

# Week 1 – Ethics as individual choice

## *Buddhism Level 2 – Buddhist Ethics*

Needs work:

First exercise needs framing correctly to “work” – not sure how to do it. Just ended up with list of peoples’ formative influences, without a sense of the mechanism in the handout.

In 2<sup>nd</sup> half tried exercise on “invent your own desert island rules” – didn’t seem to work to well, cos get into societal control rather than internal ethic

Didn’t try the quotes exercise – could just ask people to discuss their favourite quote, tho doesn’t fit in anywhere that well

Probably needs a complete rewrite

### **TEACHERS NOTE:**

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There’s a lot of information to impart here: most of it will be familiar to people I should think, but it needs to be restated. So I would suggest presenting it more as revision, with lots of questions and room for discussion; the teacher really just needs to underline the main points and get them up on the flipchart as they emerge.

And obviously, we need to be modelling ethical behaviour as far as we can!

### **LEARNING OUTCOMES FOR MODULE**

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Recognise Buddhist ethical practice as a voluntary individual choice, not an authoritarian imposed system.

See ethics as acting from the best of ourselves, despite mixed motives

Distinguish between “macro” & “micro” decisions (VP distinction!) eg. working out a “Buddhist policy” on euthanasia vs. noticing ways in which we employ subtle manipulation of people. Emphasis more on latter than former – keep trying to bring people back to issues of moment-by-moment action; or at least issues that affect them personally.

### **MEDITATION (10 MINS)**

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Just sitting, centred on breath.

Then just sitting noticing thoughts & emotions rise & fall

Then trying to notice any quality of compulsiveness or avoidance in experience; or foggy zoning out – presence of greed/hatred/delusion

### **INTRODUCTIONS (15 MINS)**

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Name & a little about how you feel about ethics – interested / curious / bored / afraid of being made to feel bad (give them a short while to think about this).

## INTRODUCTION TO MODULE (10 MINS)

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This will be very nuts n bolts – tho this one class bit more theoretical background

We're all ethical beings, know a lot about how to act, have all sorts of ideas about what's right & wrong / good & bad.

Main aims of module:

- Get some practice at thinking of ethical issues within a Buddhist framework
- Recognise ethical practice as a very practical means to progress on the path – have a flavour for how this could work. We'll be trying to focus on the fine grain of our own life.

Will be doing a lot of discussion

## SOURCES OF ETHICAL JUDGEMENT (25MINS)

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**NB maybe an alternative for next time: why do you practice the precepts/ try to live an ethical life? Why is it important part of spl life?**

### Exercise – discuss attitude to ethics – in 3s

What are the main sources of your ethical values do you think ie how do you know right from wrong? Parents? Christianity? Society? Friends? Any particular memories stand out?

### Plenary

Check how people feel about the subject. Useful just to gauge interest.

Brainstorm up peoples' sources. What other sources of ethical guidance might people in society generally use eg. to decide whether to return £10 too much change given to them in a shop. Maybe looks like this (column 1)

Then draw out the mechanisms by which those sources work

Source	Mechanism
Parental values	Withholding or giving of love & approval; punishment & reward
Society values	Withholding or giving of group approval; legal punishment.
Christian values	Punishment or promotion by God (heaven / hell)
Own conscience	Easy or guilty conscience
Buddhist values	Karma – natural consequences of actions

Draw out where else society might get its ethical values from:

- Western capitalist values
- Liberalism

[Sangharakshita talks of natural & conventional morality]

Is there any arbiter beyond the authority of god, parents, society etc?

## THE WORKINGS OF KARMA (30 MINS)

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Live in an ethical universe – an experiential understanding not a metaphysical statement

*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 hoof of 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.*

*Dhammapada, trans Sangharakshita, I.1-2*

It's ethical inasmuch as skilful actions (karmas) tend to lead to happy outcomes (karma vipaka); unskilful actions tend to lead to unhappy outcomes.

*Buddhist ethics are not about restricting our freedom. They are about liberating ourselves from the slavery of unhelpful habits, conditioning, and ways of being, and becoming potent individuals with control over the direction of our own lives. They are about behaving in ways that encourage positive emotions, and calm negative states. They are about acting in a way that gives us a sense of wholeness and self-esteem, because we are honestly trying to live up to our vision of what we could become.*

*Mitra Foundation course text, Vadanya*

Actions have consequences – that's just how things work out.

Provisionally we can divide consequences into internal & external:

**External** consequences tend to follow that law: kindness **to** others tends to bring forth kindness **from** others – that's a happy outcome. Violence tends to lead to more violence.

The universe tends to respond – but it may not seem to –

**Q: why do bad things happen to nice people eg. tsunami. ?**

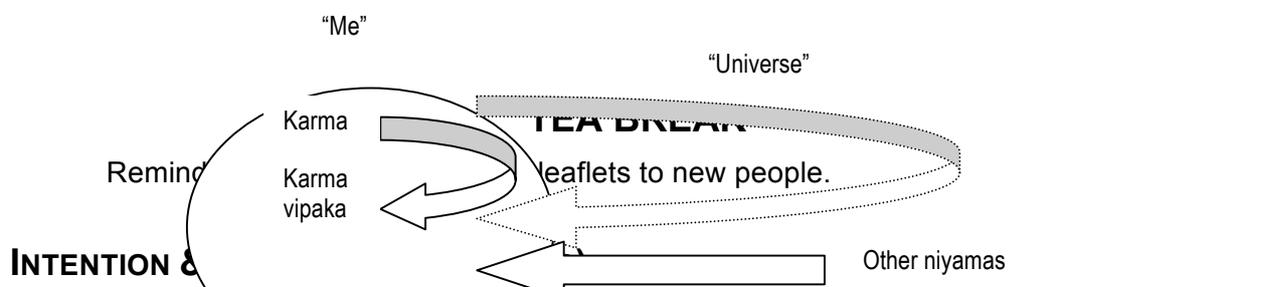
Remind of 5 niyamas (brainstorm) – it's not just karmic conditionality going on here.

**Internal** consequences are inescapable – even if no physical or verbal action has taken place, our mental actions are constantly moulding us. Our karmas are moulding the kind of person we'll be.

**Q: how do you think this operates? How does doing something change our being? – draw out tendency to carve habitual channels of action & thought – ways of seeing world affect kind of world we live in.**

How we are now is determined by our karmas of the past; how we will be in the future is determined by our current karma.

Interesting that "ethics" is derived from the Greek word "ethos" meaning character. Ethics and character are intimately linked and co-conditioning.



So what me...ful or unskilful?

(In absence of cosmic judge, we don't use terms "good" & "bad" so much)

Brainstorm answers (probably enough people will know answer)

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As the quote suggests (read out again), it's the state of the mind that counts:

Whether dominated by greed, hatred or delusion, or their opposites: a spacious abundance, love, and intelligence.

**Q: So does this mean that anything you do on the basis of being in a loving state or contented of mind is skilful? Can you think of examples where it may not be?**

Draw out possibility of just not thinking through consequences properly:

Often said that intention is primary. But

*"The terms 'skilful' and 'unskilful' ... suggest that morality is very much a matter of intelligence. You cannot be skilful unless you can understand things, unless you can see possibilities and explore them. Hence morality, according to Buddhism, is as much a matter of intelligence and insight as one of good intentions and good feelings"*

*A Guide to the Buddhist Path, Sangharakshita, from essay "The Criterion of Ethics", p. 128*

Consideration of the **likely** consequences of one's action is necessary to see whether they will cause harmful or beneficial effects. Of course, we can never be too sure about this because there are too many other factors involved outside our control.

*Kusala (skilful) is "expert in the sense of knowing how to act in a way that is beneficial rather than otherwise"*

*The Ten Pillars of Buddhism, Sangharakshita*

Can be well-intentioned but not very imaginative or interested in the consequences of our actions.

Or can be over-concerned with the externals of what I or others do, without looking at the intention behind it. **But this one is much more likely for us!**

Look for middle way.

[Flipchart diagram]

**Q: What would this middle way look like?**

## **PRECEPTS – TRAINING PRINCIPLES (5 MINS)**

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Guidelines to help us train in sila – ethical behaviour – first of the three trainings

Remind re sila, samadhi, prajna

Help us act more like a Buddha would naturally act.

We take them consciously and willingly – there's no one "up there" to impose them on us or punish us if we transgress. NOT Commandments.

## **SUMMARY (5 MINS)**

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Buddhist ethics isn't about an externally imposed set of rules; it's a training that we take on consciously and willingly.

Living ethically is about understanding and acting in line with karma, to live more in line with the nature of things – to express our interconnectedness, contentment, love.

Skilful action is based on spacious contentment, love, and intelligent consideration of consequences. Unskilful action is based on greed, aversion or foggy vagueness.

We can over-focus on the externals of our actions, or on our own mind state; we need to include both and balance.

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Our actions mould our character and habits; they also affect the kind of world we live in.

## **NEXT WEEK...**

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Love as the golden rule: the first precept. I undertake the training principle to not to destroy life.

We'll look at love & non-violence, and have a "Moral maze"-style debate about vegetarianism.

## **HOME PRACTICE**

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At moments of obvious ethical choice, try to notice the basis on which you make the choice: from a sense of skilful abundance; from fear of being disapproved of or disliked; from a sense of guilt; from an inner intuitive conscience...

Reflect about the issue of vegetarianism in relation to the suggestion that we don't take life: what do you think & feel about it? Come prepared with some awkward questions or points of view to put to a discussion.

## **FURTHER READING**

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*Living the Skilful Life*, Abhaya, Windhorse Publications. Concise, readable pamphlet, out of print but for loan in library.

*The Ten Pillars of Buddhism*, Sangharakshita, CD 161 or book pub. Windhorse. Talk given to Order Members on the Ten Precepts.