The Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path

Lecture 50: The Principles of Ethics - Right Action

Venerable Sir and friends,

We are currently pursuing, at least in imagination, at least in understanding, the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path. And each week we are studying, we're considering, we're trying to understand one stage or one aspect as we may also say, of that Noble Eightfold Path. And today under the general heading of 'the principles of ethics' we are dealing with Right Action. Right Action is the fourth step or fourth stage or fourth aspect of this Noble Eightfold Path, and coming to it, considering it, we complete half of our long journey of treading the Noble Eightfold Path. So having come so far, having come half way, it might not be a bad thing, especially in view of the fact that there may be some people here who haven't heard previous talks, it might be a good thing to take, as it were, a backward glance and to try to see how far we have come.

We've seen - and this has I think been sufficiently emphasised in the past - we've seen that the whole path, the whole of the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path, is divisible into two great sections of very unequal length. It's divisible into what is known as the Path of Vision and what is known as the Path of Transformation. The Path of Vision corresponds to the first stage or first aspect only of the Eightfold Path, that is to say Perfect Vision. This stage or this section of the path represents what we may describe as our initial insight into the true nature of existence, our first glimpse, however momentary, however confused, however obscured, our first glimpse, our first sight of reality. And this glimpse, this sight is, we may say, more of the nature of a spiritual experience than of the nature of intellectual understanding. So this is the Path of Vision. This is Right Vision also, Perfect Vision also, this initial insight into the true nature of existence, this initial glimpse of Reality itself.

Then the Path of Transformation. The Path of Transformation corresponds to Perfect Emotion, Perfect Speech, and all the rest of the other seven stages of the Path. You see the Path of Vision corresponds only to the first stage, the Path of Transformation to all the other seven stages. And the Path of Transformation represents, we may say, the gradual transformation, if you like the gradual transmutation of one's whole nature, one's whole being, in all its aspects, all its levels, its heights as well as its depths, in accordance with that Perfect Vision which one has attained in the first step or the first stage.

Now each stage of the path, each aspect of the path after the first, after Perfect Vision, represents a transformation or transmutation of one particular aspect of our being. Perfect Emotion, as we saw in the second talk, Perfect Emotion, the second stage or aspect of the path, represents the transformation of our whole emotional nature as a result of that initial insight or experience of Reality. Perfect Emotion involves or includes first of all elimination of all negative emotions such as craving, such as hatred, such as cruelty. It involves the cultivation of all the positive emotions and especially, according to Buddhist teaching and tradition, emotions such as generosity, love, compassion, joy, peace, and faith, and devotion. We went into all this in the course of the second talk.

Perfect Speech, which is the third stage of the path, with which we dealt last week, represents what we may describe as the transformation of our principle of communication. Perfect Speech is speech which is truthful, which is affectionate, which is useful, and which promotes moreover concord, harmony and unity, even, we saw, self-transcendence. And these four - that is to say truthfulness, affectionateness, usefulness and promoting concord - these are not just four qualities or attributes of Perfect Speech, but more than that, four levels of communication between human beings, each progressively deeper than the one preceding and ultimately leading, as we saw in some detail, to mutual self-transcendence.

Now today we go a stage further, Today we come from Perfect Speech to Perfect Action, known in Sanskrit as *samyak-karmanta,* and this is the fourth stage or the fourth aspect of the path. Now *karmanta* is quite literally just action. Nothing esoteric here, nothing difficult to understand, nothing requiring a long philological and etymological explanation, just action. And *samyak* is not just right as usually it is translated, *samyak* means, as I've insisted before, that which is whole, that which is integral, that which is complete, that which is perfect. So we shall follow our usual practice and speak not just of *Right* Action but rather of Perfect Action. So the question arises inevitably *what is Perfect Action?* And this is a very important question. It's a question which brings us immediately right into the midst of ethics. It's a question which compels us to examine, we may say, fundamentally, the principles of ethics. What is it, we may inquire, that makes some acts right? What is it that makes others wrong, or some acts perfect or others imperfect? Is there, we may even go so far as to inquire, is there any such universally valid criterion in the light of which we can say this is right, that is wrong, this act is perfect, that act is imperfect. Is there any such criterion? If so where is it to be found, what is its nature? These are certainly, we may say, very pressing and very urgent questions. They are questions which concern all of us. Whether we like it or whether we do not like it, we all have to act every day, every hour, almost every minute we are called upon to act. So the

question of *how* to act, in the best way, what is the *criterion* of our action, what should be the guiding *principle*, the motive, this inevitably arises.

Now we all know that nowadays churchmen and others are very fond of lamenting what they call the decline of morals. Now everybody is supposed to have got, I gather, in the last ten or twenty years progressively more and more immoral, and I gather that we're now in a pretty bad state. And this decline of morals is usually linked very firmly with decline in religion, especially orthodox religion. We've all gone away from religion, we've all turned our backs on the churches and we've plunged at once into the pit, into the mire of course, of immorality. And we may in fact agree quite frankly that traditional ethics to a very great extent have in fact collapsed. And lots of people nowadays, maybe some of you here, are no longer convinced that there are any fixed standards of right and wrong so that one can say quite definitely this is *right* or equally definitely, if not a little more definitely, that is *wrong*. Most people nowadays don't really believe that there are any such fixed standards. In the 17th century one of the great Cambridge Platonists, that is to say Cudworth, wrote a book which he called *'Eternal and Immutable Morality'*. Now if anyone were to write a book, even if the Archbishop of Canterbury were to write a book, even if the *Pope* were to write a book with this title nowadays, *Eternal and Immutable Morality*, it would seem quite ridiculous. And not so very long ago, even in the 19th century, the Victorian humanists and freethinkers, freely as they might think, widely as they might range and question intellectually, when it came to ethics, when it came to their home life as the Victorians called it, continued to conform to Christian ethics. People like Darwin, people like Huxley, even people like Marx. Apart from one or two occasional slips they were models, we may say, of morality in the full sense. But that is all changed now. Now the situation is quite different in most quarters. And many people would say, as someone in fact said to me the other day, a young lady, if you do something and if it makes you feel good, well, that thing's right, at least for you. And this is a very widely current, a very widely held view, not always held as explicitly and as openly and as frankly as that, but that is in fact what very many people do think. And I personally feel that this is not necessarily, this development is not necessarily a bad thing. It might in fact, in the long run, be even a good thing, at least as a sort of transitional stage. I think it's not a bad thing - even as I say a good thing - that morals should be thrown, temporarily we hope, into the melting pot, good that we should have to rethink, revise, even re-feel, re-imagine if you like, our morality. It's good that ultimately, as we hope, a new ethic should emerge from the collapse, from the ruins, from the disintegration of the old.

But unfortunately it seems to me as we look back over the centuries, if we look back to the beginnings of Western ethics, it seems to me that Western ethics started off rather on the wrong foot. To begin with our ethical tradition is a very composite thing, not to say mixed. There are all sorts of elements in it. There are elements derived from classical thought, classical tradition, that is to say Greek and Roman tradition, than there's the Judeo-Christian element and also, especially in the case of some of the Northern European countries, there are elements of Norse, Germanic, Teutonic paganism. But though our ethical tradition in the West is composite, though it is made up of many interwoven strands, I think we may say fairly confidently that the Judeo-Christian element in our ethical heritage is very much the predominant one. This is as it were the official ethic to which, at least in the past, everybody officially subscribed whatever their private practice or preference might have been. And in this Judeo-Christian ethic traditionally we find that morality is usually conceived very much in terms of law. A moral obligation, a moral rule, an ethic, is something which is laid upon man by God. And this is very well illustrated, as I'm sure most of you know, by the story of the origin of the ten commandments. I'm sure you've all read this episode - of course Bible reading isn't so common as it used to be - but at least I think you might have seen the film! Moses goes up to Mount Sinai. I've seen Mount Sinai. It's not much more than a hill but anyway he went up Mount Sinai and there in the midst of storm and terror, thunder and lightning and flickering flames, he receives from God the ten commandments, and coming down from Mount Sinai with, according to art anyway, these two stone tablets tucked under his arm like a couple of tombstones, he gives them in turn to the children of Israel.

Now this suggests, this in fact illustrates if not demonstrates this idea, this conception of ethics as something *imposed* on man, almost against his will if you like, by a power, by an authority external to himself. God, after all, according to the Old Testament has made man, formed him out of clay, formed him out of the dust of the earth and breathed life into his nostrils. So man is God's creature, almost God's slave you might say. And man's duty is to obey, man's duty is to do as he is told. And not to obey, to disobey, is a sin. And this attitude is of course illustrated again by the story of the Fall. Adam and Eve, as we all know, were punished for disobeying an apparently arbitrary order. God said the fruit of such and such tree thou shalt not eat, - didn't give them any explanation, didn't tell them it was bad for them, in fact it was very good for them, but they were forbidden to eat it. Now we know these are all stories, these are all mythologies, no one believes them quite literally any longer or at least very few people. But the attitudes which they represent still persist, as we shall see a little later on. And the word also incidentally, the word 'commandment' itself, when we speak of the commandments this also is very significant, that a moral law, a moral rule is a *commandment*, it's something which you are commanded to do, as it were *obliged* to do, almost *coerced* into doing, by some power, some authority external to yourself. Now this is of course all from the Old Testament, and Christianity certainly goes beyond this conception. But it doesn't go very much beyond, and even then it goes beyond in a rather imperfect fashion.

The source of specifically Christian ethics is of course Christ's teaching in the Gospels. But traditionally, theologically, Christ is regarded as God. So obviously when God tells you to do something, when God says you should do this or you should do that, that comes with a terrific weight of authority as it were. One is not asked to do something because it is good to do that so much as because one is asked, almost commanded to do it, by one in whom reposes all power and all authority in heaven and on earth. So one gets the same idea, generally speaking, even within the context of Christian ethics - how ethics is something obligatory, something imposed upon one from without, something to which one must conform. This is the traditional idea, this is our traditional heritage, this is the mode of thought by which consciously or unconsciously we are all influenced when we think in terms of ethics. Something laid upon us from without. Nowadays of course we know the majority of people are not Christian in any meaningful sense. But they still do tend nevertheless to think of morality, to think of ethics in this way, as an obligation laid upon them from without, a command, something which they are obliged to obey. We can in fact perhaps summarise the position of traditional ethics today by saying that it consists in *not* doing what we want to do and doing what we don't want to do because for reasons which we don't understand we've been told so by someone in whose existence we no longer believe! This is really the situation with regard today to traditional ethics. So no wonder we are confused. No wonder we have, as it were, no ethical signpost. We just sort of, in the traditional British way muddle through somehow or other trying to make some sort of sense of our lives, trying to discover some sort of pattern in events. But where ethics is concerned the picture most of the time is a sort of chaos.

Now I don't want to make the contrast as between black and white too abrupt or too vivid or too dramatic. That might be an exaggeration. But I am constrained to say that the Buddhist tradition is quite different. In fact we may say that the whole Eastern - especially Far Eastern - ethical tradition is quite different from all this.

According to Buddhism, according to the Buddha's teaching, according to the traditions of whatsoever school or sect of Buddhism, actions are right or wrong, perfect or imperfect, according to the state of mind with which performed. In other words the criterion for ethics is not theological, the criterion is psychological. Now it's true that even in the West we are not unacquainted with this idea even within the context of Christianity. But so far as Buddhist ethics are concerned, so far as Far Eastern ethics are concerned, whether Buddhist or Taoist or Confucian, whatsoever it may be, this criterion is the only one, this criterion is universally applied, this criterion is rigorously carried through to the very end. That the criterion of ethics is not theologica,l it is psychological.

And according to this same Buddhist tradition there are two kinds of action - what we call, just to use the technical language for a moment, what we call *kusala* and *akusala*. *Kusala* means skilful, skilful action. *Akusala* means unskilful, unskilful action. And this is significant because the terms skilful and unskilful - not good or bad but skilful and unskilful - suggest that morality is very much a matter of intelligence. You can't be skilful unless you've got some sort of practical intelligence, unless you understand, unless you can see, explore possibilities. So morality is as much a matter of intelligence and insight, according to Buddhism, as one of good intentions and good feelings. After all we've been told that the path to hell is paved with good intentions but you could hardly say that the path to hell was paved with skilfulness. It doesn't seem quite to fit.

Now *akusala* actions, unskilful actions, are described or defined as those which are rooted in craving, in selfish thirst, in hatred or antagonism or aggressiveness, and in mental confusion, bewilderment, a state of spiritual obscuration or ignorance. And *kusala* actions, *skilful* actions, are those which are free from craving, free from hatred, free from mental confusion, and which are, positively speaking, motivated instead by generosity, by the impulse to share, to give, by love, by kindness and compassion, and by understanding. These are *kusala* actions, skilful actions, those which are so motivated.

And this very simple distinction at once places the whole question of morality in an entirely different light. The ethical life, the moral life, we may say, is a matter or becomes a matter of acting from what is best in us, what is best in us within. Acting from our deepest, our profoundest insight and understanding and our widest and most all-embracing love and compassion.

Well we are now in a position perhaps to see or begin to see what is meant by *Perfect Action*. Perfect Action is not just action which accords with some external standard or criterion. Perfect Action is that action or any action which expresses Perfect Vision in the sense which I gave this term in the first talk and Perfect Emotion as described in the second talk in this series. And Perfect Action, we may say, represents the descent to the level of action of Perfect Vision and Perfect Emotion, just as Perfect Speech, the third stage of the path, represented their descent to the level of communication. In other words one has attained Perfect Vision, one has developed Perfect Emotion, and when one comes to act, well, automatically, spontaneously, one expresses in terms of one's action that vision and that emotional experience.

Now at this point a question may occur to some of you, especially perhaps those who have been students of Buddhism for some considerable time. Now you may be thinking, or you may be wondering even, well we've heard a lot about ethics, a lot about the criterion of morality but what about the *silas*, what about the precepts. When we

read about Buddhist ethical teaching, Buddhist morality, we're always being told about the *silas*, the precepts, so where do they come in? Where do they fit in here? The five *silas*, the ten *silas* and so on, are these not surely lists of moral rules laid down by the Buddha to which we must conform? Haven't they been handed down to us as it were by the Buddha himself? So where do *they* come in, where do they fit in to the total picture? So one may say, in reply to the question have they not been laid down by the Buddha?, these *silas,* these sets of precepts - well the answer is yes and no, they've certainly been taught, certainly been recommended by the Buddha, but not laid down authoritatively as the ten commandments were by God. What the Buddha says in effect is this: he says a person who is Enlightened, one who has gained Buddhahood, one who has reached and realised the plenitude of Wisdom and the fullness of Compassion, he will behave inevitably in such and such a way because it's his nature, it's the nature of an Enlightened being to behave in that way. And to the extent that *you* are Enlightened, to that extent you too will behave in that way. And if you're not Enlightened or to the *extent* that you're not Enlightened then the observance of the *silas*, the observance of the precepts, will help you experience for yourself that state of mind of which normally they are the natural expression.

Now let me make this point clear with the help of an example. We say that an Enlightened person, one who is a Buddha, is free from, let us say, craving, free from selfish thirst. But we ourselves we are full of craving, full of such selfish thirst for this and for that. For example, we crave, say, food of various kinds, we've got a liking for this and a liking for that, a preference for this and a preference for that. But suppose, just as an experiment, we stop eating some of our favourite foodstuffs, whatever that may be - we give them up, we decide we won't take them any more, very regretfully, very sorrowfully we close the larder door and we resist temptation whatever it may be, whether it's plum cake - I knew one Buddhist high priest who was wonderfully addicted to plum cake, and I was told when I went to see him you could get anything out of him, any teaching or instruction, if you offered plum cake. Or it might be anything else, whatever it is, we give it up for some time. So what happens? We may suffer for a little while, it may not be so very easy, it may be in fact quite hard going, but if we stick it out, if we banish those visions of plum cake and so on what happens? - the craving is gradually reduced. The vision recedes in the distance, and sometimes it may happen that for hours on end we don't think, even once, of plum cake! So in this way craving is reduced. And eventually we may reach a happy state where there's no craving at all. There's just no craving. We never think of that particular thing, never think of having it or enjoying it. So our abstention from that then becomes no longer a disciplinary measure, no longer something we impose on ourselves, it becomes a genuine expression of the state of non-craving to which we have attained.

Now the *silas*, the precepts, are not just lists of rules. When you read them in a book on Buddhism I'm afraid they read just like that, lists of rules - the Buddha said don't do this, don't do that, don't do something else - a whole long list of don'ts with a few do's at the end. And I'm afraid sometimes the impression is created that Buddhism is a very very dreary and negative business, and that the Buddha was going around like an old killjoy just trying to prevent people from having a good time. This is the sort of impression, if one isn't careful, that one may get from some books on Buddhism.

But the *silas,* we may say, the precepts, are really truly just patterns of ethical behaviour. They're the natural expressions of certain skilful mental states. In other words the *silas* represent the pattern of behaviour or a certain pattern of behaviour expressive of a certain person's skilful mental state. And we can find out how far or to what extent we've developed the skilful mental states by checking our behaviour against the *silas*, against the precepts. It provides you with a rough and ready check. Let us look therefore briefly just at one or two of these sets of *silas* or patterns of ethical behaviour.

As lists of rules they will be familiar to many; we need not spend too much time on them. And besides we don't want to identify Perfect Action too closely with any of its specific expressions, however worthy and noble those may be. But first of all just one observation. Different people's patterns of external behaviour, ethical behaviour, may be identical. But their mental states, the mental states *behind* the pattern, may be quite different. This sounds a bit complicated but it's really very simple. For example, suppose three different people abstain from theft, they don't steal. The first person would like to steal, he's got the urge to take something, but he abstains, he doesn't do that just out of fear of the police. This is the morality of lots of people we know. The second person has a sort of slight inclination towards dishonesty. For instance, when he's filling in his tax returns he might be quite seriously tempted but he restrains himself, he doesn't give himself the benefit of the doubt because he's trying to lead a spiritual life. The inclination is there but it's restrained. But the third person has completely eradicated craving, there's not even any tendency, any inclination to dishonesty in his case. So the first person who abstains from theft out of fear of the police is only moral in the legalistic sense. The second person, we may say, who feels an inclination but overcomes it, is moral in the sense that he's practising Right Action in a narrow sense. But only the third, one who abstains because there's no temptation even, no inclination in that direction, only he is really practising fully Perfect Action.

So now for the *silas* or patterns of ethical behaviour. The best-known pattern is of course that of the five *silas,* generally known as the five precepts. Some of you may feel that this is very old hat indeed and that you've gone

over all this before but as I said at the beginning of this course of talks, these things will be new to some people at least and these talks are designed at least partly for newcomers to our movement, those who haven't yet had the opportunity of learning very much about Buddhism, and also intended for our older, more confirmed friends and members because one day they may have to be where I am now, teaching and explaining these things. And before that is possible it means that quite a lot of homework has to be done, even homework on simple things like the five precepts.

Now the five precepts are, as usually transmitted, negative in form. They tell us what not to do, what to abstain from. But in each case there's also a positive counterpart. And it's very significant of modern Buddhist teaching that the positive counterpart is far less widely known than the negative version, the negative five *silas*. I'm sure at least half of you have heard of the five *silas* but I wonder how many of you have heard of the five *dharmas*. The five *dharmas* are the five positive counterparts of the five *silas*. We may translate the five *dharmas* as in this context the five ethical principles. So we'll briefly now consider both the five precepts and the five ethical principles, one by one - examining first the negative and then the positive formulation, and this will give us a balanced picture of this particular pattern of Buddhist ethics.

First of all - the first precept - *abstention from harming living beings*. This is the literal translation, sometimes it's rendered not to kill, but literally abstention from harming living beings. Not only abstain from killing, abstaining from harming in any way. In other words it conveys abstention from all forms of violence, all forms of oppression, all forms of injury. And violence is wrong because it's based ultimately in one way or another, directly or indirectly, on a state, a mental state, an unskilful mental state of hatred or anger or aggressiveness. And if we indulge in this expression of violence then that unskilful mental state - hatred - will become stronger and more powerful than it already is.

Now the positive counterpart to abstention from violence is of course the practice of love - *maitri*, friendliness. And here *maitri* is not just an emotion, not just a feeling as in the second stage of the path, here it's *maitri* as embodied in actual deeds, as put into operation and practice. It's not enough just to *feel* friendly, it's not enough just to *feel* goodwill towards others, we've got to express it. You've got to embody it in deeds. Otherwise if you're just, as it were, gloating over it in your own mind how much you love everybody and how kind you are it becomes a sort of emotional self-indulgence, not to say something worse. And we should watch ourselves really and truly in this respect. We often consider that we love other people - at least we consider we love *some* other people. But if we examine ourselves, if we just think, if we just reflect, we find that we never really *express* it, it's sort of something we just take for granted. Just to give an ordinary rather familiar example, it's very much like the case of the married couple, who've been married, say, for twenty or thirty or forty years, and he never bothers to bring her a bunch of flowers or a box of chocolates. And suppose someone were to ask him, 'Why is this? Don't you love your wife? You never take her a bunch of flowers on Friday night or never give her a box of chocolates.' So what would the average husband say? He'd say, 'Well, what's the need? What's the necessity? Of course I love her, but she should know that after all these years.' So there's no feeling to *express* that, it's something which is taken for granted. And this is obviously very bad psychology in our dealings with people. They shouldn't have to take it for granted or just imagine that we do have a feeling towards them, it should be evident and obvious from our actions, our deeds, what we do and what we say. And we should take steps, use various means, to just keep alive these various expressions which keep the friendliness and love alive also. And that's why in all social life and especially in Buddhism where these things are emphasised very very much, there are things like exchanging presents, giving gifts on various occasions, exchanging invitations and so on - to keep alive the spirit of friendliness. It's not enough to sit in your own room or your own cell even, just radiating thoughts of love. That's very good and very wonderful but it's got to come down to some concrete expression, and it's only then that one will feel it in a very tangible way reciprocated by other people. So therefore according to this first *sila* and first principle it isn't enough just to abstain from violence, isn't enough just not to harm others - that's too negative. There must be this positive outward-going attitude of expressing love for others, love already developed in the second stage, in terms of concrete physical action, doing things for them, or expressing what you feel towards them. In this way the whole spirit and light, we may say, of love is kept alive.

So much then for the first precept and the first principle. Secondly, *abstention from taking the not given*. Now this is again a literal translation. This is not just abstention from theft. That would be too simple, that would be too easy, too easy, that is to say, to evade or to get round or to get over or to get under. It involves, we may say, abstention from any kind of dishonesty, any kind of misappropriation, any kind of exploitation, because all these things, all these activities, are expressions of craving in one form or another, unhealthy selfish craving. And the positive counterpart of this abstention from taking the ungiven, the positive counterpart is of course *dana* or giving. And here again it's not just the generous feeling, the *will* to give as in the second stage but the generous act itself. There's no need to go into all this, it should be sufficiently obvious. We have even in this place spoken I think more than once on the topic of *dana*, of giving, of generosity, and this is something I'm sure which all those who've had any contact with a living Buddhist movement or tradition for any length of time do come to understand very easily and very readily.

Thirdly *abstention from sexual misconduct.* So the question which obviously arises - what according to the Buddhist tradition constitutes sexual misconduct? In various passages in the suttas the Buddha makes it clear that for the purposes of the five precepts sexual misconduct comprises three things. First of all rape, secondly abduction and thirdly adultery. These three comprise sexual misconduct. And all three are wrong, all three are unskilful because they're all expressions simultaneously of both craving and also violence. In the case of rape and abduction, which in the Buddha's day in a comparatively unorganised state of society seemed to have been fairly common, violence is committed against of course the woman herself or against her parents or guardians if she happens to be a minor. And in the case of adultery, of course, the violence is committed against the woman's husband inasmuch as his domestic life is deliberately disrupted. Incidentally one should also remark in this connection that in Buddhism marriage is a purely civil contract, marriage is not a sacrament. And according to Buddhist tradition, in all Buddhist countries divorce is permitted. There's never even been any discussion or argument about this in Buddhist countries. I should also point out, though this might shock some people, that in the Buddhist tradition and in all Buddhist countries today from a religious point of view, monogamy is not compulsory. And we find in some parts of the Buddhist world some Buddhist communities which practise polygamy, and this is not considered as being in any way sexual misconduct. The positive counterpart, the positive counterpart of abstention from sexual misconduct is - and this might surprise you - *samtusti. Samtusti* means contentment. This needs a little pondering upon - contentment. In the case of the unmarried it means contentment with the single state and in the case of the married it means contentment with one's recognised, socially accepted partner. But what is meant by contentment here? One could say quite a lot on this topic but perhaps it needs a whole lecture or whole talk to itself. Contentment in this context as the positive counterpart to abstention from sexual misconduct is not just a passive acceptance of the *status quo*. If you're a bachelor just thinking, well, I suppose I'll be a bachelor indefinitely, or if you're married thinking I suppose this goes on for ever and ever. Not that. I think we may say, putting it into modern psychological terms, that in this context contentment means a positive state of freedom from using sex as a means of satisfying neurotic needs. This is what contentment means in modern language in this context. All right, so much for abstention from sexual misconduct and its positive counterpart, contentment.

Fourthly, *abstention from false speech*. False speech of course is rooted in craving or hatred or fear. If you tell a lie, either it's because you want something or you're afraid of losing something or because you want to harm or hurt somebody or because you're afraid of telling the truth. So untruthfulness, false speech, is rooted in unskilful mental states and therefore is wrong. This requires no demonstration. And the positive counterpart of abstention from false speech is *satya* or truthfulness. We went into all this last week as most of you know in connection with Perfect Speech, so I think there's no need to elaborate here again.

Fifth, *abstention from drinks and drugs that result in loss of awareness*. There's a certain amount of disagreement about the interpretation of this precept. In some Buddhist countries it's interpreted as requiring strict teetotalism. Total abstinence. But in other Buddhist countries it's interpreted as requiring moderation in the use of liquids or liquors which may result in intoxication if you take them in excess. So one is free to take one's choice, we may say, between these two interpretations. And the positive counterpart of the precept is of course *smriti,* mindfulness or awareness. And this is the criterion, looking at it in the light of our general ethical criterion. It's as though the Buddha said, if you can drink without impairing your mindfulness, *if*, well drink, if you can't, don't. But one must be quite honest with oneself and not to pretend one is mindful when one is merely merry.

So much for the five precepts and the five principles, this very popular widely accepted pattern of Buddhist morality or ethics.

We haven't very much time left, I'm afraid, but I'd like to mention just two other patterns of ethical behaviour, just mention them briefly. One is what we call the *bhikshu samvara-sila.* This is a list or pattern of a hundred and fifty precepts observed by the fully ordained monk. And it represents the natural pattern of behaviour of one fully dedicated to the attainment of *nirvana.* In other words if you think of nothing but *nirvana* and the attainment of *nirvana*, if you devote all your energies, all your time, all your effort, all your thought to this then quite naturally your pattern of behaviour will approximate to the pattern embodied in this list of a hundred and fifty precepts. Unfortunately these hundred and fifty precepts are only too often are regarded just as lists of rules, and in this way the whole spirit of the thing is lost.

The other pattern of ethical behaviour which I want to mention briefly is known as the *bodhisattva samvara-sila*. These are the sixty-four precepts - I'm sorry about all of these figures but this is the way it's come down to us - the sixty-four precepts observed by the Bodhisattva. And these sixty-four precepts of the Bodhisattva represent the natural pattern of behaviour of one devoted to the attainment of Enlightenment for the benefit of all. In other words if you are devoted to the attainment of Enlightenment, of Buddhahood, of *nirvana* not just for your own sake, not just for the sake of your own emancipation so that you can be up out of it all, just looking down on the *samsara* and pitying other people paddling about there. Not that, but so that having attained, having realised Enlightenment, Buddhahood, *nirvana*, you can go back, go down, go out, and help those who are still immersed in the mire. If this is your one dominating, I was almost going to say ambition, but it isn't that, but thought or aspiration or inspiration

- whatever you might like to call it - if every ounce of your energy, all your thought, all your time, is devoted to this, then the way you behave, the way you act, the way you speak, your natural pattern of behaviour, will coincide with what is reflected in this list of sixty-four precepts of the Bodhisattva. So in this case also the spirit is important. It's not a question of drawing up, or finding or discovering the list of rules and then meticulously ticking them off one by one by one, but the living spirit, the heart of the whole thing naturally expressing itself in this sort of form or in approximation to these observances, these precepts.

So from all this the nature of Perfect Action should by now have become clear or at least less obscure. We should be clear what the principles of ethics are according to Buddhism. But before we close, just one last word. *Perfect* action is also total action. Or we may say, perhaps better, total act. And total act is that act in which the total man is involved. And such action, such act is very, very rare indeed. Most people are too divided, they're too fragmented, we might even say decimated, to act totally with the whole of themselves. Practically all the time we act with only a part of ourselves. When you go to the office, when you work there, do you put your whole heart and soul into it? I don't think so. You might put quite a large slice of your energy and your effort into it but quite a large slice also remains at home, or is hung up elsewhere. You don't do your work with the whole of yourself, with your *full* attention, all your heart and all your soul and all your strength and interest and enthusiasm, you don't. Or even if you've got a hobby it's very rarely that you put the *whole* of yourself into the hobby. Or even if it's your domestic life, even a woman doesn't very often put the whole of herself into that. There's something else, some residue left out, left over, so that people are acting all the time only with a part of themselves, only a part of themselves, a part of their energy, a part of their interest is involved. Not the whole of it, not the total. And even when we're acting from the best in ourselves, even when we're acting from the best, from the noblest impulses, even that is not a total act inasmuch as there is still remaining within us something, the less good, if you like the worst, from which at that moment we are not acting. Even if we do a good deed, a good action, out of kindness or generosity that's not a total act because there's a residue of unkindness, ungenerosity from which at that moment we are not acting. So even our good action, even our right action, even our so called Perfect Action remains in that sense imperfect, that is to say not total.

Perfect Action in the sense of *total* action, *total* act, in the *fullest* sense, we may say, is the prerogative only of the Buddha, or *a* Buddha; only of the Enlightened mind - only an Enlightened mind can really act totally, with the whole of itself as it were, the whole of its wisdom, the whole of its compassion, behind any particular act with nothing left out, nothing left over. And this aspect of Buddhahood is represented by the archetypal form of the Buddha Amoghasiddhi, infallible success in action, the green Buddha. The green Buddha represents this aspect of Buddhahood. This aspect of total act. Occasionally of course, occasionally, very rarely we may experience a sort of anticipation of Perfect Action in the sense of total action on our own level of being. It does sometimes, it does occasionally happen that we are totally involved in something - every ounce of our energy, every ounce of our effort, our awareness, our interest, our enthusiasm, our love, is involved at that moment, intellectually, emotionally, we're fully and completely involved. And we know that when that happens, when we are capable even if only for a fleeting instant of this Perfect Act, when we can put the whole of ourselves into an act, without anything being left over, without any residue, express ourselves fully and totally, even if it's only for an instant, a fraction of a second, then we feel a sort of relief, a sort of satisfaction, a sort of peace which we can get from no other source and in no other way. So it is at this state that we should aim to be all the time at the highest level, that is to say the level of Enlightenment, the level of Buddhahood, the level of the Enlightened mind. And then of course we shall really know what Perfect Action, what total act is, and we shall really understand from the source, from the origin, the principles of ethics.

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