



# Vision and Transformation: The Buddha's Eightfold Path

## *Week 4 – Perfect Action & Perfect Livelihood*



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 by looking at both Perfect Action and Perfect Livelihood. If you attended the 'Buddhism - Foundation' classes you probably already studied Buddhist ethics and the formulation of the Five Precepts, so we shall cover Perfect Action in the spirit of a recap of the Buddhist view of ethical behaviour and the formulation of the Five Precepts

In considering **Perfect Action**, it's 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 give us a 'black and white' answer and so 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. For example, we could consider the decision to make a completely honest insurance claim, without inventing a few extra losses along the way. One individual does 'the right thing' because he fears that he will be found out and punished if he doesn't. The second person considers exaggerating the claim, but overcomes the temptation because she recognises the bigger consequences for other policy holders, 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. Despite what is sometimes believed, these precepts should not be seen as commands or prohibitions. Far from this, they might usefully be regarded 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, willed 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, remembering 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 (or greed), hatred (aversion) and ignorance (delusion).

The first precept concerns **not harming** or, stated positively, acting with 'deeds of loving kindness' (*mettā*). This is the precept which governs all other ethical considerations – to put it simply, we try to 'do as we would be done by'.

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, and some people are frequent offenders in this respect. The positive statement is acting 'with open-handed generosity' – this quality has a close relationship with *mettā*, 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, reactive obsession with natural sexuality that occurs, all too often, in many religions. The positive formulation is interesting, and perhaps not immediately easy to connect with the negative one – 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 the poisons of craving and hatred, but also in the third of the traditional trio - 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. Like the third precept, the fifth has much to do with reliance, to the extent that we feel that we need certain crutches in order to get by in our daily lives. It's also important that these are not necessarily in the area of drink and drugs – we can, all too easily, be intoxicated by things like money,

possessions, status, reputation and (perhaps a rapidly growing challenge) our technological 'toys'.

In some ways, this term **Perfect Livelihood** doesn't immediately do justice to the size of the agenda that deeper thought reveals. The starting point for this discussion is to realise that Buddhism isn't just as it is sometimes represented - a worthy but unworldly set of beliefs that have little to do with the sordid reality of everyday life. On the contrary, the Buddha made very practical and realistic suggestions about improving society, and there have been many historic examples of Buddhists who have been prepared to try to do so. The essence of these teachings is still seen by many Buddhists as being entirely valid in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and the term 'engaged Buddhism' (originally coined by the Vietnamese Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh) is fairly well known.

Perfect Livelihood, in the broader sense described in 'The Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path', really involves the social and political aspects of our lives, as well as the economic ones – in other words, the transformation of our part in the whole collective life that we have come to refer to as 'society'. If we consider our personal role in this broader arena, there may well be more opportunities to bring about social and political change than in the Buddha's time. All the same, our contribution to the economy, by both earning and spending, is probably the way in which we have the greatest influence. After all, for most of us our work is a very considerable part of our lives, and to try to separate it from the rest of our experience is unlikely to be skilful, or even healthy.

For Buddhists, the blunt reality is that we need to operate in a medium that is often antagonistic to our spiritual ideals. Our principles of ethical action, speech and thought, we have to admit, are actually a long way from the norms of the society in which we live. This was true in the Buddha's time in India, and is at least as true in the western world of the present day. What can we do about this painful truth? It's certainly possible to 'opt out' of society altogether, and to do so temporarily, as we do on retreat, may certainly be a positive thing. However, if we are genuinely concerned to extend metta to other living beings, this doesn't really ring true as a permanent option. What we really need to do is to examine our economic and social role in the light of our Buddhist values. How we work, and equally how we spend our money, are conventionally thought to be nothing more than expressions of our 'individualism'. If we take our spiritual life seriously, however, there has to be more to the story. The teaching of interconnectedness emphasises our place in a highly complex web, and we can't pretend that our social and economic activities are conveniently exempt from this truth.

In 'The Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path' we have examples of 'wrong' livelihood - occupations that a Buddhist might find difficult to sustain from an ethical standpoint, and would therefore do well to avoid. Some of these, like arms manufacture and human trafficking, are as difficult to justify now as they were in the Buddha's day. However, it's easy to add modern, subtler examples of our own, quite possibly from our personal experience. Most of us have had experiences of feeling discomfort about some aspect of our employer's methods, and a few of us have even felt the need to challenge them directly, or just move on to another job. However, this sort of approach

might eventually just demonstrate that there are bigger questions that won't go away with a change of job. We need to apply questions of this sort to our personal relationship with many aspects of the economic system.

Having looked specifically at those *occupations* that might pose an ethical problem, Sangharakshita goes on to make some much broader points about our whole approach to work, and indeed to economics. To begin with, we might ask whether the work we do actually contributes anything of value to society in a real sense, and also whether it does us any personal good. The lectures that later became the text on which this course is based were originally given in 1968, when the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (the original name of the Triratna Buddhist Community) was only a year old. Since then things have changed hugely, and most of us work in ways that would hardly have been recognisable then. The economy in which most of us work is largely concerned with the pursuit of luxury, using natural resources at a truly alarming rate and helping to foster an acquisitive, information-rich, highly individualistic lifestyle. At the same time, many jobs seem to involve unwritten expectations of long hours and high performance – even when employers speak superficially about 'work life balance'. If we are trying to pursue spiritual ideals, these are facts of modern life that can only affect our mental states detrimentally.

Another consideration discussed in the chapter is **vocation** – in other words, work that is directly related to our core values. There are probably relatively few people in our economy who are truly employed in this way – obvious examples are professionals in education, health and the social services who typically earn relatively little in proportion to the vital contribution to society that they make. However, increasing numbers of people (particularly in the Triratna Buddhist Community) seem to be considering a move in the direction of more vocational work. This may involve lengthy re-training and a drop in income, but some people conclude that these are sacrifices worth making to make the time they spend at work more supportive of their spiritual development.

Under the heading of **duration** Sangharakshita suggests devoting as little time as one can manage to earning a living, and acknowledges just how radical a suggestion this is! Our society is extremely attached to its work ethic – we might even go so far as to describe it as an addiction.

In conclusion, the topic of Perfect Livelihood clearly addresses much more than our choice of occupation, as the term immediately suggests. The Triratna Buddhist Community has always had an idea that the Sangha is capable of forming a prototype 'new society', which would provide radical but practical alternatives to the 'old society'. Since the 1960s some important developments have taken place, just as suggested back then by Sangharakshita. There are now many individuals associated with the movement who have 'one foot in the world and one foot in the spiritual dimension'.