

## Virtue ethics: Avoid evil, do good, purify the mind

Source: SD 61.5b, The Buddha's karma © Piya Tan 2024.

**5.2.2.1** Philosophically, **virtue ethics**,<sup>1</sup> especially in early Buddhism, is about the transformation of oneself through the cultivation of correct and good habits over time so that unwholesome (*akusala*) patterns of behaviour are gradually replaced with wholesome ones. The way to act wholesomely, according to virtue ethics, is not simply to follow certain kinds of rules (deontology), nor seek pleasant consequences (utilitarianism), but to become one who is “**bodily cultivated**” (*bhāṅvita, kāya*).<sup>2</sup> “Bodily” here means by way of actions and speech.

Over time, the morally virtuous person will find their conduct spontaneously falls increasingly into line with moral norms (*sīla*). In virtue ethics, however, in contrast to deontology, these norms are internalized rather than externally imposed. On account of the consequences of one's moral conduct, the person often turns out to have a consistently wholesome purpose in life, and lives according to a consciously chosen and integrated set of wholesome **values**.

**5.2.2.2** Here, virtue ethics is similar to utilitarianism, which sees the moral life as directed to the joy of happiness or “flourishing” (*eudaimonia*, to use Aristotle's term). Virtue ethics thus comprises a path of self-transformation in which a person progressively emulates certain ideal standards of conduct (body and speech) inspired by that of the Buddha, his disciples or living teachers or sages who have progressed further towards the path of personal fulfilment or even on the path of awakening. The behaviour of these role models serves as a template for their habitual **intention** [5.2.2.1] to shape their conduct.

Such intentions are inspired and guided by a set of **values** [5.2.2.3], that is, the truth, goodness and beauty that they see in situations, things and people. By this value-inspired intentionality, they consistently and systematically avoid unwholesome situations in the form of **training** in the moral precepts [5.2.2.5]. Such training becomes codified in the form of precepts (for bodily disciplining) and mental training (for mental calm and clarity) for the sake of seeing into true reality that is liberating.<sup>3</sup>

**5.2.2.3** Whether an act is good or bad, wholesome or unwholesome, is determined by motive, that is, **intention** (*cetanā*). The Buddha declares,

Bhikshus, whatever qualities are unwholesome, partake of the unwholesome, and pertain to the unwholesome, all have *the mind* as their forerunner.” (A 1.56/1:11)

Bhikshus, whatever qualities are wholesome, partake of the wholesome, and pertain to the wholesome, all have *the mind* as their forerunner.” (A 1.57/1:11)<sup>4</sup>

In other words, our acts begin in the mind, defined by our intention, and are expressed as speech or an action, coloured by that intention. When the act (by body or speech) is rooted in *greed, hatred or delusion*, it is defined as being “unwholesome” (*akusala*). It will re-arise whenever the conditions are right or similar, resulting in painful feelings that characterize the “root” karma. This fact itself means that each time we feel such an experience, we can worsen or we can lessen its pain, or in special circumstances (especially with boundless love) [5.1.2], even negate it; that is, arouse anew the karma.

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<sup>1</sup> For a philosophical intro into virtue ethics, see eg R Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, NY: Oxford Univ Press, 1999. On Buddhist virtue ethics as *kusala*, see D Keown 1992:116-123; “Karma, character and consequentialism,” *J of Religious Ethics* 24 1996b:329; *Buddhist Ethics: A very short introduction*, Oxford, 2005b:13, 22 f, 25, 32, 37.

<sup>2</sup> See **Piṅḍola Bhāra, dvāja S** (S 35.127,7), SD 27.6a.

<sup>3</sup> See **Virtue ethics**, SD 18.11; (**Vitthāra**) **Kamma S** (A 4.232) SD 4.13.

<sup>4</sup> The same is said in verse in Dh 1 f.

Thus, although we are, in a sense, experiencing an “old” karma, we are really “renewing” it; which means that we can also reshape our karma. How that karmic fruit affects us depends on the presence and level of the unwholesome root (greed, hate or delusion) present, or of wholesome root (charity, love or wisdom) present at that time. The gravity or quality of the root present again depends on our current set of **values** (*dhamma*). The stronger our values, the less grave the effect of the negative karma, and the stronger the effect of our positive karma.

What are these values?

**5.2.2.4 In philosophy, value theory** is concerned with theoretical questions about the value and goodness of things that matter to us. “Things” here is a broad term for our current mental state and how we relate to others. Basically, they refer to how and why we value something, be it a person, idea, or object. In early Buddhism, these values arise from how we uphold the natural good that comprises our values.

Our most vital values work directly with our understanding and practice of the 5 precepts, which are the bases for all morality in Buddhism, whether monastic or lay. In the monastic rules, the precepts are elaborated in greater detail so that the renunciant is able to fully discipline their body and speech for the cultivation of a mind of calm and clarity.

For both the monastic and the lay keeping the 5 precepts are the very foundation of a natural moral life. By “**natural**” (*pakati*) is meant that these precepts are *karmically potential and significant*. Anyone (monastic, lay, Buddhist or non-Buddhist) who breaks any of the 5 precepts—who *kills, steals, commits sexual misconduct, lies or takes intoxicants*—creates bad karma for themselves.

The **values** here refer to what the precepts protect or uphold as *morally meaningful* (they are what we *are*) and spiritually purposeful (our task is to protect or uphold them for our own good and growth). An easy way to understand the nature of these **5 values** is to ask ourselves some very basic questions, as follows:

(1) What is the most precious thing we can ever have or be?

**Life**; for without life we do not exist.

Hence, the 1<sup>st</sup> precept is against **killing**,  
which is wrong because it deprives the being from fulfilling the other values.

(2) What makes our life purposeful?

**Happiness**, from having basic needs for our life-support and growth.

Hence, the 2<sup>nd</sup> precept is against **stealing**,  
which is wrong because it deprives another of the zest for life and the other values.

(3) What allows our happiness to be meaningful?

**Freedom**, the ability to say “no” or refuse something.

Hence, the 3<sup>rd</sup> precept is against violating another person, especially in a **sexual** manner.

Respecting when someone says “no,” no one should force themselves on that other,  
especially violating that one’s person.

(4) What makes all this right and good?

**Truth** is reflected in these values and the precepts they embody.

Hence, the 4<sup>th</sup> precept is against **lying**.

Since these values are good and true, we should practise and preserve them.

(5) What is the higher purpose to all this?

**Wisdom** allows us to understand and uphold these values, and to benefit from them.

Wisdom is rooted in mindfulness, by which we are able to keep our mind calm and clear.

Hence, the 5<sup>th</sup> precept is against **taking intoxicants** that cloud up our minds.

**5.2.2.5** In early Buddhism, morality (*sīla*) is its foundation practice. The foundation of our being is our body and speech: our body is physically *what* we are; our speech is *who* we are. Our body is morally significant since the first 3 precepts—those against **kill**ing, against **steal**ing and against **sexual misconduct**—are broken through the body; but speech is more broadly significant in the sense that we communicate with others through speech. When we **lie** we break the precept. Properly speaking, the precept against lying includes slandering, harsh speech and frivolous talk; these 4 kinds of negative speech constitute wrong speech; while **right speech** is *true, unifying, pleasant and beneficial*.

The 5<sup>th</sup> precept is broken through our taking drinks and being **intoxicated**. The intoxicated mind is likely to break all the other precepts. Intoxication clouds up the mind, preventing it from being calm and clear; hence, it will lack mindfulness and wisdom. The 5<sup>th</sup> precept, in fact, straddles between body and mind; hence, it is vital to guard oneself from breaking the 5<sup>th</sup> precept, since it is unwholesome for both body and mind.

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