

# The Ethical Heart (1 of 5) Ethical Sensitivity

June 15, 2020

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

*sīla*, *kusala*, true self, wholesome, skillful, sweeping, actions, simple, ordinary, freedom, *A Monastery Within*, "The True Self," Eightfold Path, liberation, body

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So my friends, welcome to the beginning of a series of talks for this week. The topic is the concept of what is called "ethics" in English. This concept is often considered to be very important in Buddhism, but oddly enough, it might not have a good Pali equivalent, or it's not what we think it is in the Buddhist teachings. I'm going to talk a little bit about the ethics of Buddhism.

This is partly a small response to what's happening in this country and around the world in the fight for justice. It's a way of understanding more deeply how we can respond, and how we can be changed by what's happening in the world. Without wanting to be changed, without thinking about how we want to be different so we can be an instrument of support and betterment of what's happening in the world, we will lose an opportunity here.

Today will be an introduction to the topic of ethics. In the English language, sometimes (certainly for me when I was young) the word "ethics" by itself probably doesn't inspire. It's not a warm and inspiring word for some people. Sometimes it's even an off-putting word.

But the adjective "ethical" sometimes raises very different associations for some people. An ethical person sometimes seems like a person who lives from goodness and integrity and is someone we can trust. But someone who lives by ethics seems like someone who's almost removed from themselves, as though they are living by rules they have to follow.

In the Buddha's language, if we apply the word "ethics" to the Buddha, I also would say he was less interested in ethics as an abstract concept of moral principles than he was interested in the creation of ethical people.

His way of understanding people, especially regarding societal issues around him and the caste system or class system of his time, was often by their actions. What are their actions? What are they doing? Are they doing actions that are ethical in nature, or are they not? Over and over again *that* was his measure of people: seeing what they would do.

There is a little Zen story that applies to all of Buddhism (at least in the way I practice it). There are always two things, maybe only two things: there is meditation, and there is sweeping the temple courtyard. But the temple courtyard doesn't end at the gate of the temple. In this little teaching, the idea is that in meditation we wake up. We become sensitive, caring beings, awake, and free. That is one thing.

And then there is doing something for the world – sweeping the world, cleaning the world, bettering the world, and sweeping the courtyard. But the temple courtyard is not limited to the monastery; the whole world is our courtyard.

I have done a lot of sweeping in monasteries. For me sweeping is an ordinary, wonderful morning activity. Most often we did it after meditation in the morning. We got up for meditation, and sometimes we did some morning chanting, and then we went out and swept. It was a wonderful way of being present in the clear, often cool, early morning air. With the physical activity of sweeping, there was a way in which we simply entered into the world of sweeping – sweeping in a simple, ordinary way.

Expanding that simple, ordinary caring into all the issues of our life and the world, caring for social justice in a clear and engaged way, comes out of our freedom.

There is a story from my little storybook, *A Monastery Within*, that goes like this... The title is "The True Self": A woman came to the monastery determined to ask the abbess how she could discover her true self. She'd assumed many identities over her lifetime. Most were identities that others expected her to have.

When she presented her concern, the abbess replied, "Since knowing the true self is so important for you, you should ask this question of someone who has fully penetrated this issue. We have a very learned monk here in the monastery who has read every Buddhist scripture and the many commentaries. He studied with some of the greatest Buddhist teachers of his age. He has spent years meditating and has deep realization. Come, I will introduce you to him."

The abbess led the woman into the courtyard where a solitary monk was absorbed in sweeping. "There he is," said the abbess. "When you're interested in the true self, it's important not to be abstract. Don't ask what the true self is. Ask him what is *his* true self."

Shyly, but with great hope, the woman walked up to the monk and said, "What is your true self?" The monk smiled and continued to sweep. Returning to the abbess, the woman said, "He didn't answer my question." "Quite the opposite," said the abbess. "He gave you the most precise answer he could at this time. When he sweeps, his true self is sweeping."

This is a somewhat fanciful story showing that actions – what we do – define us, create who we are, or express who we are. Ethics is mostly about what we do. The word *sīla*, which is often translated as "ethics" or "virtue" in the Buddhist teachings, is explicitly about what we do. It is about the actions of body and actions of speech. Those actions should be ethical in nature.

But there's more to the Buddha's concerns than just body and speech. He's also concerned with the inner life, with the mind and the heart. He doesn't call that ethical quality *sīla*. There is a different word that's associated with it – the word "*kusala*." It's an overarching word that expresses the whole concept of "ethical" and "ethics" much better than *sīla* does. *Kusala* is often translated as "wholesome," "wholesomeness," or "skillfulness." I'll talk more about this word as we go through the week.

*Kusala* is a key word that is used in the teachings of the Buddha in many ways and is closer to our English (language) ideas of ethics and ethical. So rather than asking, "Is it ethical?", the Buddhist question is, "Is it *kusala*? Is it wholesome? Is it skillful?"

You get somewhat different connotations and associations with the word "wholesome" than you do with "ethical." This might represent the differences between some Western orientations around ethics and the Buddhist ones.

So the word "ethics" doesn't have a good match in the ancient teachings of the Buddha. That in itself is maybe not so interesting. However, it is very interesting that what it implies is not that Buddhists are unethical, but rather, that what we would think of as ethics – where we might separate ethics and see it as its own independent topic – is integrated into the whole Buddhist path. So the Buddhist path is an ethical path, a *kusala* path, a wholesome path from beginning to end.

The development of the path of liberation in Buddhism could, in English, be equally called the development of the ethical path. As we become more and more liberated in Buddhism, we become more and more ethical.

This is not a case of ethics being just the beginning of the path, where *sīla* is the start (you get your ethics in order so you can go and practice what's higher). The development of an ethical being, becoming ethical, is part and parcel, an integral part of every step along the Eightfold Path, every step along the path to full liberation.

So this week we are not talking about ethics as an incidental topic or kindergarten Buddhism. We're also not talking about ethics in a way that some people might feel is oppressive. It's actually the case that the ethical movement of Buddhism is an opening and a liberating movement because it's completely integrated with and intimate to the path of liberation itself.

One of the main points I'd like to emphasize here is that what we call in English "ethical cultivation," or "ethical development" – becoming a more and more ethical person – is inseparable in Buddhism from becoming more and more liberated, more and more awake. The two go hand in hand.

That's a somewhat general introduction. We will talk about this as we build upon some of the fundamental aspects of the ethical path of Buddhism, and also upon some principles that support it. Because finding our way to becoming an ethical person and doing ethical things involves using our body as the instrument of knowledge, awareness, and sensitivity.

The idea that the body itself is the vehicle for becoming liberated and becoming ethical is actually a very important part of this whole path. And how does that work? What are the challenges and joys of really connecting here and using the body as the method, the vehicle for becoming ethical, as opposed to pulling out the law books of Buddhism to see what the rules are so we know how to be ethical? This is a very different orientation. We are cultivating ethical sensitivity for living a wholesome life that contributes to the welfare and happiness of all beings.

So I hope that this week this topic will be interesting to you and valuable to review. I'm certainly looking forward to talking about the different perspectives and aspects of this very important topic.

Thank you.