulness clear and radiant, I purify my mind.

The **first precept** encapsulates them all – if you're practising it then you're practising all of the precepts. The basis of Buddhist ethics is non-harm, in both the physical and the psychological senses. It's worth noting here that many Buddhists choose to be vegetarians as part of their commitment to this

precept – this obviously suggests that we can also consider whether or not we choose to support harmful actions done by others.

The **second precept** includes stealing, but also includes the more subtle act of taking things that are not freely given, such as using up other people's time and energy against their wishes. This is a common area where we can easily act unskillfully!

Because the area of sexual relationships is one in which our emotions can be very strong, the Buddha devoted the **third precept** to it. It's the first precept applied to the sexual arena. At the more obvious extreme, it's very unskillful to commit rape or to be unfaithful to our regular partner. However, we can also consider the more subtle ways in which we might allow our sexual behaviour to cause harm, for example by being over-possessive or deliberately exploiting our partner. The positive emphasis of 'stillness, simplicity and contentment' reminds us how sexual desire can cause the opposite qualities to arise – anxiety, complications in our lives and craving.

The **fourth precept** recognises that Buddhists try to find and then live by the truth, so to tell lies – even small ones – would be to go against that commitment. Not telling the truth causes confusion and mistrust because it undermines human relations. Of course the truth is sometimes painful to hear so we also need to speak with kindness and at an appropriate time. The 'speech precept' is one that many people find particularly demanding, because human communications are so often complex and unskillful remarks can 'slip out' because we haven't stopped to think about their consequences!

The principle behind the **fifth precept** is awareness. Intoxicants tend to make us less aware, which blurs our ethical sense – it's easier to break the other precepts when we're intoxicated. Obviously alcohol and recreational drugs are included here but so are more subtle intoxicants, such as the beauty of another person or even oneself (if you happen to be beautiful!), or intoxication with youth (if you're young). By the way, many Buddhists avoid alcohol completely, but there's obviously no prohibition. It's up to you, as for all the other precepts, to examine the consequences of your actions – in this case, the effect of the intoxicants you use and the extent to which they cause you to act less skillfully.

3. Different approaches to the Metta Bhavana

We've now practised the whole of the Metta Bhavana meditation, which has a structured approach to cultivating well-wishing and kindness to different sorts of people we encounter in our lives – not forgetting, of course, ourselves! Before we look at suggested approaches to the whole meditation, there are some useful thoughts that we can apply specifically to the fourth and fifth stages:

Stage 4: Choosing the 'difficult' person

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 the 'difficult 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.

Stage 5: Applying even-handedness to our well-wishing

The final stage of the Metta Bhavana allows us to become truly ambitious in our cultivation of positive emotion and well-wishing, as we do our best to apply these qualities as widely as we possibly can. We start by bringing back to our mind's eye the four people on whom we have already concentrated, perhaps imagining them all being present in the same room. The important point at this stage is that, however able to feel positive emotion and well-wishing we feel we are, we try to apply them in an even-handed way to all four recipients – not forgetting ourselves! Having reached this point, we can go further if we wish, expanding the 'target' of our metta to an increasingly broad group of people. We can do this however we like – there are no rules – but the best approach is to engage our imagination and, if we feel so inclined, to let it go free! We

can even include non-human beings and perhaps inhabitants, as yet undiscovered, of places beyond this planet!

This stage of universal well-wishing is an expression of the important Buddhist principle that there is no point in seeking happiness just for ourselves – we have the capacity, as humans, to seek it for all living beings.

Approaches to the Metta Bhavana in general

People who are learning the Metta Bhavana often experience difficulties in 'making a connection' – the practice can seem a little intangible, especially compared to the physicality of the Mindfulness of Breathing. This is not surprising, but the important factor thing to remember is that we can find ways of 'making it our own'. In order to do this, we can employ whatever imaginative means we choose – there's no right or wrong approach, but there will be ways that work particularly well for us by firing our individual imaginations. Meditation teachers will suggest specific approaches, but there's no reason why you should restrict yourself to them! However, just in case you find them helpful, here are some of the approaches you could consider:

- Internally 'speaking' phrases of well-wishing, for example, "May I be well", "May you be free from suffering" and the like;
- Imagining the people in the various stages of the meditation being bathed in light, or the 'warmth' of loving-kindness;
- Mentally connecting with memories of positive experiences that you've had, either on your own or with the other people in the second, third or even fourth stages;
- As a variation on the same theme, imagining yourself in a situation that you'd consider idyllic (for example, a quiet, fragrant garden bathed in spring sunshine), then 'inviting' the people from the other stages into that same place.

4. What comes next?

If you've enjoyed this introductory course or, better still, feel inspired by it, you're probably wondering 'where to go from here'. You might want to commit to a more advanced course; on the other hand, if you'd like to carry on your own personal investigations for the time being, you might be wondering what to read, given the bewildering amount of material that's available on Buddhism.

The next 6-week **evening course** is 'Buddhism Level 2'. It will build directly on the foundations of this course, developing one of the themes that you've already met in considerably more detail. Please consult the Buddhist Centre reception, or look on our web site for the start date of the next Level 2 course. It will start and finish at the same times as this course, and the scale of charges will be the same. Please book through reception in the usual way.

If you feel that you'd like to concentrate on meditation in particular, you could come to our dedicated 6-week introductory meditation course, in order to look in more depth at the practices you've met – body awareness, the Mindfulness of Breathing and the Metta Bhavana. 'Introduction to Meditation' courses run on Wednesday evenings, over dates that are in parallel to the introductory Buddhism courses. As an alternative, you could come to an 'Introduction to Meditation' day course which is run on occasional Saturdays – again, you should check at reception, or on our web site, for the exact dates.

One other possibility to bear in mind is the popular course that runs for 2 hours (11.00-13.00) on Saturdays, called 'Tools for Living your Life'. This is an informal class for both absolute beginners and people, like yourself, who have some background in Buddhism. It generally features both group meditation and one or two key principles of Buddhist thought and practice.

If you prefer to conduct your further investigations on your own, the 'Recommended reading and online resources' handout that was given out in the first week of the course should provide plenty of useful directions (and is also available, in a downloadable format, alongside this document).

Good luck in your future explorations – maybe we'll see you again before long!