**RIGHT ACTION / SKILLFUL ACTION**

Right action describes **ethical behavior**. It is about choosing our actions wisely and appropriate based on the circumstances we encounter. Each person’s moral choices affect the whole.
The Buddha provides us with a **code of conduct**, called the **5 precepts**. People who want to progress on their spiritual path are strongly advised to implement them into their everyday life.

Abstentions
= guides for higher ethical behavior

* Abstaining from killing
* Abstaining from stealing
* Abstaining from sexual misconduct

The 5 precepts:

* Abstaining from killing
* Abstaining from stealing
* Abstaining from speaking falsely
* Abstaining from sexual misconduct
* Abstaining from misusing alcohol and other intoxicants

4 of the Precepts are mentioned in the 8fold path: Skillful Speech is abstention from false speech. Skillful Action is defined as not killing, stealing or sexual misconduct.

Abstaining from Intoxicants is included in Right Action for as an intoxicated person can not observe Right Speech or Right Action.

The abstentions should be understood as keeping those precepts (“just don’t do these things!”) PLUS they serve as **guides for higher ethical behavior** (refining definition – “what does “stealing” mean beside stealing property)

Buddha explains: all acts of harm, vandalizing property, threatening, etc. are wrong even if no one gets hurt or killed.

Why do we practice Skillful Action?

* We want to avoid cruel, hurtful or harmful behavior
* Actions have consequences, now and in the future
* We want to live a happy, calm and peaceful life
* We want a calm, happy and balanced mind
* We want to avoid a mind troubled by remorse and regret
* It is never too soon to practice skillful action in order to enjoy the benefits like healthy relationships, clear conscience, freedom from addictions and 🡪untroubled mind

**Why are the precepts put in negative way?**

The principles of skillful action are expressed in a **negative way** 🡪 “we cannot find joy in good behavior until we let go of the wrong”

We tend to act with a mind filled with attachment 🡪 it is important to oppose this tendency 🡪 we have to **abstain from the negative** to **create space** and the **proper conditions** for the positive to manifest and flourish

* We notice how it feels to be relaxed, comfortable, peaceful and free when act in an ethical way
* For example: **abstaining from killing** 🡪 creates atmosphere for **loving kindness** (metta) and **compassion** (karuna) to enter our relationships
* Example: **abstaining from stealing** 🡪 creates proper conditions for **generosity**
* Ethical actions **shift our focus** form **self- centered** to what will **benefit others** and all
* When acting from a self- centered place, we have neither patience nor wisdom to act ethically (actions are based on greed, hatred, ignorance, envy, lust)
* **Abstaining** from negativity helps us to **clear the mental fog**
* We create space for compassion, loving kindness, generosity, and see/ experience how these genuinely make us happy
* When we achieve **clarity of the mind**, we are able to act ethically and progress on the Buddha’s path
1. ABSTAINING FROM KILLING

The reason to harm or hurt someone arises generally out of **hatred or fear** and it diminishes our respect for life – and for ourselves (even when the smallest beings are killed)

Mindfulness 🡪 recognizing our own **aversions**, observing our **mental states** and taking responsibility for them

We learn/ we understand that hatred and fear lead to a cycle of cruelty, violence, suffering and pain and thus destroy our peace of mind

**This clarity** and **understanding** helps us to **refrain from destructive actions** and choose actions which create an atmosphere of loving kindness, generosity and compassion

Abstaining from killing even the smallest of creatures helps us to strengthen and grow our respect for life. We **can** develop a complete non-harming attitude and compassion toward all living beings without exceptions (Example: ants, cockroaches)

In the book, Bhante Gunaratana explains that we should not get militant in our support for non- harming and that skillful action asks us to **make our own decisions about moral behavior**.

In order to keep the precept, the Buddha defined **killing** as the **act of taking someone’s life**

The conditions necessary for the act of killing, defined for monks by the Buddha:

* There must be a being
* You must know that there is a being
* You must intend to kill
* You must plan to use a method of killing the being
* You must kill the being, using only the planned method

Let’s look at the example of “eating meat”: meat eaters do not fulfill any of these requirements, there was no intention of killing, nor did they participate in the process. However they know that they are eating meat and it comes from an animal.

It is the **intention** what really counts. In the process of making medicine, there are tests being performed on animals, which get sick or killed. Benefitting from the medicine is not killing.

**Not all killing has the same karmic consequences** (example: killing insects for pest control compared to killing a person, parents or enlightened being)

🡪So we conclude that **by understanding the different levels**, we **choose our actions** and **accept consequences**

1. NOT STEALING
* Means making an effort to be **honest** and **respect** the property of others
* It means pointing out to the cashier the item which did not get scanned
* It means doing the right thing, returning other’s property **without expecting a reward** for your actions
* It also means not taking credit for someone else’s ideas
* Taking home items from the office for personal use and so on
* Stealing groceries – even when hungry – is also stealing

We do not choose to **abstain from stealing** to **please** others or get **rewarded**. We do this for the sake of our own well- being and for the **purpose of our own spiritual development**.

The **less self- centered** we become, the **more we can pay attention to the needs of others.**
We **do not envy** other people’s property or their good fortune – instead we develop and nurture **sympathetic joy and generosity**.

🡪Example for refining: Grocery store; letting other people with less items pass; giving away a seat for a person in need, offering help to someone in need

1. NOT ENGAGING IN SEXUAL MISCONDUCT
* The meaning of abstaining from sexual misconduct goes beyond sexual behavior
* The Buddha explains it as **abstaining from abusing all the senses**
* Sexual misconduct = rape, manipulating someone in having sex, sex with minors, animals, someone else’s spouse or partner
* Having sex with an appropriate and consenting partner is not sexual misconduct

It is basically about **lust** which one tries to fulfill but can ultimately never be completely satisfied. The pain and suffering may be temporarily covered up, but they resurface, so does the lust. The wish to fulfill the desire never goes away.

The **remedy is about disciplining the sexual activity and restrain**. The second noble truth gives us insight about craving and clinging as the root cause for suffering. So, sexual desire is a never ending cycle of craving (desire for sexual activity) and aversion (the downside is loneliness, embarrassment, insecurity, jealousy)

A **loving relationship** between committed partners is **no obstacle for spiritual development**, so one does not have to choose between the following the path of the Buddha and being in a loving relationship. If we develop this skill carefully, lust may disappear completely and its place will be filled with compassion, love and concern for other’s well- being.

We can **refine** abstaining from sexual misconduct to the point of **avoiding the abuse of any senses**. 🡪What does this mean? We live in a **consumer culture**. From food, to TV shows, music, shopping – there are not only plenty of stimulants we are confronted with on a daily basis. It is helpful to observe and question one’s habits. Whether it is scrolling through social media, consuming more food than necessary or working long hours – **what are we trying to cover up?**

When we indulge in any type of craving to the point of weariness, it is sense abuse. These actions are not beneficial for the body, the mind and the spiritual path.

We can ask ourselves after identifying the actions, **how it would feel, to abandon these habits**. By abandoning them, we **create space** and our self- respect grows. The **space** created by the absence of self- centeredness can be filled with **compassion and generosity** instead.

1. NOT USING INTOXICANTS

By this the Buddha advised to abstain from all substances which cause **“negligence, infatuation and heedlessness”**. He does not advise to avoid all intoxicants, for as pain killers and certain medications may be necessary to regain one’s health.

Occasionally light use of alcohol is allowed, however caution is advised as some people may be more prone to developing an abusive relationship to alcohol consumption.

It clouds the mind and regular consumption may result in addiction.

🡪Reasons for consumption depend on many factors: shy people may feel more relaxed, troubled people may forget about their sorrow, stress may seem easier 🡪 **all motivations arise from dissatisfaction, looking for an escape from reality**

For the purpose of the 8fold path, looking beyond the precepts 🡪 to be more generous with our definition of “intoxicants”, question yourself what your personal intoxicants are? What am I doing in order to avoid being mindful. What activities do I choose to avoid being present? What can be intoxicants? **Mindfulness helps us to identify and work with them**.

HIGHER PRECEPTS FOR LAYPEOPLE

For those who want to invest more time in their spiritual growth the Buddhist path offers 8 traditional training precepts, which some meditators choose to observe for a period of time, while others on specific occasions, such as retreats.

The 8 traditional training precepts:

* Not killing
* Not stealing
* Not engaging in sexual activity
* Not lying
* Not using intoxicants
* Not eating after midday
* Not dancing, singing, indulging in music, or watching shows, and not using perfumes, cosmetics, or adornments
* Not using high and large (luxurious) beds or seats

Creating space in our lives to observe these 8 precepts improves meditation practice, helps developing concentration

 In ancient times, people in Buddhist countries used to observe these 8 precepts on a regular basis, one day every quarter of the moon (the moon cycle is divided into quarters).

* Meditating for the day
* Going to temples
* Listening to the message of the Buddha
* Undertaking a pilgrimage
* The next day, they resumed their regular daily activities

Today however, we are confronted with the dilemma of wanting time to rest and relax but are eager to fill every second of free time with some sort of activity. Friends, work, child care, house work, … The 8 precepts offer an alternative to every day life, the routine we are trapped in. “SHAKING UP THE ROUTINE or WAKING US UP” What do we gain from this “mini vacation”? 🡪 a deep sense of peace, contentment, clarity, relaxation and improved health

If you are not already doing it, invite the thought of creating space for this mini vacation, taking time for yourself, meditating and practicing self care.

Maybe you want to try to pick a specific date, like “ever first Saturday of the month” and exercise self care.

There is a commitment for laypeople which is called **“eight lifetime precepts”**

= 5 basic precepts + three additional rules regarding Skillful Speech (not engaging in malicious speech, not speaking harshly, not speaking frivolously)

Making a **commitment or vow** **to observe and live** after these precepts act **as a reminder**, whenever you “mess up” or are unskillful.

**Mindfulness vs. Forgetfulness (= Repetition):**
I noticed how important it is to me to re-read the precepts and sometimes re-define their meaning for myself. By reading the precepts and their definitions regularly, each one of them stays **more fresh** in my mind and even if I feel I might skip the “pause” before re-acting to a situation, they help me to **remember where I want my spiritual development to go**. So then it is easier to **abandon** the unwholesome or unskillful action and choose instead compassion, generosity or loving kindness. By doing so, I pay very close attention to how it makes me feel. How does it feel to let go of anger, righteousness or greed. And how does it feel to choose compassion or generosity instead? When I am able to “do the right thing” there is a deep sense of **gratitude, joy and equanimity**.

MINDFULNESS OF SKILLFUL ACTION

**The concepts are nice. But let’s make sure we act so the concepts not only stay concepts.**

The Buddha said **“All wholesome words, deeds, and thoughts have mindfulness as their root.”** Which means that through a **committed** practice of Mindfulness, Skillful Action will come naturally.

Sati = Mindfulness = Remembering

🡪When we **suffer** – we commit a **negative action** or hurt someone – it makes us suffer more – there is then a **cycle of negativity** which we are trapped in

When we act unskillful, we feel remorse, regret, worry, sadness and the mind is clouded and agitated.

**So Mindfulness helps us to see AND FEEL this harmful impact on ourselves and others clearly.**

🡪When we feel relaxed and peaceful, our actions reflect our state of mind and we see the **beneficial impact** of our actions clearly. We notice how good we feel and this encourages us to pursue more wholesome actions **🡪cycle of positivity**

Bhante talks about how mindfulness of the precepts influences our **physical appearance**. A peaceful, balanced and **non agitated mind** makes the face bright and radiant, the body language gives clues about our mental state.

 🡪**Mindfulness of Skillful Actions** helps us to **stay present**. We pay attention to what is going on inside of our body and mind. At the same time, we stay connected to the present moment and hence are able to respond accordingly, having the **precepts** (whether the 5 or the 8) as **our guiding principles.**

🡪**Practice on cushion is crucial in order to stay mindful when confronted with a challenging situation:**
I noticed throughout the years of practice, that my actions are strongly connected to the amount of time I am able (I decide) to dedicate to my spiritual practice and mental health. The more I am able to keep my sitting practice regular (which means frequency and duration), carve out the precious and well invested time in meditation, reflection and reading, the more I am able to respond to a specific event, impulse, … from a place of equanimity, patience, love and respect. I notice this especially regarding the relationship to my children. They provide me with an abundance of opportunities to practice the path. However it is only up to me, if I make good use of it.

🡪**The power of the pause! Dedicated sitting practice helps us to nurture the ability to observe what is going on in the present moment and pause.**

🡪What if I **break the precepts**? We are human, we make mistakes. Each mistake is a wonderful opportunity to reflect, learn and revisit our commitments.
🡪Acknowledge that it happened, make amends, revisit the precepts and then move on
🡪remorse, worry, anger is not helpful to anyone

🡪In my day to day parenting, each time I make a mistake, I use it as an opportunity to be a good example for my children, by also explaining what had happened and WHY. So I am reflecting on my actions and the WHY and my children learn that making mistakes is part of life and that the important part is to learn from them and make an effort to not repeat them.

This concludes the talk about Skillful Action. Regarding the precept of “Not Stealing”, the literature I worked with for this talk is from Bhante Gunaratana, 8 Mindful Steps to Happiness – Walking the Buddha’s Path.
We covered the 5 precepts which are Abstaining from Killing, Stealing, Speaking Falsely, Sexual Misconduct (which includes abuse of all senses) and Abstaining from Drugs and other Intoxicants (which includes all sorts of unbeneficial behaviors and actions we do just to avoid staying present and be mindful.