Intro to Buddhist Ethics (3 of 5) Ethical Beauty

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Welcome to the third talk on the introduction to the foundations for Buddhist ethics. When we bring together the topics of the first two days – non-harming and wholesomeness – and when they live in us, they point to and evoke an inner ethical beauty. In Buddhism, one reason to be ethical is not because of some commandments, righteousness, or a sense of purity (depending on what we mean by purity). Rather we want to be ethical because we’re inspired to stay close to feeling and understanding our own inner harmony and beauty.

What is beautiful within us is not harmed or covered up by living an ethical life. When we do something out of hate or greed, or if we lie or want to cause harm to someone else, we can feel that we lose touch with our beautiful, wonderful capacity for loveliness and goodness.

One of the words in the Buddhist teachings that can be translated as “ethics” or “ethical” is the Pali word kusala. Another Pali word used for “ethics” is kalyāṇa. We know it in the expression kalyāṇamitta, often translated as “good spiritual friend.” However, in ancient and modern dictionaries, the first meaning of kalyāṇa is “beauty” or “beautiful.”

Kalyāṇa also means “excellence” or “good.” But “good” can understate something that is really spectacular and wonderful. In the ancient Buddhist teachings, the beauty or excellence that is being pointed to is often ethical in nature. A good spiritual friend is someone who knows how to live a life of non-harming, a life that is wholesome. The person spreads that wholesomeness wherever they go. A spiritual friend inspires others, including us, to do the same in our practice. So rather than referring to a good “spiritual” friend, we can call kalyāṇamitta a “beautiful” friend.

There is an expression that the Dharma is good in the beginning, good in the middle, and good at the end. And certainly, that’s good. But when we say that the Dharma is beautiful in the beginning, beautiful in the middle, and beautiful in the end, “beauty” points to what we’re capable of – something in us that is more than just good.

Beauty is inspiring in the sense that it feels lovely, calming, and peaceful, having clarity. Rather than using the word “purity,” I like to use the word “cleanliness.” It is a quality of the inner life that can feel completely clean. The sense of “beauty” overlaps with “clean.” The sense of “ethical” overlaps with a deep inner feeling of being cleansed. So why would you harm anyone? Why would you sully that inner feeling of being clean by doing something that is unethical?

This is not about being ethical because of rules. We are ethical because there’s an inner reference point of something really good that we don’t want to harm, we don’t want to cover up, and we don’t want to lose touch with it.

I’ve known people whose dedication to truth is not just an idea or a commitment. I felt that in their whole being these people are completely incapable of lying. There’s a commitment to truth that has been quite inspiring for me to see. I’ve known people in whom I have a deep trust because of how strongly it comes through that they are ethical. These are people who are not going to do anything to harm others – not intentionally, at least. When I am with them, there is safety. But what I value more is a deep trust or confidence in them. They mirror for me what's possible for me as well. They evoke in me the same kind of orientation.

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One foundation for Buddhist ethics is kalyāṇa, a kind of inner excellence, beauty, and goodness. There is some choice about what word you want to use to translate kalyāṇa. But it does speak to something within us that's inspiring, worth maintaining or staying close to, and something within us to be inspired by.

One of the things I said yesterday about wholesomeness is that we want to be careful not to assume that there's some thing inside that is the thing that is beautiful or wonderful, which is separate from how we are aware of and relate to whatever is happening. There is a choice here – we choose to be present, attentive, and mindful of whatever is going on in a way that does not harm us but is nourishing and wholesome-making for us. The beauty is in how we know and how we are aware.

This can be very simple. I've spent years being upset with myself because the mind wandered off, and then I jerked my mind back, sometimes in a harsh way. The way I came back from being distracted was certainly not beautiful. Slowly over time, I've learned how to notice that I'm distracted, and rather than being in a hurry to judge or criticize, to make space to feel and know that I'm distracted. It feels good and wholesome to just know it in a simple, clear way.

Then I come back to my breathing again in a way that just feels nice to do. The manner in which I come back to my breathing is part of the meditation and the spiritual life. It almost doesn't matter if I make it back to my breathing. Just the movement itself of the mind – the opening up of the mind, the switching to receptivity in the mind – feels so nice. There's no harshness, demand, disappointment, or aversion to anything. It just feels nice to keep coming back and being here.

How I relate to wandering off is where part of the loveliness, the kalyāṇa, is. This is how I can be my own good spiritual friend, my beautiful friend, my own good friend – by coming back and being here in a nice way.

It's easy to judge ourselves and think there is something wrong with us, we are inadequate, or not good enough. We can have a global view that that's the case. Then it's hard to find something inspiring within us that we feel is beautiful, lovely, and satisfying, where we feel a sense of harmony or goodness. If that's the case, then maybe we can find beauty in how we know that. We can know it kindly, with compassion and clarity. In the very clarity of knowing something, there is some beauty.

Sometimes mindfulness has a lot to do with truth-telling. We're telling ourselves the truth of what's happening in the moment. If I'm being self-critical, then the truth would be, "Oh, here we have self-criticism going on." There's something about the clarity of that truth-telling that frees us from believing that is who we are. It creates a different context for recognizing what feels good – in the truth-telling itself.

The ability to tell the truth (whether we directly see it that way or not) is a characteristic of mindfulness. It is the continual act of being with the truth of the moment, seeing it, feeling it, and recognizing it. In doing that, there is something quite lovely, beautiful, and profound about the ability to tell ourselves the truth.

An important source of Buddhist ethics is appreciating something valuable about ourselves. We discover within ourselves an inner beauty, harmony, cleanliness, and goodness. That is where the motivation to live a life of beauty comes in. Living beautifully rather than living a life of clutter, hurry, wanting, and reacting.

This is a life that requires giving a little extra time to everything. To live beautifully is to give time to each experience. If you don't give time, chances are you won't feel the inner beauty. And if you do give time, maybe each thing you do will be more thorough and complete. There will be less to clean up after yourself. May you live a beautiful life. And may you understand how inner beauty is an inspiring source for living an ethical life.

Thank you.