

2. MORALITY, THE FIRST AND LAST TRAINING

The original Pali word for this training is *sila*, which I am translating as “morality”. People translate it in various ways. Regardless of the word we choose, it is likely to resonate for people both positively and negatively. If the word “morality” bothers you due to the associations it suggests, look at the assumptions, agendas, and practices of this training and come up with your own word for it. I don’t think that it is so important what we call it. I do, however, think that we should give careful attention to trying to live it.

From my perspective, training in morality has as its domain all the physical, verbal, and mental behaviors belonging to every single aspect of life that is not explicitly meditative. When we are trying to live a good life in the conventional sense, we are working on training in morality. When we are trying to work on improving our physical, emotional, and mental health, we are training in morality. When we philosophize, we are training in morality. When we exercise, we are training in morality. When we are taking care of others or ourselves, we are training in morality. When we try to guard the environment by not misusing or wasting resources, reform corrupt governments, or make this world a better place for everyone, we are training in morality. When we commit to a non-harming and benevolent livelihood, build a healthy marriage, raise healthy children, or shave our heads and move to a remote place to dedicate ourselves to intensive spiritual practice, we are training in morality. Whatever we do in the ordinary world that we think will be of some benefit to others and ourselves is an aspect of working on this first training.

I should add a qualifier here, relating to what a life well-lived might mean. For some, that is a life of riches, decadence, and hedonism. That is not what I am talking about. It is not that wealth is inherently bad, though there are strong moral arguments to be made for a vastly more equitable distribution of wealth. It is not that all decadence is inherently bad, and I would hate to make someone feel terrible for having a second dessert occasionally, but clearly there is a great degree of spending on luxury that is contributing to the destruction of the planet and behavior that simply leads to more misery for all concerned in the name of “fun”. It is not that we shouldn’t enjoy our lives, as an enjoyable life is a much easier one to accept, but clearly plenty

of the pathways people go down seeking enjoyment do predictably lead to more suffering than they produce pleasure or fulfillment. So, with those qualifiers in mind, ponder what a life well-lived would mean and aspire to that.

The third training, called wisdom, as understood within the Theravada framework, has limits, in that you can only take it so far, and it can be fully mastered. Interestingly, this cannot be said of the first two trainings of morality and concentration. There is no limit to the degree of skill that can be brought to how we conduct ourselves in the world. There are so many ways we can develop, and no obvious ways to define what one hundred percent mastery of even one of these might be. Thus, morality is also the last training in the sense of being the training we need to cultivate throughout our lives. We may be able to attain to extraordinary states of consciousness and understand many aspects of the actual nature of sensate reality, but what people see and what is causal are the ways that these abilities and understandings translate into how we live in the world. Some folks who read *MCTBI*, for reasons I am unsure of, came away with the mistaken impression that I somehow consider morality as unimportant. Let me now be completely clear on this: morality cultivated throughout our entire lives is critical for everyone, and particularly for those who want to train in concentration and wisdom!

There are basic premises that are extremely helpful when undertaking training in morality. It is very helpful to accept, for example, that a basic moral code, that is, a universal and non-harming ethic, is helpful for getting along in this world, and thus that there is practical, real-world benefit to be derived from training in morality.

It is also helpful to accept in an easygoing and non-dogmatic way, that the more good we do in the world, the more good there will appear in that world both for us and for others, and thus the more good things will happen to us and all others. It is also worth assuming the corollary of this, which is that the more we do harmful actions in the world, the more harm we experience and therefore the more that miserable circumstances arise.

These premises are not unique to Buddhism, nor are they in any way extraordinary, and that brings me to an important point about the spiritual traditions in general: most religions have points that are generically useful that they have attempted to appropriate as exclusively theirs, such that extremist followers of that faith may come to believe that their tradition's teaching on morality is the only teaching on morality. The corollary of this fallacy is that people not of their own religion are considered unlikely or incapable of being truly moral, when, in fact, societies and traditions throughout the ages and around the world have advocated for a universal, non-harming ethic.

It is worth realizing that defining "negative" and "positive" action is often very much a question of perspective. In the face of this, some will retreat into the semi-dysfunctional and often self-serving position of moral relativism, in which we decide that morality is totally subjective or that morality is arbitrary and thus futile or unnecessary to bother with. Paradigms that are less intellectual and more grounded in common sense can help us to avoid falling into the paralyzing and extremely dangerous trap of imagining that it is futile to train in morality, however seemingly relative and arbitrary. It is better to try to do our best and fail than not to try at all.

Thus, the Buddha taught that what we think, say, and do has consequences for our subsequent moment-to-moment experience. When undertaking training in morality, we are proceeding

from the premise that we can, if we choose, control what we think, say, and do, thus creating consequences that are pleasant and beneficial, both in terms of our experience and that of others. Rather than accepting our current level of intellectual, emotional, and psychological development as being beyond our power to change, we consciously and explicitly adopt the empowering view that we can work with these aspects of our lives and change them for the better. We assume that we do have the capacity to change our world and our attitudes towards our world. We take responsibility for our actions and their consequences.

Further, as a part of our empowerment, we assume that the more we bring our resources and abilities to this training, the likelier we are to succeed. We have a body, we have reason, we have our intuition, we have our heart, and we can learn and remember. We have a community of others who have wisdom to share, we have books and other media that contain advice for living a good life, and we have our friends and family. We can draw on all these and more to try to live a good life, a life in which our thoughts, words, and deeds reflect as closely as possible the standards we have consciously adopted and defined for ourselves. The more consciously engaged we are with our task, the more we are likely to be successful.

Crucial to the control of what happens in our lives is our intention. Thus, training in morality places much emphasis on intention, with the basic assumption being that the more our intentions are kind and compassionate, the more we are likely to be able to manifest kind and compassionate thoughts, words, and deeds.

Further, it is helpful to understand that training in morality requires us to pay attention to what is happening in our lives. When we are not paying attention to what we are thinking, saying, and doing, we will not easily be able to craft these in a way that fits with the assumptions of this training. If we are not paying attention to the consequences of our thoughts, words, and deeds, both in the short and the long terms, we are unlikely to be able to gain enough experience to be able to successfully carry out our training in morality.

It is also helpful to understand that training in morality will help us when we get to formal meditation practices (the next two trainings in concentration and wisdom), providing a foundation of good mental and physical habits that can support those practices, as well as helping to avoid the mental and physical irritation that can result from a lack of a solid moral foundation. Thus, even if for some crazy reason, we have little interest in being moral because of the benefits it brings, if we are interested in obtaining the results of the other two trainings, we must also engage in training in morality.

These key points about training in morality naturally lead to the specific agendas we have for what happens when undertaking training in morality. We consciously aspire to have the actions of our body, speech, and mind fit with the premises or prerequisites of this training. In short, we have standards for our mental, emotional, and physical lives and we try our best to live up to those standards. When we are training in morality, we consciously cultivate actions, words, and thoughts that we deem to be non-harming, and if possible, kind and compassionate. By “kind”, I mean that we work to promote the happiness and welfare of others and ourselves. By “compassionate”, I mean that we work to understand and relieve the suffering, problems, or unhappiness of others and ourselves. Thus, our agenda is for our intentions to be kind and compassionate, for our minds to be aware of what we are thinking, saying, and doing, and for our experience to inform us how best to craft our life to reflect our wisely informed good intentions.