

The good roots of society

How the 5 precepts give value and reality to us
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In early Buddhist training, our Dhamma-based life is rooted in moral training (*sīla, sikkhā*), that is, the restraining, disciplining and refining of our body and speech, so that we are “bodily cultivated” (*bhāvita, kāya*). This is the basis for our mental training (*samādhi, sikkhā*), when we learn to discard distractions and free our mind so that it settles down in peace and clarity to become our path to wisdom, that is, in wisdom training (*paññā, sikkhā*).

Truth and beauty

Wisdom training is about us cultivating and growing in our understanding the true nature of life, its **impermanence**. Hence, we learn to value our lives as the experience of *happiness, freedom, truth and wisdom*. Wisdom is more than just knowledge, which is always sense-based. With wisdom, we learn to see and understand what eyes see not, what ears hear not, what nose smells not, what tongue tastes not, what body feels not, what mind thinks not.

This amazing teaching of experiencing beyond the senses comes from **early Buddhist aesthetics**, appreciating truth and beauty. Beauty is when we truly experience what the senses reveal to us, and we feel its true nature. Our mind then expresses this the truth of our experience in language and other forms of expression for the joy and happiness of others. This is the essence of early Buddhist aesthetics.

Communication

However, before we can experience, understand and express ourselves aesthetically, we need to truly understand how to realize the potential of our body and speech for truth and beauty. Indeed, the body and our ability to communicate are the bases for aesthetics, but the truth and beauty are experienced only in our mind and heart. These two are really 2 facets of our same life: thinking and feeling.

Hence, we need to ensure that we are well grounded in a wholesomely moral life, or simply, the good life, in terms of body and speech, in terms of self and other. We have a conscious body, as do other humans and beings; we are able to communicate to others how we think and feel. This makes society, living together, possible.

Human and subhuman

We would naturally want our lives as humans to be good. We definitely do not want to fall into some **subhuman state** of greed (the asuras), hate (the hellbeings), delusion (the pretas) or fear (the animals). Indeed, we only have a human body, but our minds are not always human. We are all like Jekyll and Hyde rolled into one: greed turns us into asuras, hate into hellbeings, delusion into pretas, and fear into animals.

The reality is actually more painful, when in any of these **4 biases** of greed, hate, delusion, fear, we actually become any or all of these subhuman beings, transforming at will, depending on which bias blinds us the most.

Precepts and values

The 5 precepts serve as the bases for the most basic of our Buddhist life, that of inspiring us to be human and remaining so. Keeping to these rules of body and speech, we restrain ourselves from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and intoxication. These 5 moral omissions (not doing) are rooted in 5 values which are expressed, as it were, in our non-action! We value **life**; hence, we should not kill others, even ourself; we value **happiness**, so do others; we value **freedom**, we need to accept others; and we value **wisdom**, which we cultivate when we understand the previous values.

Life

Every human, in his right mind—even animals—value their **life**. In not killing, we live and let live; we allow others to live together with us. We all value life; we value nature that support life. This is the value underpinning the 1st precept—that against killing. If we are in the habit of killing other humans, it would be difficult, if not impossible, for us to live together, and for society to rise and progress.

Happiness

Valuable as life is in itself, merely to live in quest of food, plenty, mates, security, progeny, is a predictable animal-like cycle. As humans, we understand and value **happiness**, that is, the joy of self-effort (ability to do things that benefit us and others), the joy of using and sharing the fruits of our work; the joy of not owing others anything; and most of all the joy of blamelessness (no one finding faults with us).¹

Since we all value work and how it benefits us, we should not take away from others the fruits of their labour: we should not steal. The fruits of our work are the bases for our happiness in *having, enjoying and sharing* them freely. This is the 2nd precept, rooted in the value of happiness. Such a sharing also allows us to live together as a wholesome society, celebrating our work and enjoying its fruits communally in the joy of company, benefitting society.

Freedom

Just as we are happy and functional, living together, we also at times enjoy being with ourself, especially when we are doing what we love most. Moreover, human beings differ greatly in personality, ability and inclination. In other words, we also enjoy being different from others, which may entail disagreeing with them. Such differences allow us to see possibilities for positive growth and wholesome change. We are still unified by the fact that we love life and work, and we enjoy sharing for our common benefits.

¹ The 4 joys are described in **Anaṅga S** (A 4.62), SD 2.2.

In other words, we may humanly say “no” to others, even when it comes to being intimate with another. And especially so, since we need to be willing and ready in body and mind to commit ourselves in love and sexually to another, in marriage, in communication, in procreating, in simply enjoying one another. In other words, we value **freedom**, that is, in being oneself, spending time with oneself, seeking to understand oneself.

Truth

We have thus spoken on the values of *life, happiness and freedom*, as embodied in the first 3 precepts respectively. These values work, and with the precepts, keep us **human** because they are true in a good, wholesome sense. We are not lying about it when we love life, we feel good in happiness, we enjoy freedom: we see the truth in all these.

Wisdom

Even when we are able to accept and live by these 4 values, and live together enjoying our lives, happiness, freedom, true to the values we uphold, we still lose lives, those of our loved ones, and in the end, our own life. Our happiness cannot always be taken for granted: we face a lot of difficulties in our lives. Often enough, we are not always free to do, to be, to have what we want. And then there are still those who, for various reasons may still lie, or may not see or understand the truth as we do, or as it is according to true reality.

The nature of true reality is found in all our sense-experiences. Whether we notice or accept it or not depends on our mind, how we think and understand things. Our learning the true nature of all this lies in understanding how our mind works and how we can use it to free ourselves from what deprives us and others of the values behind our lives, happiness, freedom and truth.

We need to understand how to realize and uphold these values. We can only do this rightly with a calm and clear mind, that is, one that is not intoxicated. Such a mind learns best what needs to be learned in order to understand ourselves and nature, and to be free from what threatens what we value: our lives, happiness, freedom and truth. We need **wisdom**, which comes best from a mind cultivated in calm and clarity, and to share this wisdom in a society that is ripe and ready to progress for the sake of these values.

Then, we will have a good society.

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