The Ethical Heart (2 of 5) for the Welfare of Others

June 16, 2020

SUMMARY KEYWORDS
afflictive, encourages, affliction, lies, harm, benefit, wise, happiness, monastic life, Rahula, bowl, liberation, criterion, mirror, sensitivity, reflect, self, others, self and others, precepts, stress, mature, distinction

Gil Fronsdal

Today I'll continue this conversation about Buddhist ethics. I like to think of it as the ethics that comes out of doing our practice, as opposed to the ethics that comes out of Buddhist texts, though I'll certainly refer to Buddhist texts today.

The first one I'll refer to, which I find quite inspiring and instructive, is one in which the Buddha defines a wise person in a particular way. It's interesting to see the difference between how wisdom is talked about, and the description of a wise person. Because in Buddhism we're trying to transform the person into a different kind of person. It is not just about knowing abstract wisdom, which is out there in a sense – not just having

knowledge, but really becoming changed. To be a wise person of great wisdom, the Buddha said:

> *Such a person is concerned with the welfare of themselves, the welfare of others, the welfare of self and others, and the welfare of the whole world.*

In terms of ethics, being concerned for the welfare of the whole world and the welfare of others including oneself is an ethical potential that we have.

Becoming a wise person is the whole direction in which we're moving in Buddhism. Again, it's not book learning, but rather, it means becoming a person who's concerned for the welfare of all beings. That's the goal. That is why I emphasized this week that the path of liberation and the path of what we in the West call ethics are the same thing. Spiritual maturation in Buddhism is the same as ethical maturation. It's just that they didn't have the language of ethics in the ancient world in the same way we have it in English. So we don't find the word "ethics" there in a clear way. But that's definitely the way the texts are pointing.

Interestingly, the Buddha also said that someone who's spiritually mature not only lives by the precepts, in that ethical way, but also encourages others to live that way. Exactly what it means to encourage others to live this way is a fascinating topic. It might look differently in

different settings. In some settings it might mean somehow standing up for social justice. When people are killing each other or harming each other, we would stand up and encourage them not to do that. That encouragement, which might be acts of civil disobedience, could be quite strong and powerful. But it would be an expression of encouraging others not to kill. It wouldn't be done with hostility, but with real strength. A wise person lives by the precepts and encourages others to do it as well.

So becoming a wise person has an ethical component. Where does that ethics come from? It comes from a kind of ethical sensitivity. Mindfulness itself has an ethical component, in that it cultivates the sensitivity to recognize within oneself what is harmful and what is beneficial. In the Buddhist tradition, the ability to refine one's capacity to understand in ourselves what causes affliction and what causes welfare is the primary criterion for understanding what is ethical.

There is a story about the Buddha teaching his son, Rahula. Not everyone knows the Buddha had a son. The Buddha went off for about six years to practice and become enlightened. He went off to graduate school, in a sense, and then came back to his hometown, to his family. At that point his son ordained, at seven years old, and became a novice monk. For the rest of the time the son grew up he was under the tutelage of his father.

In a sense, the Buddha was the primary parent for much of his son's life.

There is a story of the Buddha telling his son in very strong terms how important it is not to lie. The text in the Middle Length Discourses [MN 61] doesn't say what happened, but most people who read it say, "Well, this is pretty obvious" – his child had told a lie and was caught telling the lie. Without directly and specifically criticizing Rahula, the Buddha said something a little bit more indirect about lying. He said something like: the value of the life of a monastic who lies is as much as turning a bowl upside down so all the water runs out. The amount of water that's left in the bowl is the worth of the monastic life of someone who lies. That's kind of strong language. The Buddha went on to say that if someone consciously lies, that person would probably be willing to break all kinds of other precepts as well. It's that important.

But what the Buddha said next is even more valuable. He said to his son, "When you're going to do something, before you do it, while you do it, and after you do it, you should reflect and consider whether what I'm doing, or what I did, or what I'm going to do, is going to cause harm or affliction to others or not." He used the metaphor of a mirror.
He said to his son, "Do you know what a mirror is for?" His son said, "A mirror is for reflection."

“In the same way you should look at yourself. You yourself are the mirror for yourself. Look at yourself.”

The question, is this afflictive or not afflictive? is maybe the mirror. One needs to see this in oneself. Doing this takes the ethical consideration and mindfulness to look at what is afflictive and what is not afflictive, and learn to recognize that. We ask if it leads to pain and suffering, or if it leads to happiness for people, for ourselves and others. The Buddha said, "Does it lead to affliction for oneself, or does it lead to affliction for others, or does it lead to affliction for both self and others?" Here he's talking to a young child, and he gives the same kind of teaching as he does about a wise person, where the concern is in all directions – to self, to others, and to self and others.

The criterion is: is it afflictive? And how do we know it's afflictive? Through our power of attention, through paying attention to ourselves. We ourselves have the empathy. We ourselves are the standard, the reference point for really understanding how others are hurt by us. The more we can develop ethical sensitivity and feel how we experience stress, affliction, pain, and harm through our actions or the actions of others, the more we wake up the capacity to be sensitive to these kinds of issues. Then we're more careful.

Placing this at the heart of Buddhist ethics means that we are the arbitrators for what is ethical, through the criterion of what is causing harm and is afflictive or not. It's not an abstract moral code or rules out there that one has to adopt. In Buddhism there is no outside, abstract moral code that is the heart of it all. The heart of it is this capacity to recognize harm and benefit. And the ability to do that is really strengthened by our capacity to be mindful, to be attentive, to be here.

We will make mistakes. We will do things that are harmful. The ways in which we cause little pieces of stress can be very, very subtle. I've heard Buddhist teachers emphasize that this little teaching on attention to what's afflictive and non-afflictive, leading to suffering or happiness, even though it's a teaching to a young child, is actually the very heart of the Buddhist path. They teach that all the way to enlightenment, this little distinction of seeing what's afflictive and non-afflictive, what causes suffering and what causes happiness, is the guide and support for the path to liberation. Because it has to do with affliction, pain, suffering, and happiness, it's also, in Buddhism, the path for becoming ethically mature. The two – ethics and liberation – are one and the same. They're not distinct from each other.

It might seem a little simplistic to begin ethics by looking at what's afflictive and what's not, what causes suffering and what brings happiness, but that's the most reliable

criterion. If we learn to be skilled at recognizing that, we'll find our way both personally and socially very effectively. It's a phenomenal support.

One thing this means is that the way that we're ethical also needs to be non-afflictive – the way that we ethically hold ourselves is not going to cause harm. It's actually going to bring happiness and well-being. How do we experiment, as we did with the breathing today, with the way we behave in the world and the way we speak so that we can be resilient and learn from what we do? So we are not weighed down by things, but can come back to an ethical way of being, a fresh way of being that is nourishing and supportive, that encourages further ethics or furthers an ethical approach to life.

If you don't like the idea of an ethical approach to life, it's completely fine for it to be a liberative aspect of life that is more conducive to liberation and freedom and wisdom. How can you come back so that that is the direction you go? The reason I can say so confidently that either one is fine is because they're one and the same. There's no difference.

So, one of the primary principles of early Buddhist ethics has to do with our capacity to be sensitive to what causes affliction and what causes welfare, what causes suffering and what brings about happiness. I'll

talk more about this tomorrow. Thank you for being here.