

Chapter 9

Wise speech, actions, livelihood

Discussion points

- Eightfold Noble Path – Wise Speech, wise action, wise livelihood
- Ethical conduct
- No middle path in ethics!
- Unethical conduct leads to my suffering.
- Ethical conduct makes me happy.

The next three elements of the Noble Eight Fold path , wise speech, wise action and wise livelihood are often considered together as the precepts for an ethical life. These actually form the foundation of the path, for any violation of these precepts immediately creates so much inner agitation usually accompanied by fear, guilt, despair, remorse and self-depreciation that it becomes verily impossible to follow the other steps of the path. One who has begun to follow the path of freedom from unhappiness would naturally abhor such mental states and thus try to follow these precepts scrupulously.

Wise speech includes abstaining from falsehood, backbiting, divisive, harsh and frivolous speech. Wise action implies abstaining from violence, stealing, sexual misconduct, and intoxication. Wise livelihoods are those which do not demand unwise action and do not encourage others to indulge in such unwise actions. Thus selling meat, poisons, intoxicants, arms and ammunition are considered as unwise livelihoods. Not paying the due taxes, accepting bribes are indirect forms of stealing – taking something that doesn't rightfully belong to us, and thus unwise livelihood.

In modern times of cut-throat competition and untrammelled freedom to do what one likes, observance of some of these precepts sometimes look, especially to the youth, like a hangover from ancient times. Thus questions are often raised by the youth when confronted by this advice:

How can one survive without exaggerating one's achievements and concealing the shortcomings? In this competitive world if I have to move ahead in my organization, there is no better way than highlighting the shortcomings of my fellow employees before the manager. What is wrong in it? If I help a person get the payment due to him well in time, what is wrong in expecting and accepting some 'honorarium' for this help? I am quite mindful about the quantity of wine I drink, so how is this precept applicable to me? What is wrong in consensual sex or so-called adultery?

Rather than arguing against these perceptions based only on logic, it is better to encourage youth to reflect in a more personal way recalling the golden rule: "Do unto others as you wish others to do unto you."

If we reflect: How would I feel if I am undercut by my colleague who exaggerates my shortcoming before the boss, and takes credit for the work actually done by me; when someone abuses me; when someone distorts my honest critique of a friend and uses it to create discord between him and me? How would I feel if I am asked for a bribe by an officer to get the payment due from his office? Does my behaviour change after 'social drinking'? How would I feel if my son were also to start drinking in his hostel? Would I mind if my sister were to go and spend a night every weekend with strangers? Would I be willing to marry a girl who wishes to have freedom to flirt? How would I feel if my son were to know about my dubious ways of amassing wealth?

The answers to these introspective queries reveal the importance of scrupulously following these precepts, for we learn that violating these is sure to cause unhappiness to us, and thereafter to others. The unhappiness resulting from violation of these precepts manifest in a variety of ways; these become quite vivid to one who meditates and does reflective introspection. The shame and guilt when my lie or divisive speech 'was found out' and the loss of trust worthiness; the regret of having wasted time in frivolous talk; the fear of revenge from one whom I have hurt; the fear of punishment and loss of face, on being 'caught' while accepting bribe or not having paid the due income tax by concealing the income; the remorse and self-depreciation on losing temper and shouting at mother; the guilt and shame on realizing that I misbehaved with my secretary after getting drunk; the deep sense of regret and shame on being caught stealing from home to buy wine or drugs – all these are some of the ways in which unhappiness manifests on breaking these precepts.

Thus to one with a wise view it becomes evident that ethical conduct is a pre-requisite for progress on the path to liberation from all unhappiness.

Many a times there is a tendency to compromise on these precepts by misusing the concept of the Buddha's middle path. We need to be very clear that there is no middle path between falsehood and truth, between corruption and honest livelihood, between violence and loving kindness. Condoning 'minor' violation of the precepts, on the ground of 'pragmatism' and an implicit overconfidence that 'these can never overwhelm me', is hazardous. Slowly these occasional violations trap us, turn into habit and eventually bring us to grief. Having told a lie, often one ends up telling many more lies to conceal it; having demanded and accepted bribe once, people get even their illegitimate work done by paying bribe and it becomes difficult to refuse for fear of being exposed; having partnered in a crime [e.g. violence or theft] once, one is trapped and cannot easily come out of such a group safely, thus sinking deeper and deeper into the mire of unethical conduct. The Buddha cautions about this very emphatically:

Think not lightly of evil saying that 'it will not come near me'. Even a water-pot is filled by the falling drops of water. A fool becomes full of evil even if he gathers it little by little'⁵⁵

Wise speech, wise action, and wise livelihood can not only be seen as abstinences to avoid unhappiness, but also in positive terms of what ought to be done to be happy. Thus speaking truthfully enables us to be trustworthy; speaking kindly even under extreme

Dhammapada verses 16, 17.

The righteous man rejoices in this world, he rejoices in the next; he rejoices in both. He rejoices and becomes delighted seeing the purity of his own actions.

The evil-doer suffers in this world, he suffers in the next; he suffers in both. He suffers thinking 'evil has been done by me'. He suffers even more when he goes to a woeful state.

provocation strengthens forbearance, and encourages others to share their feelings frankly; practicing loving kindness towards those who are inimical to us reduces conflicts; sharing our wealth with others in need gives us joy; earning our livelihood by righteous means through hard work gives the happiness of a blemish-free life, sets a good example for colleagues, friends and other members of the family; self-restraint in a party where friends are drinking, enhances our ability to be mindful and resist

⁵⁵ Dhammapada , verse 121

temptations. Clearly, this would also improve our relationships, earn us respect from others and enhance self-respect—thus bringing great happiness. From the point of view of the society, one following these precepts is seen as a harmless person – one in whose presence no one need to be scared. It can thus also be viewed as an act of compassion, alleviating the unhappiness that would have been caused by fear.

How to ensure that we do not fall prey to the temptations and violate these precepts? The Buddha's advice is: Reflection on the likely consequences of our mental, vocal or bodily actions. Ideally this reflection should be done before starting an action, so that if I find that its consequences are going to harm me or anybody else, I do not undertake that action.

"This bodily action I want to do — would it lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Would it be an unskillful bodily action, with painful consequences, painful results?" If, on reflection, you know that it would lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it would be an unskillful bodily action with painful consequences, painful results, then any bodily action of that sort is absolutely unfit for you to do. But if on reflection you know that it would not cause affliction... it would be a skillful bodily action with pleasant consequences, pleasant results, then any bodily action of that sort is fit for you to do.⁵⁶

The same advice is applicable to vocal and mental actions.

If that reflection is missed out, one can do it while an action is being done. If that too is forgotten, one can reflect on the consequences of an action that has been done.

"Having done a bodily action, you should reflect on it: "This bodily action I have done — did it lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Was it an unskillful bodily action, with painful consequences, painful results?" If, on reflection, you know that it led to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it was an unskillful bodily action with painful consequences, painful results, then you should confess it, reveal it, lay it open to the Teacher or to a knowledgeable companion in the holy life. Having confessed it... you should exercise restraint in the future. But if on reflection you know that it did not lead to affliction... it was a skillful bodily action with pleasant consequences, pleasant results, then you should stay mentally refreshed & joyful, training day & night in skillful mental qualities.

⁵⁶ MN 61, Ambalaṭṭhikā-rāhulovāda sutta.

Making our misdeed known to a respectable person, and making a commitment not to repeat it in future has a tremendous effect in strengthening our ability to lead an ethical life. It prevents us from regret and remorse that would otherwise arise and lead to prolonged unhappiness.

In modern times of interaction through social media, these precepts require even more serious consideration. As we know from our own experience, the hurt caused to a person by wrong speech gets greatly magnified when this is done in the presence of others. When we do it through social media the effect is multiplied manifold—it is akin to abusing a person before the whole world. Thus mindlessly posting abusive comments, or humiliating pictures on Facebook or twitter, is a serious violation of the precepts of wise speech and wise action. The posting of morphed nude pictures has even led to suicides. This is akin to ‘killing’ a person. Hacking someone’s computer and stealing confidential information is no different from breaking into someone’s house to commit theft. Making money by selling information stolen by hacking is surely an unwise occupation. All these are bound to lead to unhappiness of the doer as also of others; a person with wise view would therefore shun these. That is the reason that these precepts form the basis of criminal laws in most countries in order to maintain a good social order.

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