Ethics, Compassion and the Path to Liberation

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Ethics and the search for what is 'right', 'true' and 'good' as governing principles for our way of behaviour is an age old human pursuit, engaged throughout millennia by diverse cultures. The divergence in ethical parameters of different social orders aside, the motivation to the pursuit itself appears universal. Whether considered instinctive, intuitive, spiritual, rational, altruistic, or socio-political in nature, the strength of the need remains — the need to understand what constitutes right and appropriate responses within the complex field of human relationships.

It is fair to say that the human experience of suffering would be at the root of that motivation to find a right and true ethic to live by, an ethic that might minimise whatever suffering we may encounter as feeling beings. Indeed, ethics has been defined as "*a set of concepts and principles that guide us in determining what behaviour helps or harms sentient creatures".*[i]

From ancient cultures dating as far back as 2000 BCE there is evidence of the ethical maxim we now know as *the golden rule* or *ethic of reciprocity,* which essentially exhorts (in either positive or negative form), to '*treat others as you would wish to be treated'*. This notion highlights a fundamental yet profound capacity of the human heart – *empathy* – and as a common thread found in most religions and creeds throughout the ages, its universal relevance and applicability seems indisputable.[ii]

We see clear reflections of this principle in the foundations of Buddhist ethics emerging in the 6th century BC, as recorded in various teachings:

> "Comparing oneself to others in such terms as, 'Just as I am so are they, just as they are so am I,' he should neither kill nor cause others to kill." – Sutta Nipata 705
>
> "Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful." – Udanavarga 5:18
>
> "All tremble at violence
> Life is dear to all
> Putting oneself in the place of another
> One should neither kill nor cause another to kill." – Dhp. v130

Whilst ethical behaviour may be seen as *"a necessary measure for human well-being,"*[iii] ethics as a pursuit of what is right, true and good goes beyond merely complying with religious beliefs, social conventions, or the law. Ethics in this sense is as much to do with the

pursuit of knowledge, understanding, and the striving towards perfection (fulfilment of our potential), whether human or divine. For Socrates, the greatest good was the *transcendent* form of goodness – that which gives rise to true knowledge and virtue in the human being – the ultimate aim being "perfection of the soul".[iv] For Aristotle, the highest good was rather the *embodiment* of goodness through the cultivation of a virtuous character, creating a flourishing, happy and successful human life.[v]

Goodness in Buddhism straddles the human and the divine, the everyday and the sublime. The focus on compassion and loving kindness towards all beings is a primary hallmark of the path. The Buddha pointed out how a virtuous life brings good results for oneself and others, both here and now and in the hereafter. However, the overarching Buddhist aspiration is to a higher truth – a transcendent realisation and complete liberation from suffering – the path to which engages ethical principles and moral conduct as a primary factor, though "their *ultimate* purpose is not so much ethical as spiritual." [vi] Bhikkhu Bodhi explains that in the particular context of the Noble Eightfold Path, ethical principles and conduct are not merely about outer action, but more primarily about purification of mind, and as such, must be guided by the other path factors, most especially by the wisdom factors of right view and right intention.[vii]

In examining the Buddhist approach to ethics and the place of compassion in the path to liberation, we will explore how it relates to the therapeutic framework and practice, and how to make these ancient teachings relevant for therapists. First we will consider the primary Buddhist principle of *ahimsa*, non-harm, and review the meaning and function of *sila*, ethical or moral conduct, as it is embedded in the Buddhist Eightfold Path. We briefly context the teachings on *kamma* and *nibbana*, as without a preliminary understanding of these subjects the function of sila and the eightfold path may not be properly grasped. We take a look at the five Buddhist precepts and consider how we might relate to them, and then explore the interface of Buddhist practice and insights pertaining to ethics and compassion with the psychotherapeutic field of relationship, highlighting some potential pitfalls of view and the shadow elements of ideals along the way.

(NB: Whilst the practice of the Paramitas and the Brahma Viharas are very much a part of cultivating ethics and virtue in the Buddhist path, both are discussed in depth in their own chapters later in the book, so will not be discussed here to avoid unnecessary repetition.)

AHIMSA – THE PRINCIPLE OF NON-HARM

Ahimsa is an ancient Sanskrit term meaning 'to not harm'. Deriving from the word *himsa* which literally means injury or harm, a-himsa is the opposite of this. Popularised in modern times by Mahatma Ghandi's profound commitment to non-violence in the Indian independence movement, the principle of ahimsa has ancient roots and has long been a major ethical tenet of the great Indian spiritual traditions, including Buddhism. Ahimsa is

said to be "a multidimensional concept", for its deeper meaning rests in the notion that all living beings are connected and partake of the same universal spiritual energy – so to bring harm to another would be to harm oneself.[viii]

Thus, the term ahimsa relates not only to the realm of ethical behaviour but takes in the view of *interconnectedness* (*interdependence*[ix]) and the notion of *Buddha Nature* as well, which is the territory of *right view* – the primary wisdom factor of the Buddha's Eightfold Path.

Ahimsa, or harmlessness, is actually a synonym for compassion, and is said to be the root of all virtues[x], accredited as a cause for the arising of the Noble Eightfold Path:

> *"… harmlessness [ahimsa] is an especially strong productive cause of morality; and morality, again, is the basis for concentration of mind, while concentration is the basis for wisdom. In that way harmlessness (non-violence) is the root of all virtues.'"*[xi]

To cultivate harmlessness is to refrain, as far as possible, from any action that would cause another being harm or injury. Of course this is based on our intention, accidental harm is not included. But it implies the need to know what is harmful and what is not. The Buddha referred to such actions, intentions and mind-states as *kusala* – translated as skilful or wholesome, and *akusala* – unskilful or unwholesome. It takes inner reflection to begin to understand for oneself what is skilful and what is unskilful, in terms of speech and action, as well as the intentions and thoughts which lead to them. Essentially, *skilful* is that which does not harm, brings benefit or leads to the diminishing of suffering for oneself and others, while *unskilful* brings harm, or leads to the maintenance or increase of suffering for oneself and others.

The Buddha's teaching to his young son, Rahula, a novice monk, is a classic discourse expounding the way to reflect on our actions of body, speech and mind:

> *"…Rāhula, having reflected should bodily action be done; having reflected, should verbal action be done; having reflected should mental action be done.*
>
> *"Whatever action you desire to do with the body, Rāhula, of that particular bodily action you should reflect: 'Now, this action that I desire to do with the body—would this, my bodily action, be conducive to my own harm, or to the harm of others, or to that of both (myself and others)?—[if so], then, unskilful is this bodily action, entailing suffering and productive of pain…. such an action with the body, Rāhula, you must on no account perform.*
>
> *"If, on the other hand, Rāhula, when reflecting you realize: 'Now, this bodily action that I am desirous of doing, would conduce neither to the harm of myself, nor to that of others, nor to that of both (myself and others),—hence, skilful is this bodily action, entailing pleasure and productive of happiness'—such bodily action, Rāhula, you should perform." MN61*

Rahula is encouraged to reflect similarly before, during and after any action of body, speech or mind.[xii]

MORAL CAUSATION

The Buddhist path is often described as a gradual path or gradual training[xiii] and builds upon the natural laws of causality to develop the requisite path factors – virtue (*sila*), unification of mind (*samadhi*), and wisdom (*panna*). However, it is perhaps impossible to discuss Buddhist ethics, skilful and unskilful action, without placing it in the context of the *law of kamma* (the moral law of causation - of action and result)[xiv]. This is a rather deep and complex topic in itself, but essential to understand at least to some degree if we are to understand the Buddha's path of awakening. Such an appreciation of the function of the law of kamma is in fact a component of right view. Without it, we may not make the most of the inherent power of our own mind and, therefore, the inherent responsibility we have as we interact with our world, affecting the development and trajectory of our own lives, and inevitably those of others as well.

The notion of kamma is easily misunderstood. Kamma is not 'fate' or 'destiny'. Kamma is created moment by moment with intention affected by mindstates. The function of the law of kamma is not a strictly deterministic process, but a rather complex and fluid process that remains open to present time influence, and many conditioning factors play into the overall process.[xv]

The Pali word *kamma*, literally means 'action', and while the lesser known word *vipaka* refers to the corresponding result of that action, the use of the term kamma often implies both action and result, or cause and effect, since they have an inseparable causal relationship. This notion is not foreign to the Western tradition. "As you sow, so you reap" is a well understood and oft quoted Christian teaching. But how deeply do we understand this truth and the impact it has on our lives?

Most of us comprehend that actions undertaken have an effect, on ourselves and others, for better or worse, in subtle or gross ways. The Buddha points out that it is actually the quality of the volition or intention involved in any action of body, speech and mind that is the generation of kamma. Specifically, if our volition/intention is affected by greed, hatred or delusion (considered the 'roots of the unwholesome') then that kamma has some degree of unskilfulness, is harmful, and has suffering as a result, to lesser or greater degrees. Whereas, any action of body, speech and mind generated by non-greed, non-hatred or non-delusion (the roots of the wholesome) is skilful kamma, not harmful and has happiness as a result. [xvi]

The first verses in the Dhammapada elucidate this tenet well:

> *Mind precedes all mental states. Mind is their chief; mind made are they. If with an impure mind a person speaks or acts, suffering follows him like the wheel that follows the foot of the ox.*
>
> *Mind precedes all mental states. Mind is their chief; mind made are they. If with a*

> *pure mind a person speaks or acts, happiness follows him like his never-departing shadow.*

For most of us, however, not yet being fully enlightened, our actions are somewhat mixed, and the Buddha acknowledges this mix of "black and white" or "skilful and unskilful" kamma, which has a mix of black and white results.[xvii] As we gradually cultivate a life of wholesome/skilful mindstates and activity, it will naturally lead to good fortune and wholesome, bright states of mind. However, kammic results from prior activity (including many previous lives) may also manifest when conditions are ripe, so until one's path culminates in the final release of liberating wisdom, one is still subject to the rounds of *samsara (*literally, *perpetual wandering,* or *cyclic suffering)*[xviii].

Thus, the Buddha also points out the *kamma that leads to the end of kamma*, that is, "the intention to abandon"[xix] – this is not only the intention to abandon unskilful actions and states, but ultimately, it is the wisdom that abandons *identification* with kamma and the aggregates of existence. The way leading to the *cessation of kamma* is the Noble Eightfold Path[xx], based in transcendent, or supramundane right view, i.e. the insight knowledge of the *empty* or *not-self* nature of all conditions. This insight heralds in the realisation of Nibbana.

NIBBANA

As much as the Buddhist notions of skilful/unskilful are related to whether a mind-state or action is a cause of happiness or a cause of suffering, they are similarly related to whether or not they lead in the direction of the goal, Nibbana.

The Buddha describes Nibbana as the final deliverance from suffering, "the highest bliss…the supreme state of sublime peace…the ageless, deathless, and sorrowless… supreme security from bondage." [xxi]

The literal meaning of Nibbana is *cooling*, (as in the extinguishing of a fire), or *unbinding* (of flames from its fuel); or *unbinding* of awareness from its objects (freed awareness, unrestricted awareness, or unconditioned awareness).[xxii]

In the teachings on the gradual training the Buddha offers, the attainment of the goal is always via the Noble Eightfold path – a causal result of Sila, Samadhi, Panna, (virtue, unification of mind, and wisdom). The embodiment of virtue leads to wholesome/skilful actions of body, speech and mind, which support the arising of calm and clarity. These in turn are a support for meditation, for samadhi (stillness and unification of mind) and panna (wisdom) to arise, bringing liberating insight.

However, one may wonder about the linearity of those causal links, as there are many stories in the Buddhist texts of the idiosyncratic ways in which individuals seem to awaken, such as the sudden awakening of a serial murderer, Angulimala. In his murderous rage he

encountered the Buddha, and through a brief but effective interaction snapped out of his delusion, understood the Dhamma and became a monk. (And, "in no a long time", became fully enlightened).[xxiii]

Such radical awakenings may appear antithetical to the idea of virtuous behaviour being the foundation for liberation, but such occurrences are usually regarded as the result of enough wholesome kamma being 'accrued' in that individual's mind-stream that, with the right conditions, can ripen and bring forth their results. In this case, certainly the good kamma to have even been born in the time of a Buddha, to actually meet him and receive a direct teaching from him, were powerful conditions supporting the ripening of liberating insight in Angulimala's mind.

SILA – AN ETHICAL FRAMEWORK

There are the roots of both the wholesome and unwholesome in our mind-streams. The Buddhist path encourages us to build on the wholesome roots whilst allowing the unwholesome to wane, and offers a very clear ethical framework to support this.

The word *Sila*, usually translated as moral conduct or virtuous conduct, also refers to the moral principles that guide that conduct and the inner quality of virtue which results from cultivating that conduct[xxiv]. As such, Sila forms a significant portion of the Noble Eightfold Path. Whilst these eight path factors are often explained as having a certain linear causality (the preceding factor supporting the arising of the next), they are far more deeply interrelated and mutually-supportive, perhaps operating more in a circular fashion along a spectrum, or spiral, of deepening skill and insight. In fact, this eight factored path is graphically portrayed as a wheel, the *Dhammacakka*, or wheel of Truth, once set rolling just gathers momentum.

The eight factors are classically divided into three sub-groups:

- *panna* – (wisdom, or insight knowledge), pertains to *right view* and *right intention.*
- *sīla* – (virtue or wholesome living), pertains to the three factors of *right speech, right action* and *right livelihood*;
- *samadhi* – (collectedness or unification of mind), comprises the factors of *right effort, right mindfulness* and *right concentration*.

In the observance of sila there is both an aspect of abstinence, or restraint, and of cultivation – containing and refraining from unskilful speech, action and livelihood, such that would be harmful to oneself or others, and conversely giving rise to skilful, beneficial behaviour.

Right speech is spoken of as abstaining from false speech, slanderous speech, harsh speech, and idle chatter. We need to understand the harm in using speech in these ways if we are to effectively train the mind.

Speaking falsely we create patterns of deception in our own minds as well as others, clearly unconducive to the realisation of Truth. Speaking slanderously and harshly can be hurtful to others, creates negativity in one's own mind, and does not conduce to calm and clarity. (Our anger or blame often masks the fact that we feel hurt or sad, and in our 'lashing out' at others we are merely attempting to release the pain, albeit unskilfully and ineffectively). 'Idle chatter' can just be a plain waste of time, or a nervous habit, something to fill the space, and may promote inane, scattered patterns of thinking without self-reflection. The Buddha remarked that it is often better to remain silent if one cannot speak skilfully.

Speech which comes from an open heart, intent on truth and kindliness, without self-interested agendas, can have a powerful, healing affect and communicates far beyond its words. Speech is really a vehicle which communicates the greater content, perspective and experience of the mind, and if used skilfully, can lead another toward calm and insight.

In the practice of right action, we are encouraged to abstain from killing, to abstain from stealing, and to abstain from sexual misconduct, (i.e. sexual relations with other people's partners, with minors, with the non-consenting, and incestuous relations).

In the practice of right livelihood, five specific kinds of livelihood are mentioned: dealing in weapons, in living beings (slave trades), in meat production (butchery), in poisons, and in intoxicants[xxv]. These ways of making a living are said to bring harm to others and should be avoided.

Reflected within these three aspects of Sila are the five Buddhist precepts of training. When an aspirant takes on these precepts, they are worded such that one willing undertakes a particular way of training that abstains from certain behaviours.

1. I undertake the training to refrain from killing living beings.
2. I undertake the training to refrain from taking that which is not given.
3. I undertake the training to refrain from sexual misconduct.
4. I undertake the training to refrain from false speech.
5. I undertake the training to refrain from intoxicating drink and drugs that lead to carelessness.

The first four precepts are directly related to avoiding unskilful kamma. The fifth precept relates to avoiding substances and a condition that can adversely affect mindfulness and lead to unskilful kamma.

A practitioner might undertake these precepts for a certain period of time, so as to give clear boundaries to one's intention, purpose and action, and often within a supported retreat or monastic environment. When the precepts are understood properly, some may choose to commit to them as a guide for life. For ordained monks and nuns, these precepts form the foundation of their many monastic training rules.

Many people these days balk at the idea of having such boundaries around one's behaviour. Words like *restraining* and *refraining* can conjure the notions of limitation, repression and suppression. These precepts are not meant to be imposed as 'commandments' – they are offered more as guidelines or a way of training for those who wish to cultivate the Buddhist path of awakening. They are not meant to become 'prohibitions' so much as invitations to consider and contemplate intention and behaviour, action and result, happiness and suffering. They are intended to promote reflection, respect, wholesome relationships and harmony. Bhikkhu Bodhi expresses this notion very well:

"The English word 'morality' and its derivatives suggest a sense of obligation and constraint quite foreign to the Buddhist conception of sila; this connotation probably enters from the theistic background to Western ethics. Buddhism, with its non-theistic framework, grounds its ethics, not on the notion of obedience, but on that of harmony. In fact, the commentaries explain the word sila by another word, samadhana, meaning 'harmony' or 'coordination'. The observance of sila leads to harmony at several levels — social, psychological, kammic, and contemplative." [xxvi]

So another way we can explore the intention behind these precepts is to articulate them with a more positive slant, such as encouraging respect in our relational life:

1. **Respect for life** – promoting goodwill, compassion, and kindness.

2. **Respect for others property** - promoting non-attachment, contentment, wholesome livelihood and generosity.

3. **Respect for others bodies, feelings and sexuality** - promoting integrity, self-restraint, renunciation, and mastery of the senses.

4. **Respect for truth** – promoting honesty, reliability, trustworthiness.

5. **Respect for sobriety/clarity** - promoting mindfulness, clarity, and wisdom.

In any case, it's clear that in the practice of sila it is kindness and compassion, towards self and others, that is both the motive and the aim. If kindness and compassion are not yet fully guiding our behaviour, if the mind is often hijacked by greed, hatred and delusion or confusion, then the training in the precepts can begin to reveal directly to the practitioner the benefits of restraint. It allows internal space for reflection on the various intentions and motives as they arise in the mind. It allows the possibility for choice, for consideration and wise response in situations rather than merely following habitual reactions. This is the way the boundary of sila can work in practice, as a skilful stop-gap, to support the relinquishing of unskilfulness and the generation of skilfulness.

In an evocative teaching, the Buddha describes the practice of the five precepts as gifts toward oneself and others:

> *"Now, there are these five gifts, five great gifts — original, long-standing, traditional, ancient, unadulterated, unadulterated from the beginning — that are not open to suspicion, will never be open to suspicion, and are unfaulted by knowledgeable contemplatives & priests. Which five?*
>
> *"There is the case where a disciple of the noble ones, abandoning the taking of life, abstains from taking life. In doing so, he gives freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings. In giving freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings, he gains a share in limitless freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, and freedom from oppression. This is the first gift, the first great gift — original, long-standing, traditional, ancient, unadulterated, unadulterated from the beginning — that is not open to suspicion, will never be open to suspicion, and is unfaulted by knowledgeable contemplatives & priests..." (and so forth with the other four precepts).* [xxvii]

In the same teaching, these five *gifts* are also referred to as *rewards*:

> *"a reward of merit, reward of skilfulness, nourishment of happiness, celestial, resulting in happiness, leading to heaven, leading to what is desirable, pleasurable, & appealing; to welfare & to happiness."*

In the final analysis, the Buddha was a supreme logician. He never expected people to take on his dhamma without good reason, and always encouraged those interested in truth and liberation from suffering to examine well his teachings and only take on something if they come to see for themselves the good and benefit within it. The famous *Kalama Sutta* addressed a group of people who were confused by the many different teachings they had heard, and asked the Buddha how they could know what was right...

> *"In this case, Kalamas, don't go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by probability, or by the thought, 'This contemplative is our teacher.' When you know for yourselves that, 'These qualities are unskilful; these qualities are blameworthy; these qualities are criticized by the wise; these qualities, when adopted & carried out, lead to harm & to suffering' — then you should abandon them.*
>
> *When you know for yourselves that, 'These qualities are skilful; these qualities are blameless; these qualities are praised by the wise; these qualities, when adopted & carried out, lead to welfare & to happiness' — then you should enter & remain in them."* [xxviii]

As Thanissaro Bhikkhu explains in his commentary on this teaching, *"… any view or belief must be tested by the results it yields when put into practice".* [xxix] This is truly how the path of liberation works. It is essentially a path of self-transformation, of realisation, of refining our spiritual faculties, oiling the cogs of wisdom and compassion, and nourishing the roots of the wholesome, until the path fruits in 'unshakeable deliverance of the heart' [xxx].

BUDDHIST ETHICS AND CLINICAL PRACTICE

The overall intention of psychotherapy runs parallel to the intention of Buddha-dhamma, that is, to find relief from suffering. Both modalities traverse the spectrum between the felt experience of suffering and the felt experience of the ending of suffering for the individual; this is the territory of the Four Noble Truths in Buddhist teaching. The means of both modalities are primarily those of skilfulness, wisdom and compassion.

There are many relevant overlaps between the Buddhist path and the psychotherapeutic model which we can further highlight here. As has previously been mentioned, the logic of the Four Noble Truths as a diagnosis of the affliction, its cause, its cure, and the way to that cure has a direct correlation in a therapeutic model of treatment. Similarly, the way to that cure, as in the Buddhist path of *sila, samadhi, panna*, (previously discussed), has strong correlates in the psychotherapy modality.

One could speak of Buddhist sila, or moral conduct, as a kind of boundary one sets up to protect and support both the spiritual aspirant and those with whom she/he interacts. It is exactly the same with the ethics of a therapeutic practitioner. The importance and relevance of appropriate skilful boundaries, and the indispensable part they play in a successful therapeutic outcome is made much of in the profession.

Sila, as skilful boundaries, are meant to guide, inform and support both the therapist and the skilful holding field of the therapeutic encounter. They are meant to protect both the therapist and the client from harm, meant to support a sense of safety and containment for the client and to allow their trust to emerge, in both the therapeutic holding space and in the capacity and integrity of the therapist.

Sila is reflected in a therapist's commitment to abide by their professional code of ethics, and through the boundaries of honesty, respect and confidentiality that are established in the therapeutic relationship, (including the professional boundaries of therapist and client not seeing each other in any other context, in order to maintain the potency of the therapeutic relationship). There is the boundary, or containment, of timing with the hourly sessions and the regularity of the ongoing weekly or fortnightly work, factors which serve to create a safe holding in the outer-sense of the word. In a deeper sense, it is also the personal integrity and genuineness of the therapist together with his or her skill in

establishing an empathetic field of relationship which helps provide the inner-sense of safe holding in the client work.[xxxi]

These essential components of sila, as skilful boundaries and ethical behaviour in the therapeutic relationship directly support the therapeutic work to unfold, giving rise to what we might consider as the *samadhi* factors of therapy – the process of establishing presence, the settling, the focus, the refining of both the therapist's and client's embodied attention on the present process, and the ongoing work of self-enquiry and self-reflection.

This process of directing attention appropriately and sustaining attention and enquiry supports the arising of understanding – the insight or wisdom (*panna*) factors – such that things begin to show themselves as they are. Both therapist and client begin to see the connections between mental events that give rise to certain experiences, seeing more clearly the patterns of mind, seeing causes and triggers, understanding and learning how to interact with mind-states and patterns of behaviour in a skilful way to release suffering – leading to peace, integration, and emergence of well-being.

One could even say this process, when successful, leads the client to a new 'view' of reality, a new understanding of 'self', where new information is integrated to allow a letting go of previously held views of self and reality that elicited suffering – bound up in traumatic memories, conditioned perceptions, negative self-images, suppressed emotion, unexpressed yearnings or frustrations.

The ethical maturity of a therapist, together with skill and compassion, is a foundational support for this therapeutic process to complete in a wholesome way. Of course, it doesn't mean that we will have one hundred percent successful outcomes with all our clients, (there are so many other factors affecting outcomes); however, it does mean that for our part, we do our best to provide the best possible opportunity. It is helpful to remember that even the Buddha was not always successful in the 'treatment' he offered his 'clients'!

As therapists, (just as spiritual aspirants), we are on a learning curve too. We are not fully enlightened, all knowing, all seeing – so we must also engage wisdom and compassion toward ourselves, and humbly acknowledge and accept any mistakes we might make, or any shortfalls or blind spots we may discover in ourselves along the way. We are not miracle workers, and just as spiritual aspirants of different natures are drawn towards different kinds of teachers and practices, so it is with client's seeking a compatible therapist – certainly, 'one shoe does not fit all'.

ETHICAL FRAMEWORKS IN THE THERAPY ROOM – 'RIGHT RELATIONSHIP'

It is interesting to note that in the classification of morality in the *Mahayanasamgraha* of *Asanga* [xxxii] three aspects are mentioned:

1. Morality of **abstention** [related to precepts or boundaries]

2. Morality of **cultivation** [related to cultivating skill, virtue/integrity, and wisdom]

3. Morality of **service** [offering service to others]

These aspects are clearly reflected in our moral frameworks and responsibilities as therapists in the helping professions. The first two aspects are related to our personal practice and ethics, i.e. to abstain from certain forms of unskilful action, and to cultivate skill and integrity with ongoing growth, learning and professional development. The third aspect acknowledges the ethics of the service we offer to others, the giving and supporting and sharing knowledge and skills, out of empathy and compassion. Whilst therapists indeed draw a fee for their services in support of their own livelihood, it is always up to us how we choose to apply fee structures and offer appropriate support in various ways in the community.

Just as the underlying principle of harmlessness (of body, speech and mind) in the Buddhist path guides all actions, the ethical principle of harmlessness is reflected in the therapist's ethic of care – which involves a recognition and acceptance of a client's humanity. The principles of empathy, compassion, and kindness relate directly to the Rogerian concept of *'unconditional positive regard',* which is: "…*found to be positively associated with therapy outcomes because they convey a* ***respect for*** *and a* ***desire to understand*** *each client through mutual exploration".* [xxxiii]

Whether Buddhist or not, there is a clear correlation in how the Buddhist path factors of sila relate to the ethics of the therapeutic practice of any well-trained therapist.

Right Livelihood: Any helping profession, if ethically practised, is clearly consistent with right livelihood.

Right Action: If a therapist abides by their professional code of ethics and conduct governing their profession, which includes observing appropriate boundaries; honouring and respecting one's responsibilities – to the client, to oneself as the therapist, and to the wider community within which the therapy is unfolding, (as far as one is able), then that is clearly consistent with right action.

Right speech: Most modes of psychotherapy involve talking, so there is indeed much involved here. As therapists, guided by the principles of non-harm, empathy, compassion, kindness, and with whatever wisdom and skilful means we have, we usually endeavour to: abstain from lying, divisive speech, abusive speech, and idle chatter; use speech that is truthful, kind, timely, and beneficial – trying to choose our words carefully, using words that go to the heart, and are connected with our goal in therapy – that of healing and releasing suffering. Well, all of the above are explicit expressions of the Buddha himself in defining right speech. [xxxiv]

> *"Monks, a statement endowed with five factors is well-spoken, not ill-spoken. It is blameless & unfaulted by knowledgeable people. Which five?*
> *"It is spoken at the right time. It is spoken in truth. It is spoken affectionately. It is spoken beneficially. It is spoken with a mind of good-will." – AN 5.198*

As therapists, in being responsible for knowing and abiding by our professional code of ethics, there are specific actions and non-actions which clearly reflect the five Buddhist precepts. Some primary ones to note are:

- To refrain from any form of sexual conduct/liaison with a client.
  (This relates to the 3rd precept: *to refrain from sexual misconduct*).
- To refrain from exploitation of any kind: sexual, financial, emotional, or otherwise. This would also include a need to be aware of the 'power' position of the therapist, and doing one's best to avoid dual relationships.
  (This also relates to the 3rd precept as above, as well as the 2nd precept: *to refrain from taking that which is not given*.)
- Respecting the client's privacy /confidentiality.
  (This also relates to the 2nd precept as above, and the 4th precept: *to refrain from false or harmful speech*).
- Respecting the client's autonomy and decision making.
  (This relates to the 1st precept in a metaphoric way, (*to refrain from 'killing'* a client's own power, autonomy and choice, [assuming you can refrain from literally killing your clients!]; it also relates to the 4th precept on right speech).
- Refraining from client work when one is unwell or unfit for the work.
  (This relates to the 5th precept – in not seeing clients if we are under the influence of alcohol or other drugs which inhibit our clarity and mindfulness; or similarly, if we are unwell and unable to function at our best).
- Endeavouring to use our speech in a harmless way – speech which is appropriate, supportive and kind.
  (This relates to the 4th precept again).

Unfortunately, the biggest scandals in our profession resulting in pain and confusion, for both therapist and client, usually arise from unclear boundaries. However, it's not always intentional or flagrant dismissal of those boundaries that have unfortunate effects, but often due to a human blinkeredness or blind spots. Once again, this territory is a learning curve, and we often end up learning through unintentionally veering off in one direction or the other and having to bring ourselves back to the 'middle' (the appropriate, skilful way).

It is important to recognise that sexual feelings arising in the therapeutic encounter are not 'wrong' in themselves, and can often arise for either the therapist or the client as part and parcel of the transferential material in the therapy. However, if they do arise, they should also ring a bit of a warning bell in our mind to alert us to potentially difficult territory and to

trigger a strong mindfulness on our part. Consulting our supervisor on the experience of such things is always a good provision. It may be that the feelings are so strong that the best course of action is to refer a client on, or indeed, if it is a continuing issue for the therapist, then to seek therapeutic intervention themselves and consider possibly suspending one's client work until one is clearer about the issue at hand. Irvin Yalom addresses this territory very well in his book *'The Gift of Therapy'.* [xxxv]

Another boundary area to be mindful of, is if a therapist finds him or herself 'over-extending' themselves in relation to a particular client. It may just be a sign that the boundaries are slipping a bit in that relationship, and again worth considering our intentions and consulting our supervisor on. Similarly, if we find ourselves being deeply affected by a client's processes and 'taking it home' with us, unable to maintain a healthy sense of internal boundary, it may be resonating deeply or triggering some personal issues for us and we should consider how best to support ourselves, whether through supervision or perhaps also with some personal therapeutic work.

Dual relationships are another thing which can complicate and compromise the therapeutic relationship and container. These are not always easy to avoid if one lives in a small country town or in the same locality as one's clients. However, we need to be ever mindful of the effect of seeing clients in other contexts outside of the therapeutic relationship, as at best, it may affect the potency of the therapy itself, and at worst, can lead to blurred boundaries and unfortunate fallout. It is often helpful to explain the nature of our professional relationship and its implicit boundaries to our clients from the beginning, whether directly or within a client information pack, which can avoid any confusion or misunderstanding arising at a later stage.

THE RELATIONAL FIELD AND THE NATURE OF MIND

Appropriate ethics and boundaries, along with the skill of the therapist, directly support the development of a safe holding environment (or relational field) in the therapy work. The term 'holding environment' originally comes from the psychoanalytical work of Donald Winnicott and points to the nature and quality of the relational field present in early childhood. He suggests that there is both a *maternal* and *paternal* aspect to the relational field: the maternal aspect being about unconditional acceptance and nurturance, while the paternal aspect being about protection, reassurance and safety. [xxxvi]

Therapists like Lake, Winnicott, and more recently, Emerson and Sills, make it clear that the generation of an empathetic and safe holding environment is the first step in any therapeutic process; otherwise no work in any depth can take place…

> *"The first step in any healing process is the settling of the relational field into a state of basic trust. This is directly sensed as a mind-body settling within and between both practitioner and client."*[xxxvii] *F. Sills*

> *"So deep and powerful are the contents encountered, so much alienation is indigenous to the process of trauma, that loving and skilled support is requisite for dealing with and resolving traumata."* [xxxviii] *W. Emerson*

Sills suggests that all healing work is essentially relational in nature – since original 'wounding' occurs in relationship, so it is healed within relationship. He indicates that the healing potential in therapeutic relationship lies not so much with the therapist per se but with his/her capacity to generate a safe relational field, through the depth of his/her receptivity. Acknowledging the deep interconnection of beings in his work, Sills suggests that empathy and compassion are in fact natural functions and outflows of this connection. And learning how to centre oneself in a genuine experience of interconnection directly supports the healing process. [xxxix]

This territory of interconnection is where we might discover our capacity for and experience of unconditional acceptance – something we all yearn for at a deep level, for it is both a human need and a spiritual capacity. This territory of interconnection relates to the Buddhist insights of interdependence and inter-being. These insights come through realising the essential *emptiness*[xl] of phenomena and the true nature of mind – often expressed as Buddha Nature.[xli]

Buddhist teachers of all traditions point to this fundamental reality of mind, its realisation and its consequences in similar ways, and here, Sogyal Rinpoche expresses it beautifully:

> *"When we realise the nature of mind ... it disarms and dissolves our ordinary thoughts and emotions and a tremendous love and compassion shine through us, just like the sun with all its warmth. As soon as we connect with the purity of our inherent nature, our Buddha nature, what is revealed is our fundamental goodness – the good heart. Kindness, compassion and love simply exude ... the conflict, the suffering and the pain of fragmenting and fighting with ourselves dissolve."*

BASIC GOODNESS – BUDDHA NATURE

The concept of Buddha-nature is not only a beautiful one but a useful one to reflect on and practice with, as it points to the *inherent* capacities of wisdom and compassion in the human mind that are merely veiled or obscured. It points to an inherent goodness that can be both revealed and cultivated. It seems quite opposite to the commonly accepted understanding of 'original sin' in the Western theistic tradition.

Somehow, acknowledging a basis of inherent goodness and clarity, as opposed to inherent flaws, can change our view of ourselves and the psycho-emotional stance from which we engage with the world. It implies an inherent belonging, an inherent connectedness with all that is good and true, as opposed to an inherent split or separation from the good and true.

The following teaching of the Buddha highlights this perspective, pointing to an original radiance of mind, obscured not by inherent defilements but by passing, temporary influxes that are not intrinsic aspects of the mind's true nature…

> *"Bhikkhus, originally this mind is radiant, but it doesn't show its radiance because passing defilements come and obscure it. The unwise, ordinary person does not understand this as it is, therefore there is no mind-development in the unwise, ordinary person.*
> *Bhikkhus, originally this mind is radiant, it shows its radiance when it is unobscured by passing defilements. The wise, noble disciple understands this as it is, therefore there is mind-development in the wise, noble disciple."*
>
> *AN 1.61*

How the notion and practice of sila relates to Buddha Nature and this original radiance of mind is an enlightening contemplation. In an interesting commentary, Dr. Sunthorn Plamintr points out that the term *sila* contains particularly significant connotations which aren't necessarily represented by the English word morality:

> *"The word sila denotes a state of normalcy, a condition which is basically unqualified and unadulterated. When one practices sila, one returns to one's own basic goodness, the original state of normalcy, unperturbed and unmodified…. To practice sila is thus to train in preserving one's true nature, not allowing it to be modified or overpowered by negative forces."* [xlii]

This understanding can signal a need to trust in this basic goodness, to trust in one's own inherent connectedness and interconnection with all beings. Our practice then becomes something more akin to respecting ourselves and others and returning to inherent truth and wholesome relationship every time we move away from that, rather than desperately trying to fight, suppress or get rid of negative unwanted states, conceiving of ourselves as hopeless, horrible failures! We learn to recognise and discern both wholesome and unwholesome states, the experience of both connection and disconnection, and we learn what it means to let go of that which disconnects, as opposed to clutching on to false identities.

If we can learn to see and trust this inherent goodness and truth within our own heart/mind, we can learn to see it in others as well. It's a wholly different stance to see a client and work with them through an acceptance of their inherent goodness, Buddha Nature, and acknowledging our interconnectedness, as opposed to merely seeing someone 'other' with a problem, or an illness that we pathologise.

SHADOWS IN THE FIELD

There is much we need to be careful and mindful of in our approach to and undertaking of ethical values and frameworks. Ethics, taken on as prescriptive codes and practices without wisdom and compassion, run the risk of causing other kinds of harm. In a positive sense, precepts or observances can help us to create boundaries to serve as a kind of stop-gap, in order to help reflect upon one's intentions and come to understand what is skilful and unskilful. Such guidelines and practices can help us let go of unskilful habit patterns (kamma), and reinforce skilful patterns to support one's path to health, happiness and ultimately, liberation.

However, there can be negative effects from of the 'shadow' side of prescriptive precepts and practices, (particularly, it seems, for Westerners conditioned by a Judaeo-Christian based culture and paradigm), where guilt, shame, or a sense of unworthiness can arise easily if one feels one can't meet the standards and idealised goals of our spiritual paths or of our professions.

Similarly, projecting expectations of perfection onto others, or expecting others to conform to one's own views and beliefs creates conflict and suffering. Without right understanding and true compassion, alignment with or attachment to prescriptive practices can produce problems. That is why sila is taught as part of a larger path paradigm in Buddhism.

Precepts, (or ethical boundaries as such), need to be understood with wisdom and not attached to as absolutes. In fact, 'attachment to rules and rituals' – believing that perfect sila alone will bring salvation and understanding – is actually highlighted as one of the first three fetters to liberation and clear seeing in the Buddhist path.[xliii] Sila is ultimately 'purified' by insight and wisdom.

To commit to precepts, one needs to see the value in them, or want to learn about the value in them. To take them on unwillingly, begrudgingly, or out of pressure or expectations of others may prove more harmful than helpful.

If at times one acts in a way contrary to one's precepts, commitments or aspirations, it does not equate to sin, proverbial condemnation or failure, but rather is something that requires our conscious recognition, a personal review, and a realignment of our intentions. In Buddha-dhamma, it is acknowledged that there is a natural sense of regret that arises if we realise we have caused some harm with our actions, for ourselves or for others, (a function of conscience[xliv]), and this is actually quite instructive for us in terms of understanding consequences, action and result, and helps us to reset our intention and move on.

The experience of abiding guilt however, is another matter. The experience of guilt, as an ongoing self-punishing mind-state, is a clearly negative state with unhelpful and unskilful

results, and as such, we're encouraged to let go of it. It is here that we also need to exercise the skills of wise reflection, kindness, compassion and forgiveness towards ourselves. The experience of guilt is often linked to another difficult and painful mental state, that of shame, which can become very debilitating and may need skilful psychotherapeutic support to help process and de-couple the memories, perceptions, and feelings that keep the experiences of shame and guilt feeding each other.

To remember our basic Buddha-nature is something that can help us move on. The purity of Buddha nature is never tainted or lost – just as the sun shining in the sky is never obliterated by passing clouds or stormy weather – but only temporarily obscured from our view. This perspective helps us to let go and move on from the pain of the past, and to reconnect with deep wisdom and compassion.

……

In summary, there is much wisdom to be gained for therapists within these ancient Buddhist teachings on ethics, and in considering how we might integrate them into our clinical work. Skilful practice with ethical frameworks is not about being prescriptive or moralistic, and neither did the Buddha intend it to be that way. It is about developing wisdom and skilful reflection, to understand that acting with kindness and compassion is actually as much for our own benefit as it is for others.

As therapists, acknowledging the interconnectedness between ourselves and our clients, and the relational field within which we both exist and affect each other, we see we are not completely separate entities. What we do, and the mind state from which we engage, affects ourselves as much as our clients – just as what they bring into the therapy affects us on many levels. Working in a wise and harmless way not only supports our clients but supports the development of our own path, so our therapeutic practice can become our Dhamma practice also.

Sila, as ethical principles and practices, can serve as both a container and a rudder in our life, personally and professionally. Learning to recognise and connect to basic goodness, to inherent wisdom and compassion, can be a powerfully transformative experience. In the Buddhist path, sila, in conjunction with a practice of meditation and wise discernment, provides a circulatory system of mind cultivation – a vehicle for awakening. This Noble Eightfold Path is a descriptive map, a guide, a way of training and directing the mind, conducive to harmony, calm, clarity and insight.

END NOTES

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[iii] Bhikkhu Bodhi: The Noble Eightfold Path -The Way to the End of Suffering, Ch 4; The Wheel Publication No. 308/311 (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1984), second edition (revised) 1994.

[iv] 'The Republic', Plato, 4th Century BC. Grayling, A. C., 2003, 'What is Good? The Search for the Best Way to Live', p24. Weidenfield and Nicolson, UK.
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The Wheel Publication No. 308/311 (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1984), second edition (revised) 1994.

[vii] Ibid.
[viii] John Arapura in K. R. Sundararajan and Bithika Mukerji Ed., 1997, Hindu spirituality: Postclassical and Modern, Ch 20, pp 392-417.
[ix] Interdependence refers to the Buddhist concept that all things, all phenomena, have no independent reality, for they inevitably depend on other things for their existence. "All things arise because of their interdependence, and that is why nothing has a separate, independent identity." Thich Nhat Hanh.
This understanding is drawn from the foundational Buddhist teaching on 'Dependent Origination', the principle of conditionality; see DN 15 & SN 12.23.

[x] Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha; Pub: Wisdom, 1995. n.108, p1183 (from the sub-commentary MT (Majjhima Nikaya Tika) to MN:8). ISBN 0-86171-072-X

[xi] MN 8, Sallekha Sutta: The Discourse on Effacement, trans. by Nyanaponika Thera, 1998;
http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.008.nypo.html#fn-mn-008-17

[xii] http://www.bps.lk/olib/wh/wh033-u.html
[xiii] Udana, 5.5
[xiv] See SN 35.145; MN 135; See also: http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/study/kamma.html
[xv] See AN 3.99
[xvi] See AN 3.33; MN 9.
[xvii] See AN 4.232
[xviii] Buddhist Dictionary, 3rd ed., 1987, Ñyanatiloka; The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, Singapore.
[xix] See AN 4.232
[xx] See SN 35.145
[xxi] Bhikkhu Bodhi, MN, intro, p.32
[xxii] See AN 10.81; http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an10/an10.081.than.html ; Also see Thanissaro Bhikkhu, The Mind Like Fire Unbound, 1993.
[xxiii] MN 86

[xxiv] Nourishing The Roots - Essays on Buddhist Ethics, by Bhikkhu Bodhi © 1995–2013
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[xxviii] An 3.65; trans. Thanissara Bhikkhu, Access to Insight: Kalama Sutta.
[xxix] http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an03/an03.065.than.html
[xxx] SN 56.11
[xxxi] "Awareness and the Source-Being-Self Axis – An Exploration of the Middle Way in Therapeutic Relationship", MA Thesis, Loraine Keats (Jitindriya), 2008.
[xxxii] Mahayanasamgraha, VI. 1-3; cited in "The Resonance of Emptiness", 1998, Gay Watson, p135; Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, Delhi.

[xxxiii] Cited in: Navigating the Ethical Terrain of Spiritually Focused Psychotherapy Goals: Multiple Worldviews, Affective Triggers, and Personal Practices. Elizabeth King Keenan, Southern Connecticut State University, New Haven, Connecticut, USA. Published online: 14 Jul 2010.

[xxxiv] See: "The Noble Eightfold Path -The Way to the End of Suffering", Ch 4, Right Speech, Bhikkhu Bodhi; The Wheel Publication No. 308/311 (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1984), second edition (revised) 1994.
Also see: http://www.accesstoinsight.org/ptf/dhamma/sacca/sacca4/samma-vaca/
[xxxv] Ch 63, 64: "The Gift of Therapy", Irvin D Yalom, 2001; HarperCollins Publishers Inc.,USA.

[xxxvi] Sills re: Winnicott http://www.craniosacral-biodynamics.org/articles-relational-field-empathy.html

[xxxvii] Sills, F. http://www.craniosacral-biodynamics.org/articles-relational-field-empathy.html
[xxxviii] Emerson, W.R. http://wellness-institute.org/images/Journal_5-2_Somatotropic_Therapy.pdf
[xxxix] Sills, F. "In this intentionally created holistic listening field, the client's system is met with respect and spaciousness… This relationship is a gateway to the deeper forces and intentions that centre the human experience as a whole…. Genuine interconnection is sensed that is not an expression of either the practitioner or client's conditioned experience. Empathy is a function of this connection. It is a natural outflow of compassion in the presence of suffering, being-to-being. It is this that allows the practitioner to appropriately respond to the actual state of the client and to unconditionally accept their presence".
http://www.craniosacral-biodynamics.org/articles-relational-field-empathy.html

[xl] '*Emptiness*' is a translation of the Buddhist term, *Sunyata*, which points to the ephemeral, transient nature of all phenomena revealing the absence of any permanent entity or identity existing within or outside of any flow of mental objects or events. The mind that realises nibbana is *empty* of the notion of a fixed self – *empty* of fixation on, or identification with phenomena; clear, compassionate, luminous, unbounded, and free. See MN 121 & 122; See also: AN 10.81, http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an10/an10.081.than.html

[xli] The term Buddha-nature points to *"the potential for enlightenment or enlightened nature that is inherently present in each sentient being".* Schmidt, Marcia Binder, 2002, The Dzogchen Primer, Shambhala, p286. According to the Dzogchen teachings (of the Vajrayana school of Buddhism), Buddha-nature or *the ground* has three qualities: *Empty* in essence, *cognizant* or *luminous* in nature, and *unconfined* in capacity. See: Schmidt, Marcia Binder, 2002, The Dzogchen Primer, Ch 3, Drubwang Tsokniyi Rinpoche, Shambhala.

[xlii] http://www.urbandharma.org/udharma2/5precepts.html

[xliii] AN 10.13

[xliv] The Buddha pointed to two mental qualities that he called "bright guardians of the world": one is conscience (*hiri*) and the other concern, or integrity (*ottappa*). "*…as long as these two states prevail in people's hearts the moral standards of the world remain intact, while when their influence wanes the human world falls into unabashed promiscuity and violence, becoming almost indistinguishable from the animal realm."* (Itiv. 42). http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/bps-essay_23.html