

# Wise Choices in the Turbulence of This World Ethical Conduct as the Path to Freedom

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My name is Ayya Virañani, and I'm very happy to be here too.

I don't really know where I live anymore. As Buddhist monastics, we're called "homeless ones," so I've been wandering for a long time. I'm originally from Hawaii—that's where I come from—but I arrived here this morning. And it doesn't feel that strange to be here, it doesn't feel like I've literally come halfway around the world. Weel, dear friends, here we are. So thank you, everybody.

## **Meditation**

I'd like to begin tonight with a little practice together.

Not so much a loving-kindness practice, but a simple **mindfulness** practice, because we need it. However, I want to emphasize the attitude of loving-kindness—coming together with awareness, the attitude of kind, **gentle acceptance** of whatever is arising, allowing it to be known naturally.

So please get comfortable. I know many of you have done a lot of meditation. Some of you maybe not so much. That's okay.

Find a comfortable posture in the body where you can sit and maintain that posture. Let the body relax onto the chair. Let the chair hold the body up by itself. You **have to do nothing, just rest**.

And if you notice, in the first minute of this sitting, areas of tightness or tension that you can consciously relax—neck, shoulders, hands, face—now is the time to do that. Just move or wiggle a little bit. Let your arms relax.

Allowing the breath to just do what it's doing. You do not have to do anything.

And now bring a little awareness to the natural movement of the breath, receiving it **timely**. Because really, it is a gift that each moment keeps us alive. It's really important.

So noticing, as though you've never noticed it before—with that attitude of interest, friendly acceptance, curiosity.

You may feel the breath coming and going easily. It may be very subtle. You don't have to do anything special to make it feel a certain way, just receive.

If you have a hard time feeling it, you can put your hand over the stomach, the belly, or the chest, and just feel the movement. Sometimes two hands—feel it more that way.

Allowing the breath to come in naturally and knowing the bare, simple sensation. It is beneath—underneath—below the idea of my breath and my body.

What is the experience of that at the beginning, the middle, and the end of the in-breath? At the beginning, the middle, and the end of the out-breath?

Just receiving and knowing as clearly as you can without looking too hard. Allowing the sensations to emerge, to come into the foreground. And only being aware of what is obvious, what is clear to you right now.

So what is the experience of those moments? Movement? Roughness or smoothness? Lightness or heaviness? Tension, release?

Noticing as clearly as you can what happens to this breath in your **paying** attention.

And noticing if there's any attitude in the mind that wants it to be different—more “something” than it actually is. And just drop back into that simplicity of receiving this gift of breath.

In the silence, you can maintain that gentle, rather focused awareness on the rising and falling of the breath in the chest or the belly. Just cultivating simple awareness of this, and cultivating the stability of mind.

A stability of paying attention, of knowing.

And if it's easy to rest in this place, keep looking, because each breath is different from the one that came before it and the one that will come after it. Knowing that in the body, with a vivid clarity, of embodiment, with kindness.

And keep going in this way in silence.

If something else calls your attention—a sound, a thought, a sensation—acknowledge that with the same kindness and the same interest. Rest there for a moment as you receive that, and then when you're ready go back to the simple movement of breath.

If it's **boring, monotonous**, uninteresting, please keep looking—with the same kind of interest you would explore the face of a friend. Every breath is experienced differently. No two are ever the same.

So let it unfold in this kind field of attention, moment to moment to moment...

If, as the sitting goes on, you begin to experience strong unpleasant sensations, see if you can get curious about that. With that same holding, same interest, same friendliness. What happens to it if you pay attention. Does it get stronger, does it get weaker, does it go away, does it go away in a hurry, or does it fade? Does it move around? Notice this strong experience clearly, vividly, in a way that perhaps is new.

And if that sensation goes away, then come back to the breath, calmly. And if it does not—if it becomes stronger or really difficult—just gently and quietly allow yourself to move, but do so very mindfully, very aware of all the movements. How the body is arranged as it moves.

Or perhaps restlessness arises, a mental phenomenon, the mind **constantly moving**. Or there is **sleepiness or dullness**, unclear.

Notice those experiences just like any other kind of sense contact. That experience will have a flavor, a way it is identified.

What is that? What is that?

Bringing into the foreground, with friendliness, meeting each moment, what is this moment of experience?

Meeting each moment like an old friend, like a new friend. Connecting, and sustaining that connection again and again.

And if you can rest with the rising and falling of the breath, look and see the next breath, see if there is something new, different, that hasn't been noticed before.

## Dhammatalk

There is a remarkable paradox at the heart of meditation practice: how simple it is, and yet how difficult. The instruction could not be more basic. And still, the mind refuses to be controlled. That is simply its nature — what it does. But it can be guided. It can be inclined toward something. We are training the mind to go there. Just like the world right now, it cannot be controlled, only met with skill.

### **Today Will Be My Peaceful Day**

The world is messy right now in ways that many of us, in our not-short lives, have never seen it messy. It is shocking sometimes: chaotic, difficult, turbulent, unpredictable. And we cannot change that individually, because we are not God. Wouldn't it be nice if we could wake up in the morning and say, "Let's have peace in the world today"?

The meditation teacher Venerable Paññākāra, whose monks were recently seen walking across the United States, offered a simple instruction to everyone: wake up in the morning, make the bed, sit down, take a piece of paper, and write: *Today will be my peaceful day.*

It is a fascinating instruction, precisely because we cannot force it. We cannot create peace by deciding to have it. We cannot pretend, "Okay, today I am going to be peaceful all day long." Life is just too chaotic inside and outside for that. But we *can* set the intention to find some peace in the midst of all of this — and then put the paper aside, go live our day, and see what happens. It is such an interesting practice to hold that possibility for ourselves first thing in the morning: *No matter what is going on out there, today my intention is not to be disturbed.*

We can feel things — fully, honestly — without getting caught in reactivity about what is happening. The hating of it, the disturbance of it, the fear about it: these negative emotional states that arise on account of turbulence are a source of deep distress. And that distress is, to a significant degree, optional. There is real difficulty in the world. The Buddha was not naive about this — he was, ultimately, a realist, and that is remarkable. The world can be genuinely difficult. It can also be beautiful. And it can flip from one to the other in a moment.

"Today will be my peaceful day" means: when it flips, know that — kindly — and then decide what to do. Find a way to incline toward something useful, beneficial, wholesome, healthy, and balanced, rather than feeding whatever negative reactivity has arisen. That is the basic Buddhist path — not just for monastics, but for all of us.

Because we cannot control the mind, we cannot control the habits we arrive with. But we do not have to feed them.

### **The Practice of Non-Feeding**

Consider a simple, ordinary example. You are on an airplane, seated in the middle block. You prefer a window seat, but there was none available. The people on either side of you each have a window — and the very first thing they do, as soon as they sit down, is close it. Your mind does what minds do: it begins to generate a whole narrative about this. A small irritation. A mild injustice.

*Today will be my peaceful day.*

You remember that. And there is a kind of inward pause — *Oh, right.* This is the very place of practice. What am I going to feed here? They have the window seat, and I don't. This is simply the way it is. With a bit of practice, you discover that you can get over it — in less than a minute, even — and simply sit there. You wanted to see the mountains. Oh well. No one is harmed. Just let it be.

That is a small thing. What comes out of the mouths of political leaders on giant screens is, admittedly, harder to meet with equanimity. But the principle is the same. We have a choice — eventually, if we remember.

## Ethical Conduct: The Underrated Foundation

So what, then, actually makes this possible? What makes it possible to remember, to pause, to choose? This is where ethical conduct enters — and it is, in the Buddhist teachings, profoundly underrated.

People come to meditation for many reasons: to find balance, to create a little space, a little silence, a way to feel rather than just react. But we rarely connect the steadiness we are seeking with ethical conduct. It does not seem obviously related. And yet in the teachings that have been handed down to us, generation after generation, there is a very clear path to freedom, with three parts: *sila*, *samadhi*, *paññā* — ethical conduct, concentration, and wisdom. And these are cultivated sequentially. Ethical conduct always comes first. Based in our own cultivation of purity of mind, we can then develop concentration, wisdom, and compassion. There is a causal relationship here.

As Westerners, we do not always have a comfortable relationship with ethics. It has been used against us — jammed down our throats by religions, wielded as a weapon of guilt and control. And let's face it: goodness is not fashionable. To be a simple, kind, openhearted person — some part of us finds that boring. But it turns out that "boring" is quite a lovely place to live.

The Buddha's path — the Eightfold Path — reflects this structure clearly. The first two aspects are cognitive and motivational: right view and right intention. Then comes the ethical conduct section: right speech, right action, right livelihood. Basically, refraining from any speech, action, or livelihood that can harm other beings. From that foundation flow right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Ethical conduct is not an add-on to the meditative path. It *is* the ground from which everything else grows.

## Restraint and Awareness: The Twin Engines

Ethical conduct works through two interlocking capacities: restraint and awareness. You cannot restrain what you have not noticed. And you cannot notice what you have not trained yourself to see.

The mind is very quick — faster than we usually realize. When a thought arises, we typically catch it only after it has already been running for some moments. Restraining a thought we did not notice is impossible. But restraining speech and action is more accessible, because these are coarser, slower, more visible. This is why the practice begins there.

We take up the practice of noticing: where does the mind go? Is this thought wholesome or unwholesome? Useful or useless? That thought about the person who closed the window — *Today will be my peaceful day*. We step back from what is not useful. We abandon it. We let it be. And then the other side of the coin: when something wholesome arises — silence, perhaps, or a moment of loving kindness, a small effort to see the situation from the other person's perspective — we celebrate that and nurture it.

This whole dynamic is what the tradition calls *right effort*. And it arises naturally from the practice of ethical conduct, because we have already been refraining from what is unwholesome.

One of the gifts of this practice is that it takes us out of our bubble of self-interest. Little by little, it releases any sense of entitlement or self-centeredness that gets between ourselves and others. The person who closed the window: who cares? This is ridiculous — and the humor in seeing that is important. That was just a small flash of self-centered entitlement. *Today will be my peaceful day*. I do not want to go there.

## The Five Precepts as Daily Training

In the Buddhist tradition, the five precepts offer a precise and practical form for this practice. They are often misunderstood as commandments — as "Thou shalt not" — which would mean we can automatically fail. In fact, they are framed in exactly the opposite way. Each one begins: *I undertake the training to refrain from...*

This framing matters enormously. It is a training. It is a practice. It is not a moral verdict about who we are, but a deliberate, moment-by-moment cultivation of restraint.

**The first precept** is to refrain from deliberately killing living beings. This includes the easy cases, and also the harder ones — the mosquito, the tick. The practice inclines us toward putting the creature out of the house rather than swatting it. A small thing, but in its smallness, revealing.

**The second precept** is to refrain from taking what is not given. For monastics, this is relatively clear: things offered may be used. But for everyone, it can be quite subtle. Imagine a shared bathroom on retreat. Someone has left their special shampoo in the shower — a brand you have been eyeing at the shops. *They won't notice if I take a little.* The precept is alive right there, in that moment of small temptation. And it extends further still: taking too much space in a conversation, talking over someone, consuming what has not been freely offered — all of this falls within the territory of the second precept.

**The third precept** is to refrain from sexual conduct that causes harm. The damage that can come from ignoring this — particularly in spiritual communities — hardly needs elaboration. The simple form of the practice is this: we do not have to act on every impulse. Knowing that something is harmful, we refrain.

**The fourth precept** is to refrain from false speech — from lying. Its most obvious forms are easy to recognize. But the more interesting terrain is internal. We lie to ourselves with great subtlety and skill. Here is an example from personal meditation practice: sitting with a period of very difficult experience — not psychological, but existential — there was a strange mixture of genuine fear and a measure of equanimity present simultaneously. And in reporting that experience to teachers, there was a tendency to emphasize the equanimity: *You know, I'm really amazed how much equanimity there is. There's some fear, sure, but that's just the old habit. I'll keep looking at it.* That was a lie. The fear was enormous. It was being minimized because good meditators are supposed to be equanimous, not scared. The result of that self-deception was not pleasant.

*Just being honest is all of the practice, actually.* Internally and externally. How often we say, "Oh, that's okay, I'm fine with that," when we are not fine at all. A friend who has practiced for fifty years will sometimes stop herself mid-sentence: "Wait — no, that's not quite right. What actually happened was this." Correcting yourself in the middle of your own sentence. That is the practice. Venerable U Pandita, the great Burmese teacher, used to say: *If you can't speak the truth, how do you think you'll be able to see the truth?* He did not care what students reported in their practice, so long as it was truthful. Truth was the only thing that made guidance possible.

**The fifth precept** is to refrain from intoxicants — substances that cloud or disturb the mind. Alcohol is the obvious example in our cultural context. And it is genuinely difficult to abstain in a culture that bonds over drinking. But the practice is simply to watch. If you drink, notice what happens to your mind. Notice the shift. That noticing itself is the practice.

## **The Freedom This Leads To**

Taking these five precepts on — "I undertake the training to refrain from" — is the whole engine of the practice working, moment to moment, in daily life. It strengthens the mind. It strengthens the heart. It strengthens our capacity to guide the mind, and the mind's willingness to listen when the thought arises: *No. Today will be my peaceful day.*

The Buddha was very clear about where this leads. Not enlightenment as some grandiose, distant state — but something more practical and more immediate: a mind that can rest. With itself. With the world, as the world actually is. That is no small thing right now.

This is a freedom from clinging — from greed, aversion, and delusion. Freedom in the Buddhist sense is always freedom *from* clinging to the way things should be, to how we want them to be. When we train the mind through ethical conduct, through the very practical day-to-day events that unfold moment to moment, we move from clinging toward release. That moment of *oh, it's just the person who closed the window* — that is a moment of profound peace and freedom. We are free to go on and simply live our lives, no longer enslaved by the reactive habit that just arose.

The Dhammapada, one of the most accessible and beloved collections of the Buddha's teachings, closes this reflection beautifully. Verses 197 to 199:

***So happily we live without hate among those who hate.  
Among people filled with hatred, we live without hatred.  
So happily we live without misery among those in misery.  
Among people in misery, we live without misery.  
So happily we live without ambition among those who are ambitious.  
Among people who are ambitious, we live without ambition.***

This is the description of a quiet mind in the midst of people filled with greed, aversion, delusion, and wanting. Through refraining, through restraint, through constant and kind attention, we cultivate a freedom that says: *I am not playing that game. I don't want to. I am simply going to be happy — and act from that place.*

Not passive. Not retreating to a corner. But acting from a place of choice and non-reactivity. That is the choice available to us in each moment, through the cultivation of ethical conduct.

*I undertake the training to refrain from* automatically implies *I undertake the training to cultivate*. One side of the coin cannot exist without the other. And from that simple, daily devotion, over time, something very beautiful grows.



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