

[Contents \(click on heading to view text\)](#)

- Practicing the far-reaching attitude of ethics with the other far-reaching attitudes
 - *Generosity of ethics*
 - *Patience of ethics*
 - *Joyous effort of ethics*
 - *Concentration of ethics*
 - *Wisdom of ethics*
 - Questions and answers
-

There is a very beautiful quotation from Lama Tsongkhapa that pertains to the far-reaching attitude of ethics. I thought I would read it to you:

“Ethical discipline is water to clean away the stains of negativity,

Moonlight to cool the heat of afflictions [[‘afflictions’ is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of ‘disturbing attitudes’](#)],

Radiance towering like a mountain in the midst of sentient beings,

The force peacefully to unite human kind.

Knowing this, spiritual practitioners guard it as they would their very eyes.”

The first line is *Ethical discipline is water to clean away the stains of negativity*. You can see that in our life, we get involved in all sorts of garbage actions and manipulative behavior that weigh quite heavily on our mind, and that accumulate as we get older. You can see around you, people who have accumulated years of manipulative, dishonest behavior. They try to rationalize their behavior, but still, it burdens the mind.

Ethical discipline is the water that clears all that away, because when we start to engage in ethical discipline and clean up our act, we reverse all those old habitual behavior patterns. We stop the “Ferris wheel” of having our negative karma create more negative karma which again creates more negative karma, and so on.

This is true especially here where we are not just talking about ordinary ethics but the far-reaching attitude of ethics which is conjoined with the altruistic intention to become a Buddha for the benefit of others. This ethical discipline is done with a noble motivation that encompasses the welfare of all beings, and it is able to reverse the negativities in the mind.

*Ethics is like the moonlight that cools the heat of afflictions**. When we are burning with anger or jealousy, or heated up with attachment or greed, keeping ethical discipline is like the moonlight shining and cooling everything off. You can see that when the mind is very much in a passionate state and out of control with all the afflictions*, just the remembrance of ethics – remembering very clearly what we want to do and what we do not want to do as well as what creates positive effects and what harms ourselves and others -- automatically cools the out-of-control-mind that wants to act impulsively and get our own way.

The radiance (of ethics) towers like a mountain in the midst of sentient beings. So ethics is like Mount Meru or Mount Rainier – it is big, solid and firm. Somebody with ethical discipline becomes like that. There is a firmness about them. There is a constancy. There is a reliability and a trustworthiness. You feel that when you are around them. That kind of person also influences the environment and the minds of other people.

We can see if for ourselves. If our own mind is out of control, we send that energy off and it ripples and affects other people and sets off their alarms, and everybody gets out of control. On the other hand, if we have a firm mind and our ethics are quite clear, then that kind of steadiness, clarity and honesty also sends vibrations – to put it in a New Age way [laughter] – into the environment, and it affects the other people we share the space with.

There have been studies done on the people involved in the holocaust, in the Cultural Revolution, etc. The people who made it through are the people who have very clear ethical standards. Their minds are very clear, and these become a firm foundation in the sea of chaos, and the other people in the environment automatically gravitate towards them.

Ethics is the force peacefully to unite human kind. We were talking last time that if everybody kept ethical precepts, the newspapers would have to find something else to write about, because there would not be nearly as much war and devastation.

It is clear that a lot of harm that occurs is due to our out-of-control mind. When you think about it, natural disasters arise due to the force of our negative karma in previous lives, and those negative karma were a result of unethical actions. By keeping ethical discipline, it not only stops the human-made problems caused by our out-of-control mind, but it also stops the natural disasters which are caused by our afflictions* and lack of ethical conduct in previous lives. It becomes “the force peacefully to unite human kind.”

Knowing this, spiritual practitioners guard it as they would their very eyes. Seeing the benefits for self and others of keeping ethical discipline, we cherish it, appreciate it and guard it. This kind of attitude is so different from the mind that feels, “I should do this. I should not do that.” This is how we usually talk to ourselves when we are trying to make decisions. But real ethical discipline is really beyond the should’s and the obligation and guilt. It comes from a very kind heart and a very clear-sighted mind.

I really like that quote, so I thought to share it with you.

Practicing the far-reaching attitude of ethics with the other far-reaching attitudes

The far-reaching attitude of ethics is also practiced together with the other far-reaching attitudes.

Generosity of ethics

First, you have the generosity of ethics, which is sharing what ethical conduct is with other people, explaining it to other people, influencing them to keep ethical discipline.

Patience of ethics

There is the patience of ethics, which is very important. This means remaining undisturbed even when confronted by the threat of being harmed when you are trying to keep ethical behavior. Sometimes there might be a situation where you refrain from harming somebody else, but they harm you in return. It is good to be able to be patient with that kind of circumstance, because you are very clear in what you want to do and what you do not want to do. Even though you might get hit or somebody might scold you, or whatever, you have the patience to bear with that kind of difficulty because it is for the higher reason of keeping your own ethical conduct pure.

To be able to do this, we have to really think of the long term benefit of ethics, because we always want to do what is expedient. We want the problem to go away as quickly as possible. That is how we usually make decisions and how we evaluate everything – we say to ourselves, “How can I make everything turn out okay for me right now?” There is no willingness to endure any kind of discomfort for a long term reason.

It is very important to work for the long term benefit. When we only look out for our own immediate gain, even if we get our way or we get some happiness, it is very short-lived. It lasts for a very short time and then we will have more problems. We also have to experience the karmic result of our negative action. Whereas if we are able to endure a little bit of harm right now, what it does is, it purifies the negative karma that causes that harm and it prevents us from creating more negative karma that bring more

problems in the future.

His Holiness always advises, that when we are trying to make ethical decisions, if it is for the long term benefit of yourself and the long term benefit of others, then it is definitely something worthwhile to do.

When we say long term benefit, it does not mean just five years or ten years; it also means future lifetimes. If it brings a good result in the long term and a bad result in the short term, it is still something that is good to do. Why? Because the long term effect is going to be something much greater than just the little bleep of what happens right now.

For example, in order to keep good ethical conduct, you might have to endure the pain of somebody criticizing you. This is harmful to your personal interest because you are not getting what you want. You do not have your way and you are losing your reputation. So there is harm in the short term. But by not retaliating or criticizing the person who harms you and ruining their reputation, by bearing the difficulty and abandoning the desire to speak harshly, slander and lie, then the karmic benefits in the long term become very good.

If it is something that brings short term benefit but long term harm, then it is something to avoid doing. If there is some short-term benefit but in future lives, there will be incredibly huge difficulties, then it is not worth it. If it brings a bad result, both in the short term and the long term, then definitely abandon it. This is something to seriously think about with a lot of our actions.

Joyous effort of ethics

This is the mind that takes delight in ethics, that feels very happy and good about ethical behavior. When you wake up in the morning and think you have the five precepts, you go, "Yippy!" When you get the opportunity to take the eight precepts for one day, you say, "Wow! It's fantastic!" instead of thinking, "Oh, it's the day to take the eight Mahayana precepts. Oh God! I have to get up before sunrise." [laughter] Instead of that mind, you have the mind that clearly sees the advantage of it and takes joy.

Concentration of ethics

The concentration of ethics is to be able to focus on it, to be able to be mindful of it. It is keeping our motivation, our altruistic intention pure and constant in a concentrated way when we are acting ethically.

Wisdom of ethics

The wisdom of ethics involves viewing the "circle of three" as interdependent: 1) the person who is keeping the ethical discipline, 2) the action of being ethical, and 3) the person or objects in the environment that we are relating to in an ethical way. None of these exists inherently. They each arise depending upon the other. Remembering this, is the wisdom of ethical conduct.

If we frame our ethics with compassion and altruism on the one hand, and the wisdom recognizing emptiness and dependent arising on the other, then it really becomes the far-reaching attitude of ethics. We may not be full-fledged bodhisattvas right now, but we can try to practice it.

Even though we are talking about [the more advanced] topics that are found towards the end of the *lamrim*, we are not just talking about them in isolation. They are definitely things that we can train ourselves in right now. It isn't intellectual blah-blah, because practicing ethics is about how we make daily-life decisions, how we relate to people, how we relate to the environment. They are not some kind of intellectual conceptualization.

Questions and answers

[Audience: Inaudible]

I think that is a really good point. There is this feeling now in America to say whatever you feel and tell it as it is. But I think that is kind of foolish in many ways, because it is assuming that everything we think is true. It is assuming that whatever we feel at one moment, will continue to be experienced in the next moment. But we are so changeable and fickle, it may not happen this way. So, I don't think it is valid to say that everything that happens to pop into our mind is necessarily beneficial. Lots of times, we say things that harm others, but we change our mind later. Or, we say things that make the situation worse.

So I don't think that it is necessarily wise.

I think it is wise to try to be honest with other people, but in a caring and compassionate way. I think being honest very much involves having that care and compassion. Being honest doesn't mean just spilling everything that comes to mind.

[Audience: Inaudible]

Each situation is quite different. If we constantly corrected those people who said something we disagreed with or didn't like, and constantly entered into a whole negotiation process, we would not be able to do anything. Because then every small thing anybody says becomes a huge mountain to us. So sometimes it is good to just wait. If it is something trivial, you just let it pass and forget it.

And then there are other things which are more serious, where there is a misunderstanding, and maybe you needed to keep quiet at the time it happened so as not to speak out of anger. But later, you could go back to the other person and discuss it and try and clarify, instead of brushing it under the rug and pretend it doesn't exist.

[Audience: Inaudible]

We need to recognize that when we talk about ethics, it is not black and white rules that apply to every single situation on earth. Every single situation is a composite, a dependent arising of many factors. And so before we choose how to act in the situation, we have to examine all the various factors going on there.

I think what you brought up is a very good point, because when we try to frame issues in black and white terms, and get too intellectual about things, then what we do is, we use Buddhism to disengage with ourselves and disengage with the world. In reality, we are just caught in our head and our ideas. It is very easy to do this. I did this for years. This happens. It is part of the process; you go through it and you realize your mistakes. [laughter]

[Audience: Inaudible]

There is pride and arrogance in it. That is why when we take the eight Mahayana precepts, there is one verse that we say at the end: "By having the flawless ethics of the Dharma law, pure ethics and ethics without conceit, may I complete the perfection of ethics." The *ethics without conceit* is really pointing out that ethics is not something that you use to make yourself more arrogant, more proud, more egotistical, more self-righteous, more condescending. That is not real ethics; that is just twisting the Dharma to increase the ego.

[Audience: Inaudible]

But you see, sometimes we do not have clarity. I mean, we are sentient beings, and one of the things we can't buy at the supermarket is clarity. We lack that. There is a deficiency of that in the economy. But it is good to acknowledge that we lack clarity, that we are not perfect, that this is just the way things are. We do the best we can, and we have some kind of patient, open attitude about it, not only with ourselves, but also with others.

We have a very judgmental mind. We are so hung up about doing things right, as if 'right' were some external thing that we have to fit ourselves into and second guess. 'Right' is not some kind of external thing at all. It really is this process of growing and learning and recognizing that we are sentient beings. If we can accept ourselves for our lack of clarity, it is going to be much easier to accept other people for their lack of clarity, because we realize that when somebody is doing this stupid thing that is bugging us to death, actually, they are just exactly like us, and it is no big deal.

I avoid using the words 'right' and 'wrong' because they appear to me as if they are external things, an external right and an external wrong. Whereas we are talking about things we create – whether we create benefit, whether we create harm.

[Audience: Inaudible]

This is the value of doing reflection. For example, with the purification meditation that we did at the beginning of the session, you normally precede that by doing a reflection, “What did I do in my life or what did I do today that I feel good about doing, that brought benefit in the long term, that I can rejoice at?” “What things was I unclear about and what things did I make a mess of?”. Or, maybe we are still unclear about those things. It is not like every time we sit down at night to do the reflection, we are able to instantly tell what our motivations were and figure things out. But even that is beneficial, the process of being honest regarding what we are clear and unclear about.

And then you do this kind of purification where you imagine the light coming from the Buddha and purifying either the negativity or the lack of clarity. This is why purification practices are done every night, because everyday we make mistakes. This is what being a sentient being is. If we were Buddhas, it would be a different story, but we are not Buddhas yet.

[In response to audience:] The purification practice involves four steps – 1) generating regret; 2) taking refuge and having bodhicitta; 3) making a determination not to do the negative action again; and 4) some kind of remedial action, like, for example, doing this meditation. You can see that there is some kind of psychological effect from doing these four steps, that is counteracting the imprint in your mind.

When you do those four steps, or the four opponent powers, you are reducing the impact of negative actions. When we create karma, it is not like a paw print cast in concrete. It is not as though you did a negative action and now you have this indestructible block of negative junk in your mind. Remember that action is an impermanent, changing thing; the seed that is left in your mind is impermanent and changing. So that harmful seed can be destroyed. Or it can be mitigated, which then brings a different result.

[Audience:] When we do the purification practice, is it absolutely essential to have specific actions in mind that we are purifying?

Not necessarily. It can be helpful to think of specific actions, but there are many actions we did in our previous lives, or even in this lifetime, that we can't remember. But we can at least think in terms of categories of actions: all the times that I have killed in my past lives, or all the times that I have spoken harshly to other people. Even thinking in broad categories like that, helps us to develop the determination to at least not repeat that kind of behavior in the future. You are purifying. You are changing the way that imprint ripens in your mind.

There are times when you feel that your mind is really stuck in depression, or anger, or attachment, or anxiety, or whatever. Or you see certain things happening repeatedly, for example, we are often short-tempered or we constantly get ourselves into crazy relationships. In such cases, think specifically about purifying that attitude or action, and all the kinds of past karmic actions that gave rise to it.

[Audience: Inaudible]

In ancient India, they had something called the thirty-two signs of great beings or holy beings. Some of these signs are like the crown protuberance, the hair growing a certain way, the long earlobes, the way the teeth are arranged, the length of the arms, etc. They were recognized in the Indian culture as being indications of a realized person. That was something in the Indian culture that was adopted into Buddhism.

The thing to note is that each one of those physical features is a result of having done a specific kind of practice or having accumulated specific kinds of positive potential.

In the same way, the color of our hair is influenced by karma. What sex we are, our height, our health, etc, is influenced by our karma. The body we have is a result of past actions and an Enlightened body is also a product of previous causes.

[Audience: Inaudible]

One of the results of karma is that we set a habit to do the same action again. For example, if we speak using harsh words, one of the results is the tendency to speak harsh words again. Making a very strong determination to avoid speaking harshly to others can counteract that tendency. It doesn't mean that making that determination one time is going to stop all of that energy, but it is definitely going to impede it.

[Audience: Inaudible]

That is why, if you do this kind of reflection every night – rejoice at the instances where you had a positive attitude and acted well; develop regret at your negative actions and determine to change – you really do start to change, because there is this very direct, conscious kind of self-evaluation going on all the time that is done with kindness to oneself, not criticism.

Regret and Guilt

[In response to audience:] In our culture, we're taught that when we make a mistake, we're supposed to feel guilty. We have the idea that somehow, the guiltier we feel, the more we are atoning for the evil we did. This guilt just keeps us totally stuck and immobilized. We don't move. We just sit there and feel guilty. I think it is so incredible that there is no Tibetan word for 'guilt'. Can you imagine that? There is no concept in Buddhism that equates to 'guilt'.

Regret is different from guilt. Regret comes from a wisdom attitude of discernment where we realize we made a mistake. For example, if I put my hand on top of the electric stove and I burn my hand, I have remorse or regret, because I did something really dumb. But I don't have to feel guilty and hate myself and tell myself how stupid and evil and hopeless I am.

Regret is just recognizing, "Wow, I did something that is going to generate harm and I regret that." But it doesn't mean that I am a bad person. I don't have to beat myself up. In our culture, we almost feel that if we make a mistake, and if we feel guilty about it, then somehow we're paying back for the mistake we've made. But in fact, we don't, because the more we feel guilty, the more we continue being dysfunctional.

This is why we have to be very attentive and to make sure that we are hearing Buddhism through fresh ears, not as a six-year-old child in Sunday School. We have to be attentive not to hear it through the ears of another religion, but to hear it in a fresh way.

[In response to audience:] But the beauty of being an adult is, that we finally can take a look at our mind and decide if everything we believe is really true, or if we should throw out some of our wrong beliefs or unproductive beliefs. This is what being an adult means. We can change.

[Audience: Inaudible]

One of the karmic results of our engaging in negative actions is that we experience harm in return, for example, taking a negative rebirth or experiencing harmful things happening to us. When we purify, we stop that kind of result from happening. If you do purification and then your car gets smashed, or somebody tells you off, it doesn't mean that your purification is a failure. We should not have a mind of, "I'm purifying, so nothing bad will happen to me."

We should realize that we have been collecting stuff since beginningless time. For some actions that we purify, the purification stops the results altogether. For other actions, it may just decrease the gravity or discomfort of the action, or it may shorten the duration of the harm that we receive as a result of doing the negative action. It doesn't necessarily mean that everything will be hunky-dory if we do purification for a week or a month or a year.

Actually, when we experience harmful things in our life and things don't go the way we want even though we have been doing purification practice, it is helpful to think, "Well, this is good. My negative actions could have ripened in a lot of suffering that lasted a long time. Instead of that, it is ripening now as this one particular problem that I am having. So, this karma is now finishing."

One time, a friend of mine was doing a retreat. When you do a retreat, you do very strong purification. During the retreat, a huge, painful boil grew on her cheek. This is in Nepal. She was walking around one day during her break time. Lama Zopa Rinpoche saw her and she complained to Rinpoche about the boil. Rinpoche went, "That's wonderful! As a result of all this purification that you did, all that harm that would have resulted in really unhappy rebirths for eons and centuries of suffering has ripened in the form of this boil that is painful but will go away." So he told her she should rejoice and pray to have more. [laughter]

You can see the kind of thought training, the thought transformation that's involved in that.

[Audience:] What are Jataka tales?

The Jataka tales are specifically about the (previous) lives of the Buddha, and the different actions that he did when he was a bodhisattva. The purpose of these tales is to explain the kind of motivation and attitudes a bodhisattva has, and the actions of a bodhisattva. Here, you can also see the incredible things, the constructive deeds that he did as a way of purifying negative karma.

[Audience: Inaudible]

The whole point is to see that it's not as though the Buddha was always a Buddha and that somehow the Buddha's Buddha nature is different from ours. The Buddha was once exactly like us. We have the same Buddha nature in terms of the positive potential of the mind and the empty nature of the mind.

The Buddha became a Buddha but we didn't, even though he was once confused just like us and hanging out with us, because we continued to hang out while he went to practice the path. That is where the difference is. The Buddha had the same exact confusion, problems, all eighty-four thousand afflictions [['afflictions' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'delusions.'](#)], and tons of negative karma. This is not just talking about Shakyamuni Buddha, the historical Buddha, but any being who has become a Buddha. There are many Buddhas. They have all gone through this same process.

You look at Milarepa. You read his biography. You think you've been naughty – Milarepa killed thirty-two people or something! He did black magic and killed relatives. He was quite vengeful. But he practiced the path and purified.

[Audience: Inaudible]

Actually, they say that the purification is stronger in the degenerate age, because the outside environment is so degenerate. It is like when society is really decaying, people's afflictions* are really increasing, life spans are shorter, there is more war and turbulence and natural disasters.

[Audience: Inaudible]

There are various ways you can look at it.

In the scriptures, they talk about things becoming more degenerate. In many ways, it is true: it is more degenerate now than it was at the time of the Buddha.

Another way to look at it is, affliction[#] is affliction[#] and people are people, and it's basically the same all throughout history. So, it depends on which way you want to look at it.

It may be quite degenerate now, but the thing is, that within the degenerate age, you can purify quite strongly and gain realizations quickly if you practice. The effort that it takes to purify and gain realizations is so much greater than the effort it would take if you were in a less degenerate period of history, where it was very easy to practice. That is why they say that keeping one vow for a day in this age – like if you do the eight precepts or the five precepts – purifies more negative karma and creates more positive potential than keeping the entire monks' or nuns' ordination at the time of the Buddha. At that time, it was much easier to keep the ordination and do practice – you didn't have to overcome so much and change so much. Whereas in the degenerate time, just to get ourselves to practice is so directly confronting the ignorance, anger and attachment that it makes quite a strong imprint.

This is also why they say that the thought transformation practices are so important – doing the taking and giving meditation, rejoicing at getting the boil. There is so much confusion in our life, but all of it can become things that we use to enhance our practice and speed our way to enlightenment.

In the same way, in the tantra, there are particular deities that are specifically for times of degeneration, and they act quite strongly to help you get yourself together. An example is Yamantaka. They say he's made for the degenerate times. He looks really wrathful. He is not an external god or deity or spirit, but he is symbolic of helping us get in touch with that wisdom that is so strong and so clear that you get it all together very quickly. The whole appearance of that specific Buddha is an appearance of wisdom in that really clear, cut-out-the-crap-and-practice way.

This teaching is based on the *Lamrim* or *The Gradual Path to Enlightenment*. Please refer to the following web-page for its outline and other transcripts or to listen to the audio recording of these talks: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/GradualPathToEnlightenment/outline.html>

*'Afflictions' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'disturbing attitudes.'

'Afflictions' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'delusions.'