

# Week 1 – Ethics as individual choice

## Buddhism Level 2 – Buddhist Ethics

### SOURCES OF ETHICAL VALUES

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Our own value system is probably a mix of different sources. Eg.

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

And there are other value systems superimposed (eg. Western liberalism, capitalism)

### THE WORKINGS OF KARMA

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We live in an ethical universe:

*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 (karma) tend to lead to happy, spacious resulting experience (karma vipaka); unskilful actions tend to lead to unhappy, constricted resulting experience. So Buddhist morality is said to be a "natural" morality, rather than a conventional morality that it is determined by the conventions of the society.

### INTENTION & INTELLIGENCE

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So what makes an action skilful or unskilful? (In the absence of cosmic judge, we don't usually use terms "good" & "bad"). The state of the mind governs; whether rooted in greed, hatred or delusion, or their opposites: a spacious abundance, love, and intelligence.

So the ethical status of an action is determined by the emotional **intention** behind it. We are likely to have mixed motives, so we try to act from the best in ourselves. But good intentions aren't enough: we also need to anticipate the result of our action.

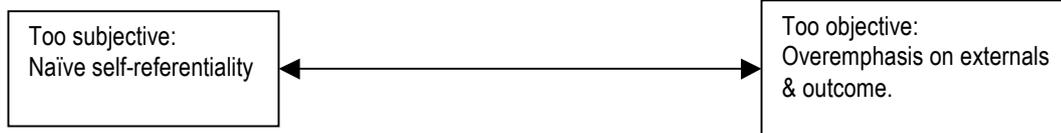
*"The terms 'skilful' and 'unskilful' ... suggest that morality is very much a matter of intelligence. You cannot be skilful unless you can understand things, unless you can see possibilities and explore them. Hence morality, according to Buddhism, is as much a matter of intelligence and insight as one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

We can be well-intentioned but not very imaginative or interested in the consequences of our actions. Or we can be over-concerned with the externals of what I or others do, without looking at the intention behind it - **this one is much more likely for us!** Look for middle way.



## PRECEPTS – TRAINING PRINCIPLES

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The five precepts are guidelines to help us train in sila – ethical behaviour; 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; they’re NOT Commandments.

## 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.