Introduction to Buddhist Ethics (1 of 5)
Non-Harming

May 27, 2024

SUMMARY KEYWORDS samādhi, ahimsa, pyramid, wisdom, interpersonal, Four Noble Truths, suffering, agency, capacity, clinging, attachment, self-harm, justice, fair, non-violence, autonomy, freedom, self-protection, protection of family, liberation, safe, body, speech, thoughts, meaning and purpose, agency and autonomy, identity and dignity, community and kinship, healing and reconciliation

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Hello everyone, and welcome to this Monday morning meditation and teaching. I'm very happy to be back.

I want to turn my attention for at least the next couple of weeks to what some people consider to be the foundation of Buddhism. In English, we would probably call this foundation "ethics" – living a virtuous life.

If we think of Buddhist teachings as a pyramid, then virtue and ethics would be the foundation upon which the pyramid is built – a wide strong base upon which the higher layers of the pyramid would go up to a point. The second layer would be meditation or samādhi – cultivating ourselves in a wholesome way. The third and top layer would be wisdom. In this way, wisdom is supported by meditation and spiritual practice, and spiritual practice is supported by ethics.

Ethics has a lot to do with how we live our lives in relation to other people. It can be in relation to ourselves as well. But the interpersonal world we live in is a huge part of human life. As adults, some people forget this because they have somehow become separated, alienated, or isolated from others.

A healthy way of being a human being is to be brought up by adults who care, who feed and clean them as babies, who watch over and protect them as they grow up. The deep interpersonal world that human beings depend on continues into adulthood. If we have children or there are children in our immediate community, then part of the adults’ role is to care for them and help them grow up safely in ways that allow them to grow into their full potential. The interpersonal world of human beings is huge. So when ethics is at the foundation of Buddhist practice, caring for the interpersonal world supports our own inner life so that we're in a good place to meditate and cultivate wisdom.

One of my favorite definitions of wisdom from the Buddha is that a wise person is someone who “avoids harming self, harming others, harming self and others, and harming the whole world.” Instead, a wise person focuses on benefiting self, benefiting others, benefiting self and others, and benefiting the whole world. A wise person is defined by their care for how they live in the world with self and others. The person avoids harming self and others, and instead benefits self and others and is concerned with the welfare of the world.

Ethics is a foundation for samādhi, and samādhi is a foundation for wisdom. Wisdom then supports further deepening and understanding of the value of ethics and the virtue of non-harming. In the Buddha's teachings, probably the fundamental principle that lies at the heart of it all is the idea of non-harming. The highest reach of Buddhist teachings is often held to be the Four Noble Truths, which have to do with suffering and the end of suffering. Ending suffering depends on ending the ways in which we contribute to and are responsible for our own suffering.

This doesn't mean that all suffering is caused by oneself. But we have the most agency and capacity to make a difference when we do not contribute to, add to, or create our own suffering. Over time with deep mindfulness, we understand how phenomenally fundamental and pervasive are the ways in which clinging and attachment of all kinds causes self-harm. Or to say it in the terminology of the Four Noble Truths, clinging and attachment cause suffering. In Buddhist ethics the fundamental ethical principle is non-harming.

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Our understanding is that non-harming runs through the whole course of the Buddha's teachings. It is a constant reference point for what we're doing in training and practice. It might be easier to understand the value of not harming oneself. However, the idea of not harming others can be more challenging when issues of safety and protection are involved or when there are issues of justice, where we feel that what is fair or right for us is being threatened.

I like to believe that one of the minimum engagements that Buddhists have in an ethical life is using non-harming as a reference point to understand themselves and how they can live with others and promote what works for the welfare and benefit of all beings in both the short term and the long term. Sometimes violence can bring results in the short term, but in the long term, violence causes tremendous harm that might take generations to rectify.

In my teaching here during the last two weeks, I taught about ten basic human needs – meaning and purpose, agency and autonomy, identity and dignity, community and kinship, and healing and reconciliation. We can understand all ten of those needs by recognizing that at the heart of all of them is the principle and way of living that involves non-harming, *ahiṃsa*.

For the Buddha, the purpose and meaning at the heart of the Buddhist teachings is a life of non-harming.

A healthy sense of agency and autonomy is the very soil from which a powerful, confident, non-harming lifestyle can arise. It is often those people whose agency, autonomy, and freedom are curtailed or frustrated who feel that they have to harm others in order to get what they need and want. You can analyze all ten of these needs from the point of view that, for Buddhism, non-harming lies at the heart of them.

Whether you agree with this view is another thing, but it is the reference point that I think really makes Buddhist practice come alive. It is a reference point that guides Buddhist practice and supports mindfulness. It helps us to question ourselves and see ourselves in a deeper way.

We don't necessarily have to agree with the principle of non-harming in order to use it as a powerful reference point to clarify and understand what makes us operate and motivates us, and what we believe. Then we can look at it more deeply. I think that to be respectful of all beings, there is also a time to be respectful of how intense the motivation is for self-protection in people – protecting themselves, their families, and their children. Self-protection is what prompts people to be violent. Protecting one's family is a fundamental human need.

The call for non-violence and non-harming needs to respect this deep instinct we have. It is not necessarily greed, hatred, and delusion that lead to acts of violence. Occasionally it involves something very deep and fundamentally human. Not to justify the dynamic but to respect how people are. Only through deep respect can we hope to convey to others the value of *ahiṃsa*, non-harming.

Even if we don't believe in non-harming in all circumstances, it is the fundamental principle for how we relate to ourselves if what we want to do is to become free. The spiritual liberation – the liberation of heart that Buddhism champions – points to the possibility of profound peace. It is inseparable from a deep affinity for non-harming – a deep association with and a realization of the value, beauty, wonderfulness, and wholesomeness of living a wise non-harming life. A wise life that understands deeply how to engage in the world in a way that supports self and others and can ensure that we are safe for all beings.

Another one of my favorite quotes from the Buddha is his instruction to make yourself safe for all beings. What a great thing to do, so that no one has to be afraid of us. And what does it take? How do we have to grow and develop ourselves? How do we become strong? How do we become skilled in finding our way through this complicated world so that we can provide a sense of safety for all beings that we encounter? It's not an easy task, but it's a worthwhile one. Maybe it's a lifetime task that we're working towards. I think it's a noble task to become safe for all beings.

And how does that safety translate to others, to society around us? Maybe that question is secondary to how we discover this for ourselves. Meditation and mindfulness create a path to understand the value of non-harming – not just to understand, but to really see and discover clearly for oneself, to verify for oneself that a non-harming
approach to living in the world with our body, speech, and thoughts brings tremendous benefit and goodness to one who practices it.

It is possible to know the value of non-harming so thoroughly for yourself that no one has to convince you or give you a philosophy or ethical guidance to understand it. It's so obvious from what has developed in your own heart through this practice that we do.

To support this process, if you’re interested in using the concept of non-harming not as an admonition or as something that you should do, but rather as a reference point to help you reflect deeply, you might ask: What is happening here? In what way are we harming? Where is the non-harming? What is the wise thing to do here in reference to this phenomenal teacher that we can carry with us, the teacher of non-harming?

This week I’m going to talk about some of the fundamental principles of Buddhist ethics, as we began with the most important one – non-harming – today. That will create the foundation for talking about the precepts next week.

Thank you.