

When we do something bad

It would be rather disappointing if we do something really important, something that defines our life and happiness, and yet not know what its purpose or goal is. In simple terms, we can say that to be a Buddhist is to try to emulate the Buddha's conduct and follow the good examples of the early saints. And, of course, to practise the Buddha's teaching, the Dharma.

After all, these are the 3 refuges – the Buddha (our ideal of human awakening), the Dharma (the path or method of personal cultivation) and the sangha (the spiritual community of the awakened). In other words, on account of the uncertainty of rebirth, we need to consciously aspire for a happy rebirth, and work out our lives in that direction, as taught in **the Saṅkhār'-upapatti Sutta** (M 120).¹

If we carefully examine the early Buddhist teachings, we would notice that the Buddha would at first only admit arhats² or streamwinners into his order.³ Indeed, according to **the Dakkhiṇa Vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 142), we are still “outsiders” (*bāhiraka*) to the Buddha's true teaching, the noble eightfold path, until we are at least streamwinners.⁴

Properly speaking, then, if we are serious about being true Buddhists, about overcoming suffering – or at least, not resorting to Buddhism as a livelihood or for worldly pleasure or power – we should aspire to become at least streamwinners in this life itself. This is the spiritual minimum we need to work for. Otherwise, we are likely to be uncertain about our future life.

On account of our worldliness, then, at the moment of dying, we will lose our human body, and move on to assume the form – perhaps, an asura demon, an animal, a preta or a hell-being – that our mind is habitually preoccupied with, laced with greed, hate or delusion. Even if we are reborn in the heavens as devas or angels – on account of our lack of spirituality – when that heavenly karma ends – we would fall straight into hell!⁵ Once we fall into any of these sub-human states, it is extremely difficult to get out of them.

The point is that even though we have a human body, we do not always – in fact, rarely – have a human mind. We have an asura mind if we exploit others, measuring them merely for what benefits they can give us. We have an animal mind, when we let lust, fear and groupthink rule us. We have a preta mind if we are caught up in an addictive rut of collecting things, sex, pleasures and religiosity. We have a hell-being mind if we harbour ill will or violent thoughts towards others.

When we diligently keep to the precepts with lovingkindness, we are, for that moment, truly human. When we cultivate lovingkindness, or compassion, or gladness, or equanimity, we are, to that extent, of a divine heart. It is for this reason that it is said, “Difficult it is to be human” (*kiccho manussa,paṭilābho*, Dh 182).

¹ M 120/3:99-103 ([SD 3.4](#)).

² For the case of Yasa the young householder, see Mv **1.7.11+14**, [SD 11.2\(7\)](#).

³ See, eg, **Aṅguli,māla Sutta** (M 86,6.2+6.3), [SD 5.11](#). Also the huge followings of Vipassī Buddha: **Mahā'padāna S** (D 14,3.15-17, etc), [SD 49.8a](#) & [SD 49.8b](#).

⁴ On the “outsider,” see **Dakkhiṇa Vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 142,5(11)) & nn, [SD 1.9](#); also [SD 47.1](#) (1.1.2).

⁵ See (**Nānā,karaṇa**) **Puggala Sutta 1** (A 4.123/2:126-128), [SD 23.8a](#).

However, being human or being divine does not guarantee us any kind of lasting happiness or any happy rebirth when we have no access to the liberating Dharma. The best guarantee we have – if we are not diligently living a life of renunciation working for arhathood – is to aspire to attain streamwinning in this life itself.⁶

Now, if we are streamwinning aspirants or streamers,⁷ **what if we break the precepts?** The best way to prevent ourselves as streamers from breaking any of the precepts is to hold our heart constantly in lovingkindness, “standing, walking, sitting or lying down.”⁸ And we should fall asleep with lovingkindness, and wake up with lovingkindness, too. We should sleep happily, wake happily. In this way, unwholesome mental states are less likely to invade our minds, or when they do, they would not stay very long.

However, if we are very much involved with the world, then, there are always opportunities for us to break the precepts or have negative minds. This may happen despite our best efforts – because our latent tendencies of lust, ill will and ignorance lurk in the depths of our unconscious – like sealed cans of gas that explode when the temperature goes too high.

Even as streamwinning aspirants or streamers, it is possible that we may, under certain circumstances, fall victim to **the 4 biases** of greed, hate, delusion and fear.⁹ In **the Cūḷa Dukkha-khandha Sutta** (M 14), Mahānāma the Sakya complains to the Buddha that although he is a once-returner (*sakadāgāmi*) – who is slightly more advanced than a streamwinner – he is still troubled by greed, hate and delusion. The Buddha replies that this is because he is still living a layman’s life.

Then, the Buddha tells Mahānāma that only when he has attained the zest (*pīti*) and joy (*sukha*) of dhyana, only that joy would be able to overcome the lure of greed, hate and delusion. He is then taught how to practise sense-restraint, so that he is able to at least temporarily ward off the influences of the 3 motivational roots of greed, hate and delusion.¹⁰

When a streamer breaks a precept, it is likely to be on account of some level of greed, hate or delusion. It is important that we first carefully understand the nature of the precepts, so that we observe them properly. When we do break any precepts, we should do the following spiritual exercise:

- (1) “Which precept have I broken?” Mindfully and fearlessly examine a single breach at a time.
- (2) “What are the conditions that made me break this precept?” There is always more than just one condition here. There is no *one* to blame, not even ourself, but the contributing *conditions* need to be carefully identified and examined.
- (3) “How do I feel if I am fully free from the unwholesome mind that arises *from* such an unwholesome act?” Recollect the times when we are joyfully meditating, doing puja, or listen-

⁶ See Reflection, “[Spiritual streaming](#),” R430, 2016.

⁷ “Streaming” is a convenient shorthand, in colloquial speech, for “aspiring to streamwinning.” We can also use “streamer” as a shorthand for an aspirant to streamwinning.

⁸ See **Karaṇīya Metta Sutta** (Khp 9,9 = Sn 151), [SD 38.3](#).

⁹ The 4 psychological biases or motives (*agati*) are an extension of the 3 unwholesome roots (*akusala, mūla*) or greed, hate, delusion and fear, esp when dealing with others. See **Sigālovāda Sutta** (D 31,4+5), [SD 4.1](#); **Agati Sutta 1** (A 4.17), SD 89.7; **Saṅgaha Bala Sutta** (A 9.5,6.4) n, [SD 2.21](#).

¹⁰ M 14 ([SD 4.7](#)).

ing to an inspiring Dharma talk, or simply recalling a very happy moment, when we are not breaking any precept. Feel the joy, and smile in our heart at it.

- (4) Recite that precept which we have broken with a renewed commitment to observe it fully and happily.

It is clear here that streaming is a practice, not a status. We cannot become a streamer by merely joining a group or performing a ritual or taking a vow. Streamwinning is a daily examination of our conscience, a moment-to-moment awareness of what is going on in our minds. We must show lovingkindness to all this, knowing fully well that all negative states are impermanent: they will pass when we remove their conditions.

Good states, too, are impermanent. So, we need to keep on renewing our efforts, even little by little, but never giving up – like drops of water filling a pot (Dh 121 f, 239) – just as we age, so, too, goodness grows with us, so that we look with joy at the progress we have made.¹¹ In other words, we must constantly cultivate lovingkindness to help us with the keeping to a morally virtuous life.

Once we attain streamwinning, we will gain such spiritual wisdom and strength that we will never deliberately break any precept, and our moral life is the kind praised by the Buddha and his saints. We may still be shaken by compassion, just as when the Bodhisattva sees the first 3 signs of the old man, the sick man and the dead man. But we will joyfully know there is a clear and certain way out of our imperfections and sufferings – as in the 4th sign, that of the peaceful and radiant renunciant. We are sure of awakening.

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¹¹ The Buddha describes the nature of a streamwinner in **(Agata,phala) Mahānāma Sutta** (A 6.10), [SD 15.3](#). In **(Mahānāma) Gilayana Sutta** (S 55.54), the Buddha declares that the attainment of streamwinning by a lay person, who is thus “freed in mind,” is no different from that of a monk, “freed in mind for a hundred years” (S 55.54), [SD 4.10](#).