

# The Good Life: Understanding Buddhist Ethics

With John Peacock and Akincano Weber





# Welcome to The Good Life!

**Welcome to The Good Life: Understanding Buddhist Ethics. Let's hear more about how the course will unfold.**



## **Living the good life brings happiness for ourselves and others**

This course will place ethics at the center of Buddhist practice. Living the good life is related to living an ethical life. It is aimed at bringing us a degree of happiness—but not just for ourselves. It's a happiness that spreads to others in our community and those around us.

A question that might occur to you is "Why?" "Why should I do this course? Why should I be interested in ethics?" Well, from a personal perspective, I can say that ethics is the most valuable, most important, the most exciting part of the Buddhist path. And that's a very personal reflection I'm sharing with you. But why is that? Why is it so exciting? Well, it takes what's often seen as merely a set of rules and turns it into a quest, an inquiry, and a deep engagement with our lives. Thus, we turn our lives from something fairly monochrome into something rich, vibrant, and textured.

**We invite you to join us in an exciting exploration of a topic that's not very well understood.**

Hopefully by engaging with this course and the various investigations we'll do together, you'll begin to see the centrality of ethics within Buddhist practice. And the key component of this, of course, is that our meditative, contemplative practice makes no sense unless it's engaged totally with the ethical world.



## A deep inquiry into how we live

Our methodology for this course is to shed light on a number of different components of ethical teachings. One aspect of this teaching is about inquiry. One aspect is about trying out different strategies around how to understand and enact ethical teachings. Another aspect will be about self-reflection and a continued form of growth along the path. The Buddha's teaching is famous for making growth and development an ethical path, and intentionality on that path is one of the key pieces that he brought to ethics.

**We hope that by joining us in this inquiry into ethics and its role in Buddhist teaching, that you will arrive at the broader, more practical vision of ethics that the Buddha envisaged for us.**



## Meet John and Akincano

Let's take a moment to learn more about our teachers and find out why they are so passionate about Buddhist ethics.



### John Peacock

"I've had a long-term fascination with ethics. My PhD in philosophy was devoted to ethics in both Buddhism and Western philosophy. So I feel very passionate about the subject and that hopefully that will become clear as this course continues."



### Akincano Weber

"I am passionate about making the teaching of ethics more central to Buddhist practice. I am keen on broadening the vision of Buddhism as a path, rather

than just a technique and a method... It is my conviction that ethics is the connective tissue of Buddhist practice and that, so far in bringing Buddhism to the West, we all need to do a better job at exposing the importance and the ramifications of ethics to the Buddhist path."



## **This is central to the path**

"All the other elements of Buddhism we've spoken about in our teaching careers are important but we don't necessarily need to put them at the center, whereas I feel that ethics is at the center."



## Unit 1: Why Ethics?

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Unit 2: The Eightfold Path to Ethical Living

Unit 3: Ethics and the Brahmaviharas

Unit 4: The Precepts as Ethical Questions

Unit 5: Self Respect and Respect for Others

Unit 6: Ethics, Society, and Engagement



### Unit 1: Introduction

## Why Ethics?

**Why is ethics important? Why isn't meditation alone enough? In this unit, we'll look at the big picture and see that Buddhism is, at its heart, about finding ethical ways of being in the world.**

Why do we practice Buddhism? Why do we meditate? Our suggestion is that the awareness we're developing through these practices is in service of how we live. It's about ethics.

In this course we will show the overwhelming importance in Buddhist practice of holding ethics in mind continuously. It's a reversal from the usual ways that we

understand this path. We usually understand the way the path unfolds from ethics as a ground to the higher reaches of understanding or wisdom. One of the ways we'll rethink this is that ethics is a foundation but also becomes the end goal. And we might suggest that the ethical political is at the culmination of this process.

We'll begin by making the case for the importance of ethics and its centrality in our lives. For example, two questions we might ask ourselves as we embark on this path are, "How do I live?" and "What do I do?"



## Why Ethics?

**If our practice of Buddhism discounts ethics to focus on meditation and special experiences, we may miss the point of all these practices. It's about how we develop our character and how we live with others.**



## Does *sīla* mean ethics?

In this module we want to address the question, "Why ethics?" And the first thing I would want to start off with in this particular context is the fact that there is no direct overlap between this word that we use "ethics" and the word *sīla*, which is generally taken, certainly in popular Buddhist contexts, as being the ethical context. Many of you will be familiar of the division of the Buddhist path into *sīla*, *samādhi*, *paññā* (ethics, stillness, wisdom). This scheme has about one textual reference in the main body of the canon, and mostly then you find it in commentarial tradition.

So when we start to talk about ethics, the first thing to examine is whether *sīla* is directly mappable onto the notion of ethics. And why is this important? The importance of ethics being equivalent to *sīla* is that we all have to live in a world. We all have to be with others. We all have to make decisions on a day-to-day, moment-by-moment, contextual basis. And I know sometimes it's difficult living with these messy things called other people! And when we do that, when we're living with others we are automatically thrown into an ethical/*sīla*-type situation.

**The moment I ask myself the questions, "What do I do now? How am I going to live in this moment?" I've introduced ethical questions. I've introduced questions in the domain of *sīla*.**

Now, *sīla* probably equates much more with a sense of morality: a shifting, changing morality that uses guidelines as a way of engaging with the context and the place that you find yourself in now. Whereas the word "ethics" has a broader spectrum of meanings. When we look at it in its original connotations, which are derived from Ancient Greek, the word derives from two words in Ancient Greek, which are *ēthike* and *ethos*. The word *ethos* is primarily the one I want to look at. It has many meanings. One of the meanings is "custom, habit", but it can also mean, more importantly, "character." It can also mean the way that we dwell in this world. So, when we think of *ethos* we think of a way of living. We're thinking of how the way we live develops and perhaps sustains character traits.

## Putting ethics at the heart of Buddhist practice

So in our question, "Why ethics? Why *sīla*?", well, when we approach these terms, more often than not, we tend to think in terms of prescriptions: what we should do and what we shouldn't do. I don't know about you, but for me, when I hear a list of prescriptions, I'm actually not that interested. And in the Buddhist world in general, I think there's been a great lack of interest in ethics. Perhaps I'm over generalizing, but I think it's important to make this point, that often we ignore the field of ethics—of our behavioral activities—to move towards the more contemplative, perhaps, dare I say it, even mystical aspects of Buddhism, and use the notion of ethics simply as a ground to project us into these more quietist dimensions of Buddhist practice.

I'm raising this question of ethics and *sīla*—the moralities that are involved in Buddhist practice and the notions that we get of ethics arising out of the Ancient Greek understanding. If we put these two together, they actually become of fundamental importance to the ways that we direct our lives, on a day-to-day basis.



## What is meditative awareness for?

I started the introduction by asking what is the awareness *for* that we have developed in that very basic, general practice that Akincano gave us. I still want to keep it open but if I'm answering that question...

**Perhaps that awareness I'm developing is in service of how I live with you, how you live with me, what I do in the world, and how I develop my character as an individual.**

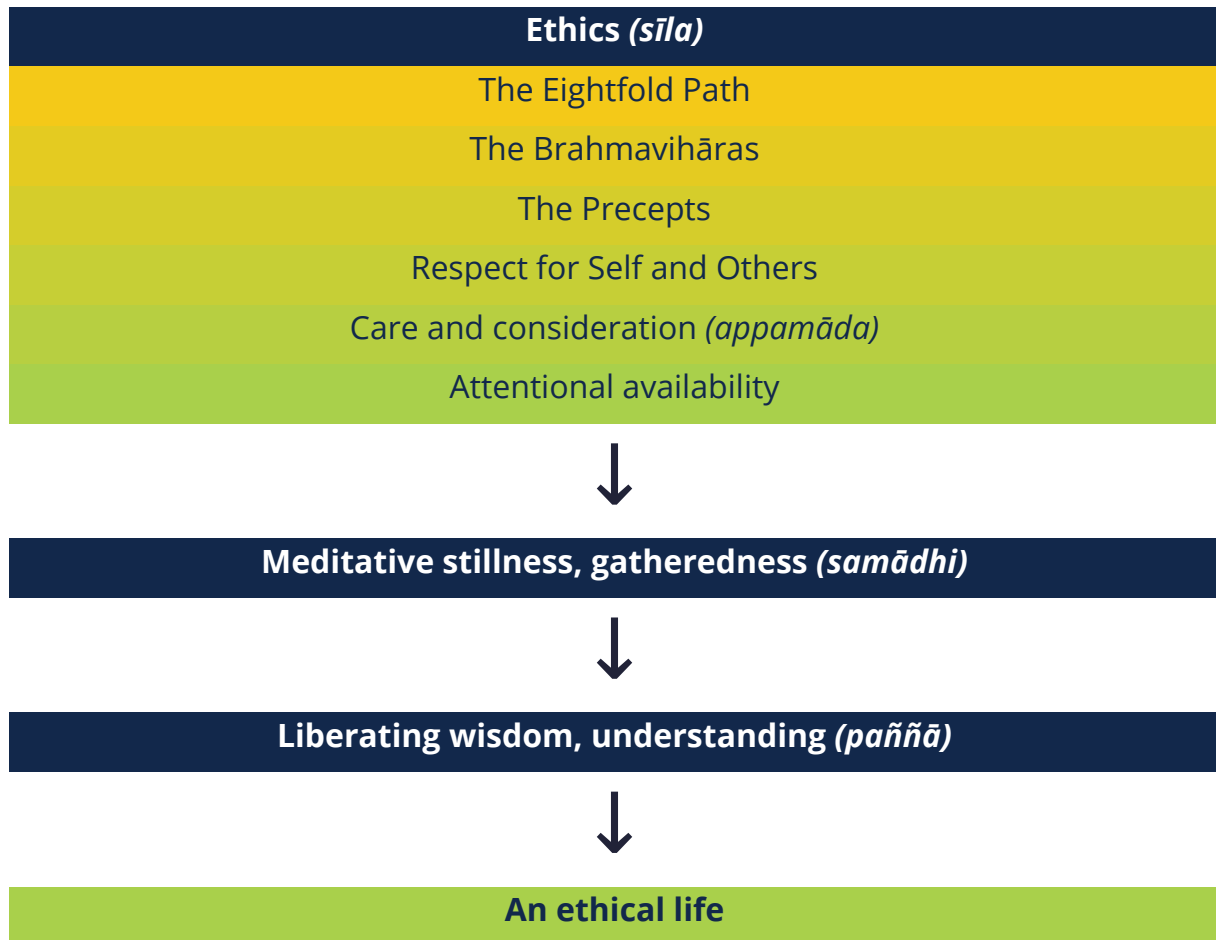
One of the things I think that we know is that any sense of an examined life will lead us to engaging in all sorts of activities that possibly in hindsight we might realize, "I didn't really want to do that. I didn't know that was going to cause X or Y or Z to happen when I engaged in that thoughtless speech or that thoughtless activity." And yet, actually, this is something we are doing quite a lot of the time: engaging in thoughtless acts of body, speech, and mind. We think certain things that have certain consequences; we engage in actions which have consequences; and we engage in speech which has consequences. And if we don't bring our awareness to bear on these ethical domains—domains of *sīla*—then we find ourselves in a state of forgetfulness. We then engage in behaviors that perhaps will lead to regret and certainly often damage to others, damage to relationships, damage to our ways of being with others in the world.

**So when we raise that question of "Why ethics? Why *sīla*?" Perhaps instead of seeing ethics only as a starting place for our explorations of Buddhist practice, perhaps we can see it both as a starting point and something we're moving towards.**

The practice itself becomes an unfolding of an ethical awareness. So awareness becomes in the service of living this more engaged life. We're really beginning to become aware and to remember what we're engaging in. And we'll unpack many of these terms as we go through.

## Ethics is the foundation and the goal

This diagram shows some aspects of Buddhist ethics and how the path culminates in ethical ways of living.



So the basic answer or the basic response at this initial stage as to "Why ethics?" is because it opens up a field of engaged awareness. When we're engaging in practices commonly known as *vipassanā*, the development of insight; when we're engaging in quieting the mind, focusing the mind, sometimes referred to as *samatha*: we're always looking to develop them in a way that allows us access to a field of awareness of our being with others and engaging with others in our day-to-day situations.

**And this becomes a response to those initial questions: "What do I do? How do I live now?" I do it with a heightened sense of awareness and stability of mind. And so the heightened stability and presence of mind and quietness of mind is not simply an end, but is in service of this ethical/*sīla*-based practice of life.**



### **This doesn't sound easy**

So, John, let me let me play devil's advocate here. I want to know about ethics and I hear that the word for ethics in Buddhism is *sīla*. And you seem a tentative about a straight equation of the two. You say it's about becoming more aware of how I live. Somehow you make it sound easy but there is a lot of stuff in there. It means, where is my intention? What is my behavior? How about my relationships? What is my responsibility? There is quite a lot in there. You make it all sound a lot easier somehow!



### **This is a rich field of inquiry**

And that's certainly not the intention. The intention is not to make it sound easy at all, because I think what we're engaged has a degree of complexity.

Coming back to your initial devil's advocate position about the difference between ethics and *sīla*, I don't think the terms map on entirely to each other. But *sīla* seems to be concerned with aspects of behavior. And sometimes it's directly prescriptive, or we can read it as prescriptive. For example, most Buddhists will be familiar with a set of precepts that are often given on retreat. "This is what one should do." That's only one way of reading them, but they sound very much like a moral code that one lives by.

## The precepts

The precepts that people might be familiar with when they go on retreat are...

### THE FIVE PRECEPTS

Refraining from harming or killing.

Refraining from taking what is not offered.

Refraining from sensual misconduct.

Refraining from false speech, or harmful forms of speech such as malicious speech, harsh speech, and gossip.

Refraining from clouding the mind with intoxicants such as drink and drugs.

These become really good containers. But they are a nice set of prescriptions and you see these listed in popular books on Buddhism: "Don't kill, don't steal, don't engage in sexual misconduct, don't lie, and don't take drink and drugs on retreat." It sounds very moralistic.



### Is *sīla* ethics or morals?

If I've got you correctly, then you've used the Greek notion of *ethos* closer to character and the notion of morals closer to convention. Character is something you develop, so there is a lot of responsibility and choice in there. But you don't have much of a choice other than to follow the conventions or not follow the conventions of your society. You don't actually make up the conventions, you grow in to the conventions.

So if we have ethics and morals, where exactly is *sīla* on that spectrum?



### Sila is both ethics and morals

If I'm looking at the more complex role that I think *sīla* plays and I think it oscillates between both. I think it oscillates between a set of conventions which enable us to function together. You perhaps feel safer if I don't engage in some of these behaviors that the precepts tell us we shouldn't engage in.



### Then *sila* is more than development of character

Then you're saying it's not enough to just equate with ethics and development of character. And it's not enough to identify, *sīla* with morals and convention and the respect for conventions that are prevalent where I live and with whom I live.



### *Sila* is more than following rules, too

It oscillates between the two traditions. I think the word ethics is very powerful in the West, and a very off-putting word for a lot of Western people. When we start talking about ethics, they often go towards, "Oh, it's just a list of rules that I have to follow", without bearing in mind that the kind of behaviors we engage in—for better or for worse—are going to form our character over a protracted period of time.

We're talking about an interaction between the moral customs and conventions of our societies that sometimes need to be questioned and sometimes just need to be followed. Sometimes they are actually just rules of etiquette, behaviors that help me not to annoy you, for example, which I can easily do!



## Is this a happy life?

When I listen between the lines of what you've said, this is about an engaged life, an aware life, a reflective life. Is it also a happy life? If I want to be happy, do I need to be ethical? Is this one of the statements of Buddhist teaching?



## The path is all about ethics

I'm going to actually be quite upfront about that. I think that is absolutely the point of what we're doing. If you ask yourself the question, "Do I want to be happy? Do I want to be contented?" Then the whole realm of ethics is of vital importance.

**And in many ways, if I'm being very contentious about this, I would say actually a lot of contemporary Buddhist practice misses the point.**

It becomes much, much more about self-reflexivity, "How I am...", "How I'm feeling..." about periods of passivity, quietude, which of course have their value. I'm not trying to devalue that. What I'm trying to put across is that those experiences are not the point.

**The point is that when you come out of your meditative *samādhi* (gatheredness)—your focused state of mind—you still have to**

engage in the world. We still have to relate. You still have to go out and be with your family and in your workplace. That requires ethics.



## The Role of Ethics

Akincano describes the traditional roles that ethics has played within the Buddhist path. For example, we'll look at how ethics is said to support stillness and wisdom.



### *Sīla* is a basis for happiness

So we've titled this course *The Good Life*, and I think we've done so for a good reason. It is important to us that the notion of ethics is understood more broadly than we hear ethics often spoken of in Buddhist circles. We think that this topic deserves a widening of perspective.

Ethics, *sīla*, is one of the irreducibles of the Buddhist path, together with wisdom, stillness, compassion, investigation, and the *Brahmavihāras* (divine abodes). And yet if we listen to Buddhist teachings, often ethics has a sort of, ugly duckling flavor to it. In many ways, ethics sounds unsexy compared to the stillness part, the wisdom part, the liberation part, and what John—I think cheekily—called the mystical part of the teaching.

There is probably good reason that we are a little tired of doctrines that remind us of the necessity of moral living. Many of us have religious backgrounds in which this necessity was taught in forceful ways. And that may explain the lack of enthusiasm we have when we come across something that reminds us of morals and precepts, and conventions and stricture. However, that doesn't do justice to the notion of *sīla*.



**Let me be very, very clear. One of the big turnarounds in my own practice around *sīla*, I recall, is when I understood that *sīla* is a basis for happiness.**

I didn't get that right away. Like many of you, maybe, I was reared on notions of morals basically being an avoidance of doing bad stuff: avoiding offending or hurting people, hurting people, avoiding being immoral. So the notion of ethics immediately evoked norms, conventions, rules, regulations, and precepts, as we call them in Buddhist teaching. But ethics is more than that.

**It's important to understand that if we want to be content and if we want to be happy, then our best chance is to be ethical. That's a key piece that needs to be very clear.**

Before we get into the relationship of ethics and stillness of mind, or ethics and the development of wisdom, or ethics and the relational piece, we need to be clear that if you seek happiness—and I hope all of you are seeking happiness—then your best bet for living a happy and contented life is to be an ethical person.

## Two forms of happiness

Let's distinguish two different forms of happiness.

### TWO FORMS OF HAPPINESS

There's a happiness that is connected with value-based living. It has something to do with contentment.

There is another happiness that is sense-based. It has to do with feeling good.

We all need both sorts of happiness, in a particular balance and in a particular ratio maybe.

**But it's clear that sense-based happiness cannot replace a value-based happiness.**

No amount of sensory happiness can cover for the fact that we do not live by our values, or the values we have espoused, or we feel obliged to live up to and then don't. No amount of sensory happiness can either comfort us over this discrepancy between the sphere of values and our behavior. No amount of sensory happiness can make up for a lack of congruency with our own values, and the sense of conscience that we feel.

The Buddha, like Socrates and Jesus, was of the understanding that human beings have an innate capacity to establish what is ethical. The Buddha felt that we have a capacity to sense what is ethical and he deemed that sensitivity important, and living by that sensitivity he deemed to be a virtue. So part of ethical living is sensitizing ourselves to that dimension in our life that is ethical and speaks to us in a variety of ways. If we are in congruency with that sphere, we tend to feel good and content, and if we're not, we tend to feel bad faith, distraught, profoundly uneasy about ourselves.

**We need to understand what happiness is. Many of us may mistake happiness simply with excitement. And if we don't have another notion of happiness than sensory excitement, then it's difficult to espouse a notion of ethical living.**

One of the points of Buddhist teachings is to broaden the notion of ethics so that it encompasses relationships, action, the way we address the world and are touched by the world... beyond sets of individual rules. Traditional Buddhist teachings make a distinction between the type of ethics that consists in avoidance (*vāritta-sīla*), and the type of ethics that is concerned with actually making choices in living (*cāritta-sīla*). So, what you avoid and how you conduct yourself. And the avoidance part is much more famous in Buddhist teachings than embracing the way we conduct ourselves: the full engagement John spoke of, the reflective, more aware way in which we live in the world.

I would like to quote you an example of somebody who also felt that we have a sense of ethical guidance and an inner compass. This is from a man who cannot be suspected of being a Buddhist. His name is Immanuel Kant. And the quote is from his voluminous tome called *The Critique of Practical Reason*.

**Two things fill the mind with ever and increasing admiration and reverence the more often and more steadily one reflects on them: the starry heavens above me, and the moral law within me.**

—Immanuel Kant.

### **Where does *sīla* traditionally fit in Buddhist teachings?**

So it may be worth looking at, "Where does *sīla* fit in the edifice of Buddhist teaching, traditionally?"

John has already referred to the triad of *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā* (ethics, stillness of mind, wisdom). *Sīla* is credited for being foundational both to the development of stillness via lack of regret (*avippatisāra*). *Sīla* is also credited with the development of wisdom. This is partly because the development of wisdom entails some degree of stillness...

**But unless you're willing to engage in ethics, it is unlikely that you will be able to still your mind because your mind will be torn and conflicted. There will be a sense of remorse and regret which consumes energy and which will prevent the coalescence of the mind necessary for stillness. Because of that, it will also impair your capacity to have deeper insight.**

From that point of view, there is a clear trajectory establishing ethics as a basis for greater stillness and greater stillness as a basis for greater understanding, which is the liberating force in Buddhist teachings.

This sounds a little theoretical, but practically it actually makes a lot of sense. There is a famous passage somewhere early on in *The Path to Purity*, a famous 5th-century commentarial work that John and I often vilify! But today let me quote a passage that I find makes a lot of sense of this triad of *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā* in very practical and psychological terms.

<b>THE PATH TO PURITY'S VISION OF ETHICS SUPPORTING CALM AND WISDOM</b>	
<b>Ethics</b>	With the cultivation of ethics ( <i>sīla</i> ), unwholesome impulses are hindered to manifest as word, deed, and behavior.
<b>Calm, collectedness</b>	With the cultivation of calm ( <i>samādhi</i> ), unwholesome impulses cannot take root.
<b>Wisdom, understanding</b>	With the cultivation of wisdom ( <i>paññā</i> ), unwholesome impulses are overcome.

So you have the playing together of *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā* in very practical ways.

There *are* such things as unwholesome tendencies. Human beings are not innately pure. We all have unwholesome tendencies. The most elegant and short shrift way of naming them is in the words of 2nd-century teacher, Asanga. He made two distinctions.

## TWO TYPES OF UNWHOLESOME TENDENCY

### ***Jñeyā- varana***

Unwholesome tendencies that manifest as your lack of capacity to understand. Asanga called these *jñeyā-varana*: the tendency to be veiled by the lack of cognitive understanding, veils in your comprehension.

### ***Kleśā- varana***

These are basically unwholesome tendencies that come from bad habits. They are emotional in nature.

These are your major problems. We all have these unwholesome tendencies in us, either because we don't get stuff or because we are too reactive to this stuff. These unwholesome tendencies are stopped from flowing into word, deed, and behavior by *sīla*.

## HOW SĪLA, SAMĀDHI, AND PAÑÑĀ COUNTERACT UNWHOLESOME TENDENCIES

### ***Sīla* (ethics, morality)**

*Sīla* stops our unwholesome tendencies from seeping out into the world of action, into the world of *karma* (action).

### ***Samādhi*(stillness, gatheredness)**

And then we have stillness (*samādhi*) that minimizes the power of these unwholesome tendencies to take root in the mind. We cannot stop these unwholesome tendencies by being able to still the mind, but at least we can stop them from taking root, becoming virile, being seeded in our mind.

### ***Paññā*(wisdom, understanding)**

Finally, it is wisdom (*paññā*)—the third part of this triad—that makes these unwholesome tendencies clear, that shines a light on our reactivity, and that helps us to overcome these unwholesome tendencies.

So the play of *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā* does make a lot of psychological sense to me.

## The triad of generosity, ethics, and development

There's another triad that may be less obvious.

THE TRIAD OF GENEROSITY, ETHICS, AND WISDOM	
<b>Generosity</b>	It says that the path begins with generosity, engaging generously with the world, seeking out opportunities for growth.
<b>Ethics</b>	Then comes cultivating ethics.
<b>Cultivation, development (<i>bhāvanā</i>)</b>	Development in the bodily realm, in our relationship to the physical world ( <i>kaya bhāvanā</i> ).
	Development in the ethical world, the social realm, the relational world.
	The development of wisdom ( <i>paññā</i> ).

These forms of *bhāvanā* (cultivation) become the latter part of the path.

That's the tripartite model in a sort of mechanical way. It makes it sound as if ethics is an intermediate stage of the path that you leave behind. Like John, I think this model has its value. I think acting generously in the world engages you, discerning where happiness comes from and how you can contribute to it is an important piece of ethics, but it doesn't actually stop. Just because you begin to meditate, it doesn't mean you can stop living ethically. I mistrust the sequencing of that. I see the structural necessity—generosity, ethics, development—but it doesn't mean that ethics stops when you start developing or cultivating the mind. These two triads, I think, are representative of *sīla* in most Buddhist teaching contexts.



# Meditation 1: Becoming Receptive to Experience

**In this guided meditation, John invites us to relax and receive our experience. This becomes the foundation for an ethical engagement with life.**

In this meditation, we're going to pick up a theme that is not directly related to ethics but is very important to the development of ethics, which is a sensitization towards what's happening in your experience.

**We're going to pay attention to little things arising in your experience, take note of them, and also develop a sense of not just noticing, but a sense of softening towards what is occurring in your experience.**

## The posture

Let's get into a comfortable position, making sure that this posture is intentional. This is different from simply sitting in a chair, on the floor, on your cushion, or meditation stool. This particular way of sitting sends a message to keep alert and awake and aware, to be receptive to experience... particularly in an ethical sense of being receptive to experience and what is being given to us in that experience. We need to have this uprightness and alertness: a sense of being open to what is occurring in experience.

## Opening to what is here

Before we even begin the normal aspects of meditation practice we might just be open to what is arising right here, right now for us. It could be thoughts but more often than not it's just small sensations in the body. Noticing things that we are not usually receptive to. That might just be the feeling of your buttocks on your seat. It may be the feeling of your legs or your feet on the floor.

As we sit here just being open to our experience, we might notice the warmth or coolness on exposed skin, usually the hands or face. We're not trying to

generate these experiences; we're just noticing them, opening to them, being aware of them. And that awareness is also a receptivity.

We might notice the touch of clothing on our bodies, something that's occurring all the time, just as many of these other things are. We often sit on a seat but don't feel our buttocks on the seat. Unless we feel really cold or really hot, we're not aware of the air touching the skin.

**How often we're passing through daily life, almost immune to the little things that tell us quite a lot. Our receptivity has to be engaged in order for us to comprehend what is happening in that context.**

This may feel very simple. And some of you have done these meditations before. This might sound like a tick list we go through: the feet, the buttocks, a touch of clothing, a feeling of the air on the skin. But it is not simply a tick list. Open up to it. Really be aware and have a sense of what is coming to you at this moment.

And, OK, this is not ethical in the sense of "I'm having to make a choice about what to do". But sometimes ethical situations involve us not having to do anything and just *be with* what is happening. We could think of it as a training of just *being with* the experience without having to intervene. Sometimes we might want to intervene if we're uncomfortable on our chair and it becomes painful. You have to make a choice, often, of what to do.

So think of this receptivity practice as a way of opening to experience and seeing where we just let be and, at other times, where we have to make a judgment.

**And yet, this is so simple: just dwelling in this awareness, just being this body mind, sitting here at this moment, receptive to what is going on.**

It is highly, highly important to have this stillness and receptivity in order that in ordinary life we are able to make clearer judgments about whether we should intervene, act, or not act. What might seem a preliminary, warm-up exercise before the main practice of getting to the breath becomes a very, very important dimension of us opening to experience.

Being aware of our bodies sitting here with all these experiences happening... and we've only touched on a few of them.

## **Bringing a gentle focus to the breath**

After a while, we may wish to focus a little more. Again, not intervening, but just *being with* that coming and going of the breath. This is not just an inert body, this is a living body. And what gives it life is the breath. We're breathing all the time, unnoticed until perhaps you've climbed a hill and you're short of breath. This is when the breath becomes noticeable. Otherwise, we take it for granted.

**Think of how we move through life, taking many, many, many things for granted, not being responsive to what is presented to us, what is being given to us in our experience.**

And so we notice the sensations of breathing. Every breath comes with a sensation. Every breath is different, just like every context we step into is different. And I notice that. I notice individual sensations within this breath. As my abdomen expands it gives rise to those sensations; my chest expands and contracts, and I notice that. Not intervening at this stage, not trying to change the experience.

**In a sense, we're warming up before moving into an engagement with life where we notice more clearly.**

## **Noticing the rise and fall**

I will also notice—unbidden, mostly—thoughts, sensations, and experiences which simply arise. Thoughts arise. Feelings arise. Sensations arise. And instead of pushing them away, we can notice those. This is all part of the tapestry that we call experience. Sometimes it's giving you information, telling you something about what's going on. A little discomfort, an anxiety may arise. I see it and perhaps move into it just a little more closely, with a little more openness, with a little more care or friendliness before returning back to this arising and falling of the breath as a primary focus—it could be anywhere else in the body but mostly it's usually the breath.

As much as we can, we are increasing our receptivity in this process. We're not just trying to hold onto the breath, desperately clinging to it, sometimes judging—"Am I doing this right? Am I doing this wrong?"—but just being there for it. And sometimes when we move through the ordinary world, our everyday world, sometimes we have to stop and take account of where we are, and read the situation very carefully. We notice what is required and instead of reacting, we respond.

**This is all part of the training you may be very familiar with. We can turn this training over and see how it's related to the development of an ethical awareness by stilling, steadying, and creating an awareness which is receptive and responsive.**

## **Bringing receptivity into your life**

When you're ready, you can open your eyes, bring yourself back into the room, and become aware of your surroundings.





## Reflect

1. What can you do today that would be generous, kind, protective, or helpful?
2. Has acting ethically in the past lead you to a sense of peace and contentment? Has it deepened your meditation?
3. Have unethical actions in your past caused you regret and unease?
4. To what extent do you live by the five precepts, below?
5. Do you agree that the purpose of meditative awareness is to support an ethical life? If not, what is meditative awareness for?
6. Say hello and introduce yourself, if you wish to.
7. What has sparked your interest in this course, and Buddhist ethics?
8. In brief, what does an ethical life look like to you, at this early stage in the course? (We will revisit this question at the end of the course.)
9. Is it better to give up harmful actions than to pursue beneficial actions?
10. Do you agree that Buddhist practice misses the point if it doesn't put ethics at the center?

You may wish to make notes in a journal.

### THE FIVE PRECEPTS

Refraining from harming or killing.

Refraining from taking what is not offered.

Refraining from sensual misconduct.

Refraining from false speech, or harmful forms of speech such as malicious speech, harsh speech, and gossip.

Refraining from clouding the mind with intoxicants such as drink and drugs.



## Teacher Discussion: A Different Way to Live

**John and Akincano discuss the centrality of ethics in our lives and in Buddhist practice.**



### **Ethics is at the center**

When we start to ask ourselves those basic questions:

- "How do I want to live?"
- "What do I want to do?"
- "What direction is my life taking?"
- "How do I not leave a wake of destruction behind me as I move through life!?"

...Then we are asking ourselves ethical questions. This seems to me to be the most important element. This is not secondary. This is right at the forefront of what we're doing in this path of practice. All the other elements we speak about in our teaching careers are important, but we don't necessarily have to put them at the center. Whereas I feel that ethics is at the center.



## The elements of the path support each other

If I look in my own biography, my path hasn't actually been the traditional sequence of ethics (*sīla*), collectedness (*samādhi*), wisdom (*paññā*). I remember it was only the sitting—which technically would either be the *samādhi* or the *paññā* piece—that made me aware that some of my ethical choices were not great. So rather than starting with ethics as the basis for *samādhi* and for *wisdom*, I found that when I sat down and tried to still my mind that there were ethical issues bubbling up. And these made me aware of the suboptimal nature of some of my choices and consequently made me shift.



## In Daily Life

**Akincano and John recommend reflective exercises that will develop your ethical awareness in everyday situations.**



### **Keep a journal and reflect on your ethical choices each day**

For our first In Daily Life contemplation, we would like you to take up a journal. And for this journal, we ask that you contemplate the residue you're left with, at the end of the day, of the choices you have made during that day. It may be choices to do something or not to do something. Either way, we would like you to get the texture of your ethical landscape or perhaps the feeling tone your choices leave you with.

We would like you to do that with as little recrimination as possible. We are interested in you having a feel for this, rather than blaming or applauding yourself, or in any way reinforcing your notion of self for that matter.

**So, a journal, and some contemplation at the end of your day: what is it that I have acted on? What is it I haven't acted on during the day? And what does that leave me with?**

To give you a few examples of the sort of topics, I envision:

- how you speak to people
- when you neglected to say something
- what you bought, what what went through your mind when you stood in the shop
- how you responded to situations that were unforeseen

- how well you have done justice to the need that has come from others.

Things like that. Again, no recriminations, no reproaches, no applause. Just acknowledge that there is a residue. And what the flavor of that residue is.



### **Notice the little ethical choices**

We've asked you the basic question, which is "Why ethics?" We can do that from a very abstract position. What we're asking you to do as a contemplation is not just to look at the overall picture of your ethical life and your ethical responses, but to actually walk that landscape a little, to become aware of the highs and lows in your days.

As Akincano has stressed, I think it is really important that we do this without recrimination. We have a friendly eye towards what we're doing: be that something we may applaud in ordinary life or may deride. What we're doing is just beginning to walk that landscape, to reflect on it, to see it. It's so difficult for us—mostly because we're embedded in ethical situations all the time—to see that landscape, to see the choices we make, sometimes even just to notice the consequences of a flippant remark, some dismissive body language that says, "I haven't got time for this at the moment." Or the ways sometimes you can notice a responsive decision where you reflect that, "I really listened to somebody for a few seconds." And how that changes the atmosphere, how it changes the quality of the relationship.

These are the simple little things that we look for. We're not looking for big ethical choices. We're not talking about to kill or not to kill, or to lie or not to lie, to steal or not to steal. We're talking about the little ethical choices that you make:

- to listen or not to listen
- to walk away or to stay where you are
- to contemplate just for a second where your food comes from.

These are ethical awarenesses. You're beginning to walk the landscape of your own ethics, to become aware of that, reflect on it, and note it down in your journal.



### **How much do I make myself attentionally available?**

It's about granularity. Most of us, for most of the time, will not be faced with the question, "Do I kill or do I not kill?" But think of it on a more subtle level. Think of it as...

- How much do I make myself attentionally available?
- How much space, how much time, how much openness does somebody receive who comes towards me who makes a gesture of contact?
- How much or how little am I available for this person?
- How big, how empathetic, and how responsive is my answer to this person?
- Am I just rushing past? Do I actually stop?
- Am I listening or am I just wishing they would leave me in peace?

Just acknowledge that we all make decisions. Every interaction is a play of many, many gestures and in those gestures I make statements. I say, "I don't have time." "You're not important enough." "This is bothersome." "This is not the right moment for me." Consider these as choices we make. These statements are choices. They're not just happening.

So contemplate this. Contemplate what comes up and how you feel about this.



## Unit 1: Why Ethics?

# Summary

Congratulations, you've completed the first unit. Our focus has been on understanding the importance of ethics to the Buddhist path. Let's revisit some of the main points in a brief recap.

- The word we are translating as ethics is *sīla*. When we speak of ethics, on the other hand, the emphasis is on how we choose to live and how that shapes our character. These terms don't map directly onto one another, however, and *sīla* also incorporates some aspects of what we would refer to as morality: following the rules and conventions of our society.
- When we hear the word ethics, we often think about a list of things we should or shouldn't do. But actually, whenever we ask ourselves questions such as "How should I live?" or "What should I do?" we are asking ethical questions.
- There is a tendency in Buddhist circles to focus on the contemplative or mystical aspects of the teachings. We often find that less attention is given to ethics except as a basis for deeper meditation. However, we can think of ethics being both the foundation and the goal of the path.
- We might ask ourselves, "Why do I meditate? What is this meditative awareness *for*?" One answer to that question is that we develop greater awareness in service of how we live with others, and how we develop our character.
- The good news is that ethics (*sīla*) is a basis for happiness. We can distinguish between two forms of happiness: 1) the happiness that comes from value-based living, and 2) the happiness that is based on pleasant sensory experiences. We all need both of these kinds of happiness to differing degrees. However, it's clear that the happiness based on sensory pleasure cannot replace the happiness—the contentment and peace—that comes from living in accord with one's values.
- One model that describes the place of ethics in Buddhist teachings is that of ethics supporting stillness of mind through a lack of remorse. The mind that is not regretful but is content and peaceful can easily coalesce become deeply gathered and still. This in turn leads to wisdom and understanding.

- We all have unwholesome tendencies. A commitment to *sīla* prevents these unwholesome tendencies from seeping out into the world. Meanwhile, meditative stillness (*samādhi*) prevents the unwholesome tendencies from gaining a foothold in the mind. Finally, wisdom (*paññā*) illuminates these unwholesome tendencies, leading to their abandonment.
- Another traditional model describes the Buddhist path in terms of generosity, ethics, and cultivation and meditation (*bhāvanā*). This sequence has the drawback of making it seem as though ethics is merely a precursor to meditation, a view this course will challenge.

## Formal practice

A suggestion for formal meditation until the next unit is to cultivate receptivity to experience. [Revisit the guided meditation](#) to follow John's instructions through the process of opening to what is here, gently settling on the breath, noticing the rise and fall of sensations, and bringing this receptivity into your life.

Audio from the guided meditation is available as a download to support you. Or you may wish to review the instructions in the workbook and undertake the practice at your own pace.

## In Daily Life

John and Akincano offered some reflective tasks that will bring greater ethical awareness into our lives. We are invited to:

- **Keep a journal and reflect on our ethical choices at the end of the day**
- **Notice the little decisions we make and their consequences**
- **Notice how attentionally available we are for others.**

See the [In Daily Life section](#) or the workbook for more details.

## Next up: The Eightfold Path to Ethical Living

The pragmatic heart of the Buddha's teaching is the Ennobling Eightfold Path. We will examine the factors of this Eightfold Path in view of ethics. We also hope to give exposure to a crucial and somewhat sidelined Buddhist teaching on care and considerateness.

We will look at how each of the components of this path support ethical living. If we're talking about a path to happiness and the cessation of suffering, then obviously the Ennobling Eightfold Path is an ethical path. It's really a prescription for living a good life. And we think this shows that ethics is at the heart of the awakening process.



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