

2. PERFECTION OF ETHICS (SILA)

Next is the perfection of ethics. Ethics is generally considered to be that quality of mind which restrains or protects us from committing physical, vocal, and mental actions of a negative kind. The vows of the layman and the monk are also considered aspects of ethics. Although this is generally the case, one does not have to take vows or receive ordination in order to practice ethics. For example, one can practice the discipline of refraining from the ten negative actions. These are divided into three physical, four vocal, and three mental acts.

Three Physical Acts

The first of the three unwholesome physical actions is killing. If we are about to kill or contemplate doing so and recall that it is wrong and refrain, this is a practice of the ethics of abandoning killing. The same is also true of the other two unwholesome actions of the body — stealing and sexual misconduct. Whenever we encounter these situations and restrain ourselves rather than commit the unwholesome action we are engaging in the practice of ethics.

Four Vocal Acts

We are also practicing ethics when we restrain ourselves from the four negative vocal actions: lying, harsh speech, slander and idle gossip. If we divert our mind from them and refrain from such vocal actions, we are practicing ethics.

- For example, we are all inclined to tell lies. When the desire to do so first arises, we should immediately recall its faults and the way in which it harms both ourselves and others. If we have lied in the past, we will experience the results in this life by finding that although we have been truthful with others they do not believe what we say, and that we are often cheated by them. Such situations are the karmic results of our previous lies. By deepening our awareness of such consequences and shunning their cause, in this case lying, we are practicing ethics.
- Similarly, when the desire arises to slander someone or to cause discord between two persons, we must reflect immediately on the negative attributes and harmful results of such actions. We should notice how they are a cause of misery to ourselves and others. We may find that we suffer from the loss of friendships that had previously been harmonious. This is the karmic result of denigrating and breaking up the friendships of other people in our lives. If we bear these

consequences of slander in mind and as a result abstain from it, we are practicing the ethical discipline of abandoning slander.

- This also applies to the third unwholesome action of speech, that of using abusive language or harsh speech. If we scold an animal or another person harshly, it causes them mental suffering, and if we tend to use hard or abusive speech, we should recognize its wrongness and the way in which it harms others. We all know that if someone abuses us it hurts. It is also true that those who are subjected to harsh speech are experiencing the karmic results of similar actions. Developing this awareness of the wrong qualities of such actions and refraining from them is the ethical discipline of abandoning harsh speech.
- The fourth negative vocal act is idle gossip or talking of frivolous and trivial subjects. Because of such delusions as desire and hatred, we spend endless hours in these ways. It is one of the most common ways in which we waste time. We must try to cut down on such chatter. If we are able to talk about things that will help us to increase our understanding of dharma or are relevant to our study and practice, it will be beneficial, but merely to waste time babbling is very harmful; it serves only to distract us from our practice. People who have a tendency to spend day after day, and possibly their whole lives, engaged in mindless verbiage are experiencing the karmic result of previous addiction to gossip. We must realize the harmful consequences that will follow from continuing to indulge in such talk and put a stop to it. It is caused by the delusions; to continue such behavior will only aggravate them. When we spend time in nonsensical activities, attachment, hatred, jealousy and similar negative states of minds will inevitably arise. So if we can reduce such empty prattling and use speech in a more proper and beneficial way, we will be practicing dharma.

Three Mental Acts

The first of these is covetousness, our tendency to want those things of others which appear to us as desirable. This is a very harmful trait which causes the increase of such delusions as attachment and also causes such adverse actions as stealing. People who often lack material necessities or meet with obstacles in attempting to obtain them are experiencing the karmic result of a previous inclination towards covetousness. By seeing its wrong qualities, we should abandon greed of this kind. To do so is a practice of the ethics of abandoning covetousness.

Harboring malevolent thoughts towards others is the next negative action of mind. If a person has ill-will towards us we become very upset, and other beings are affected by us in a similar way. Many problems, whether it be a fight between two people or between two nations, are caused by the existence of ill-will. Here, too, our having previously held malevolent thoughts towards others results in our now experiencing their consequences. By becoming aware of the wrong features and bad effects of such adverse actions, realizing that all the suffering we now experience is the result of our previously committed unwholesome deeds, we must make an effort to stop them arising and to eliminate such causes of unhappiness.

The final negative mental action is that of holding erroneous views about such things as the law of cause and effect, emptiness, past and future lives, or the ability to attain liberation from conditioned existence. All such things do in fact exist. If one argues that such phenomena are fictitious, one is committing this particular negative action. The future consequence of holding such wrong views is a state of greater ignorance. An example would be birth as an animal, a being quite incapable of any real understanding of such truths as these. By fully realizing the mistakenness of such actions we must abandon them and doing so is the practice of ethics. This kind of moral practice should, of course, be observed by all, not just by those who have received particular ordinations.

Summary

Abstention from physical, vocal and mental actions of an unwholesome kind by means of restraint is called 'binding morality'. This is something for everyone to do regardless of whether or not they believe in the dharma. With or without faith in Buddhism, if one wishes to achieve any happiness and to avoid or eliminate suffering, one will need to follow such a code of conduct.

There are three kinds of ethics. The first, the ethics of restraint, has been explained. The second is called the ethics of cultivating wholesome qualities, and refers to all the practices we do in order to proceed along the path. It includes virtuous actions, meditation, the transformation of the mind, development of an awakening mind and so on. It refers especially to those practices which help to develop pure morality — such as hearing about, developing an understanding of, and meditating deeply on the subject. The last kind of ethical conduct is the morality of working for the benefit of others. It refers to helping others in every possible way to develop the proper attitude towards the practice of moral discipline and to understand the benefits that arise from doing so. Also, as well as the individual disciplines relating to the lay, monk and nun ordinations, there are the bodhisattva vows. Thus we can see there are many ways of

practicing pure moral conduct. If we do not understand this clearly, we may wrongly believe that the practice of morality is confined to those who have taken specific vows.

Beneficial Effects

The perfection of ethics is like water we can use to remove the stains of unwholesome actions. Although outer dirt can be washed out with ordinary soap and water, to cleanse our inner mental defilements we must use the special water of pure moral conduct. It would be useless to try removing the stains of our mental defilements with ordinary water. Even if we were to stand in a lake for years and years it would be to no avail. The only way to achieve physical, vocal and purifying mental actions of a noble and virtuous kind is by purifying their opposite negative qualities, and this in turn can only be done by the practice of pure morality.

We might also compare such mental defilements as attachment, anger, jealousy and confusion to a raging fire within us. This is true even to the point that when a person becomes very angry or feels strong hatred, he actually experiences physical heat. At such a time, when the fire of defilements is blazing, the best way of extinguishing it is the practice of ethics. In the scriptures ethics is compared to moonlight. When we sit outside on a moonlit evening we experience a feeling of coolness, and in the same way wholesome conduct is like the moonlight which cools the burning heat of defilements within the mind. If the power of moral integrity is present within us, wherever we go it will be a source of satisfaction and self— confidence. If we lack moral discipline and as a result become involved in unwholesome physical, vocal and mental actions when confronted with others who are aware of our actions we feel ashamed and regret our errors.

People are naturally attracted to someone who has moral integrity and he is able to influence them without using force. On the other hand, someone who lacks such integrity is only able to influence others by force or coercion. When highly realized beings have appeared in order to benefit mankind, they have been followed not because they wielded great force but because of their flawless moral conduct. So if we familiarize ourselves with the positive qualities of giving and morality, we will begin to appreciate the need to practice them. This is why advanced meditators and other dharma practitioners consider their practice of ethics very precious and protect it as they would their eyes.