The Tree of Enlightenment

Dr Peter Della Santina

E-mail: bdea@buddhanet.net
Web site: www.buddhanet.net

Buddha Dharma Education Association Inc.

Chapter Five

Morality

In Chapter 4 we discussed the Four Noble Truths, our last topic being the fourth truth, which consists of the Noble Eightfold Path to the end of suffering. There we used the analogy of climbing a mountain, where the very first step depends on keeping the summit firmly in view, while the last step depends on being careful not to stumble at the outset. In other words, each part of the way depends on the other parts, and if any part of the path is not completed, the summit will not be gained. In the same way, in the case of the Noble Eightfold Path, all the steps are interrelated and depend on one another. We cannot do away with any one step.

Nonetheless, as mentioned at the end of Chapter 4, the eight steps of the path have been divided into three ways of practice: (1) morality, (2) mental development, and (3) wisdom. Although, conceptually and structurally speaking, the first step of climbing a mountain depends on the last and the last depends on the first, practically speaking, we do have to climb the lowest slopes first. We may be attracted to the summit, but to get there we must cross the lower slopes first; only then can we proceed to the higher reaches. It is for this very practical reason that the steps of the Noble Eightfold Path have been divided into these three ways of practice.

The first of these three ways of practice is morality. Morality forms the foundation of further progress on the path, of further personal development. It is said that, just as the earth is the basis

of all animate and inanimate things, so morality is the basis of all positive qualities. When we look around us, we can see that everything rests on the earth, from buildings to bridges, animals to human beings. The earth supports all these things; in the same way, morality is the foundation of all qualities, all virtues, all attainments, ranging from the mundane to the supramundane, from success and good fortune to skill in meditation and, ultimately, wisdom and enlightenment. By means of this analogy, we can easily understand the importance of good conduct as a fundamental prerequisite for following the path and achieving results on it.

Why do we take the trouble to stress the importance of good conduct as the foundation of progress on the path? The reason is that there is a tendency to think of good conduct as rather dull and boring. Meditation sounds more exciting and interesting, and philosophy and wisdom, too, have a kind of fascination about them. There is a dangerous temptation to neglect the importance of morality and want to go straight on to the more exciting parts of the path. But if we do not create this foundation of good conduct, we will not succeed in following the other steps of the path.

It is necessary to understand how the rules of good conduct, or the precepts, are established in Buddhism, because there are different ways in which moral or ethical codes can be presented. If you look at the moral teachings of the major religions of the world, you will find that there is a surprising degree of agreement among them. If you look, for instance, at the moral teachings of Confucius or Lao Tzu, at those of the Buddha and of Hindu teachers, and at those of Jews, Christians, and Muslims,

you will find that the basic rules of good conduct are almost identical. However, although the rules in most cases correspond almost exactly, the attitudes toward these codes and the ways they are presented, understood, and interpreted differ considerably from faith to faith.

In general, there are two ways moral codes can be established—what we might call the authoritarian way and the democratic way. A good example of the former is God handing down the tablets of the Ten Commandments to Moses on the mountain. By contrast, in Buddhism we have what I think we can call a democratic way of establishing the basic rules of good conduct. You may wonder why I say this when, after all, we do have rules of morality laid down in scriptures. You might ask, "Isn't this similar to God handing down the commandments to Moses?" I think not, because if we look more closely at the meaning of Buddhist scriptures, we can see what lies behind the rules of good conduct—namely, the principles of equality and reciprocity.

The principle of equality holds that all living beings are the same in their basic orientation and outlook. In other words, all living beings want to be happy, to enjoy life, and to avoid suffering and death. This is just as true of other living beings as it is of us. The principle of equality is at the heart of the universality of the Buddha's vision. Understanding the principle of equality, we are encouraged to act in light of the additional awareness of the principle of reciprocity.

Reciprocity means that, just as we would not like to be abused, robbed, injured, or killed, so all other living beings are unwilling to have such things happen to them. We can put this principle of reciprocity quite simply by saying, "Do not act

toward others in a way you would not want them to act toward you." Once we are aware of these principles of equality and reciprocity, it is not hard to see how they form the foundation of the rules of good conduct in Buddhism.

Let us now look specifically at the contents of morality in Buddhism. The way of practice of good conduct includes three parts of the Noble Eightfold Path: (a) right speech, (b) right action, and (c) right livelihood.

Right speech constitutes an extremely important aspect of the path. We often underestimate the power of speech. As a consequence, we sometimes exercise very little control over our faculty of speech. This should not be so. We have all been very greatly hurt by someone's words at some time or other in our lives, and similarly, we have sometimes been greatly encouraged by the words someone has said. In the area of public life, we can clearly see how those who are able to communicate effectively are able to influence people tremendously, for better or for worse. Hitler, Churchill, Kennedy, and Martin Luther King were all accomplished speakers who were able to influence millions with their words. It is said that a harsh word can wound more deeply than a weapon, whereas a gentle word can change the heart and mind of even the most hardened criminal. Perhaps more than anything else, the faculty of speech differentiates humans from animals, so if we wish to create a society in which communication, cooperation, harmony, and well-being are goals to be attained, we must control, cultivate, and use our speech in helpful ways.

All the rules of good conduct imply respect for values founded on an understanding of the principles of equality and reciprocity.

In this context, right speech implies respect for truth and respect for the well-being of others. If we use our faculty of speech with these values in mind, we will be cultivating right speech, and through this we will achieve greater harmony in our relationships with others. Traditionally, we speak of four aspects of right speech – namely, the avoidance of (a) lying, (b) backbiting or slander, (c) harsh speech, and (d) idle talk.

Some of you may already be familiar with the Buddha's instructions to his son Rahula about the importance of avoiding lying. He used the example of a vessel. The vessel had a little bit of water in the bottom, which he asked Rahula to look at, commenting, "The virtue and renunciation of those who are not ashamed of lying is small, like the small amount of water in the vessel." Next, the Buddha threw away the water in the vessel and said, "Those who are not ashamed of lying throw away their virtue, just as I have thrown away this water." Then the Buddha showed Rahula the empty vessel and said, "Just as empty is the virtue and renunciation of those who habitually tell lies."

In this way the Buddha used the vessel to make the point that our practice of wholesome actions, our good conduct and character, are intimately affected by lying. If we are convinced that we can act in one way and speak in another, then we will not hesitate to act badly, because we will be confident that we will be able to cover up our harmful actions by lying. Lying therefore opens the door to all kinds of unwholesome acts.

Slander is divisive. It creates quarrels between friends, and it creates pain and discord in society. Therefore, just as we would not like to have our friends turned against us by someone's slanderous talk, so we ought not to slander others.

Similarly, we ought not to abuse others with harsh words. On the contrary, we should speak courteously to others, as we would like them to speak to us.

When we come to idle talk, you may wonder why we cannot even engage in a little chitchat. But the prohibition against idle talk is not absolute or general. The kind of idle talk meant here is malicious gossip—that is, diverting ourselves and others by recounting people's faults and failings.

In short, why not simply refrain from using the faculty of speech—which, as we have seen, is so powerful—for deception, creating divisions among others, abusing others, and idling away time at their expense? Instead, why not use it constructively—for communicating meaningfully, uniting people, encouraging understanding between friends and neighbors, and imparting helpful advice? The Buddha once said, "Pleasant speech is as sweet as honey; truthful speech is beautiful, like a flower; and wrong speech is unwholesome, like filth." So let us try, for our own good and the good of others, to cultivate right speech—namely, respect both for truth and for the welfare of others.

The next part of the Noble Eightfold Path that falls into the category of morality is right action. Right action implies (a) respect for life, (b) respect for property, and (c) respect for personal relationships. You will recall what I said a moment ago about life being dear to all. It is said in the *Dhammapada* that all living beings tremble at the prospect of punishment, all fear death, and all love life. Hence, again keeping in mind the principles of equality and reciprocity, we ought not to kill living beings. You might be ready to accept this for human beings but demure with regard to some other living creatures. Here, how-

ever, some of the developments in recent years in the fields of science and technology ought to give the most skeptical free-thinker food for thought. For instance, when we destroy a particular strain of insect, are we absolutely certain of accomplishing the greatest, long-term good of all, or do we, more often than not, instead contribute unwittingly to an imbalance in the ecosystem that will create even greater problems in the future?

Respect for property means not to rob, steal from, or cheat others. This is important because those who take what is not given by force, stealth, or treachery are guilty of breaking this precept. The employer who does not pay his employee an honest wage, commensurate with the work performed, is guilty of taking what is not given; the employee who collects his salary but shirks his duties is equally guilty of lack of respect for property.

Finally, respect for personal relationships means, first of all, to avoid sexual misconduct. Put most simply, it means avoiding adultery. Beyond that, it means avoiding sexual liaisons with people who are liable to be harmed by such relations. More generally, it means avoiding abuse of the senses. You can easily see how, if these guidelines are followed in a given community, such a community will be a better place in which to live.

Right livelihood is the third step of the Noble Eightfold Path included in the way of practice of morality. Right livelihood is an extension of the rules of right action to our roles as breadwinners in society. We have just seen that, in the cases of right speech and right action, the underlying values are respect for truth, for the welfare of others, and for life, property, and personal relationships. Right livelihood means earning a living in a way that does not violate these basic moral values.

Five kinds of livelihood are discouraged for Buddhists: trading in animals for slaughter, slaves, arms, poisons, and intoxicants (drugs and alcohol). These five are not recommended because they contribute to the ills of society and violate the values of respect for life and for the welfare of others. Dealing in animals for slaughter violates the value of respect for life. Dealing in slaves violates both respect for life and right action in personal relationships. Dealing in arms also violates the value of respect for life, while dealing in poisons or intoxicants also does not respect the lives and welfare of others. All these trades contribute to insecurity, discord, and suffering in the world. How does the practice of good conduct, or morality, work? We have said that, in the context of society at large, following the rules of good conduct creates a social environment characterized by harmony and peace. All our social goals can be achieved within the rules of good conduct based on the fundamental principles of equality and reciprocity. In addition, each person benefits from the practice of good conduct. In one of his discourses, the Buddha said that someone who has observed respect for life and so forth feels like a king, duly crowned and with his enemies subdued. Such a person feels at peace and at ease.

The practice of morality creates an inner sense of tranquillity, stability, security, and strength. Once you have created that inner peace, you can successfully follow the other steps of the path. You can cultivate and perfect the various aspects of mental development. You can then achieve wisdom—but only after you have created the necessary foundation of morality both within and without, both in yourself and in your relationships with others.

Very briefly, these are the origin, contents, and goal of good conduct in Buddhism. There is just one more point I would like to make before concluding our review of Buddhist morality. When people consider the rules of good conduct, they often think, "How can we possibly follow them?" It seems to be terribly difficult to observe the precepts. For instance, even the prohibition against taking life, which is the most fundamental, appears very difficult to follow absolutely. Every day, as you clean the kitchen or putter about the garden, you are very likely to kill some insect that happens to get in your way. Also, it appears very difficult even to avoid lying in all cases. How are we to deal with this problem, which is a genuine one?

The point is not whether we can observe all the rules of morality all the time. Rather, the point is that, if the rules of morality are well founded (i.e., if the principles of equality and reciprocity are worth believing in, and if the rules of morality are an appropriate way of enacting them), then it is our duty to follow these rules as much as we possibly can. This is not to say that we will be able to follow them absolutely, but only that we ought to do our best to follow the way of practice indicated by the rules of good conduct. If we want to live at peace with ourselves and others, then we ought to respect the life and welfare of others, their property, and so on. If a situation arises in which we find ourselves unable to apply a particular rule, that is not the fault of the rule, but simply an indication of the gap between our own practice of morality and the ideal practice of it.

When, in ancient times, seafarers navigated their ships across the great oceans with the aid of the stars, they were not able to follow exactly the course indicated by those heavenly

bodies. Yet the stars were their guides, and by following them, however approximately, mariners reached their destination. In the same way, when we follow the rules of good conduct, we do not pretend that we can observe all of them all the time. This is why the five precepts are called "training precepts"; it is also why we renew them again and again. What we have in the rules of good conduct is a framework through which we can try to live in accord with the two fundamental principles that illuminate the teaching of the Buddha: the principle of the equality of all living beings, and the principle of reciprocal respect.