



## **Living a Skillful Life**

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Note: Many of the quotations are from *Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness: Walking the Buddha's Path* by Bhante Gunaratana (Bhante G.). The citations will be abbreviated as EMTH.

### **Why lead a skillful life?**

When we look at our behaviors, whether they are skillful or unskillful, we ask “what does each bring?” The main point is that all actions have causes and effects. The purpose of mindfulness is to develop an awareness that our actions have consequences both good and bad depending on intent. “The basis of Buddhist morality is that acting in unskillful ways leads to unhappy results and acting in skillful ways leads to happy results.” (EMTH p. 27) Happy means long lasting happiness not the short-lived happiness obtained through desire or ill-will.

The concept of karma comes up in relation to cause and effect. Karma refers to how both skillful and unskillful behavior affects an individual over time. Karma is not punishment or retribution but simply an extended expression or consequence of natural acts. Karma means “deed” or “act” and more broadly names the universal principle of cause and effect, action and reaction, that governs all life. The effects experienced are also able to be mitigated by actions and are not necessarily fated. That is to say, a particular action now is not binding to some particular, pre-determined future experience or reaction; it is not a simple, one-to-one correspondence of reward or punishment.

So, looking at unskillful behavior, how can it lead to harm? This is not straightforward as noted above. It can be immediate or delayed. Our mind often makes up causes and effects which may not really be the case. Another way to state it is that karma or unskillful behavior puts you at risk whatever the cause or effect.

Skillful behavior yields two results, internal and external. How happy you feel (internal) and how happy others feel as a result of your behavior (external).

### **Living a Skillful Life**

The Buddha stated in the Fourth Noble Truth that the way to end suffering is through the Eightfold Path: *“And this, monks, is the noble truth of the way of practice leading to the cessation of stress: precisely this Noble Eightfold Path — right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.* These eight steps are translated as “right” which means skillful. “Right” and “Skillful” will be used interchangeably. The three steps which address leading a skillful life are right speech, right action and right livelihood.

Three steps of the Eightfold Path address living a skillful life: Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood. While the content of these steps may seem to consist of “do’s and don’ts”, the three virtues are mindful practices from which we can gain insights.

## Right Speech

The Buddha noted: “ *And what is Right Speech? Abstaining from false speech, abstaining from slanderous speech, abstaining from harsh speech, abstaining from frivolous speech. This is called Right Speech.*” ([Magga-vibhanga Sutta: An Analysis of the Path](#) SN 45.8)

Some quotes on the impact of speech:

*“Wrong speech causes us many problems. We lie and then get caught in it; we say something nasty about a co-worker and get him into trouble; we speak inconsiderately and offend a client or friend; we spend a whole day in meaningless chatter and get nothing done.”* Bhante G.

*“Speech can break lives, create enemies, and start wars, or it can give wisdom, heal divisions, and create peace. This has always been so, yet in the modern age the positive and negative potentials of speech have been vastly multiplied by the tremendous increase in the means, speed, and range of communications.”* Bikkhu Bodhi

*“As my teacher once said: ‘if you can't control your mouth, there's no way you can hope to control your mind.’ This is why right speech is so important in day-to-day practice.”* Thanissaro Bhikkhu

To summarize: Skillful Speech has four qualities

It is always truthful.

It is uplifting, not malicious or unkind.

It is gentle not crude or harsh.

It is moderate, not useless or meaningless.

The Buddha noted that one who practices skillful speech will be trusted and respected.

### The first quality: Truthful, not false speech

The Buddha: *“Herein someone avoids false speech and abstains from it. He speaks the truth, is devoted to truth, reliable, worthy of confidence, not a deceiver of people. Being at a meeting, or amongst people, or in the midst of his relatives, or in a society, or in the king's court, and called upon and asked as witness to tell what he knows, he answers, if he knows nothing: “I know nothing,” and if he knows, he answers: “I know”; if he has seen nothing, he answers: “I have seen nothing,” and if he has seen, he answers: “I have seen.” Thus he never knowingly speaks a lie, either for the sake of his own advantage, or for the sake of another person's advantage, or for the sake of any advantage whatsoever”*

There are other ways of not speaking the truth:  
You can lie by remaining silent.  
Your body language can give you away.

*“Though the deceptive intention is common to all cases of false speech, lies can appear in different guises depending on the motivating root, whether greed, hatred, or delusion. Greed as the chief motive results in the lie aimed at gaining some personal advantage for oneself or for those close to oneself — material wealth, position, respect, or admiration. With hatred as the motive, false speech takes the form of the malicious lie, the lie intended to hurt and damage others. When delusion is the principal motive, the result is a less pernicious type of falsehood: the irrational lie, the compulsive lie, the interesting exaggeration, lying for the sake of a joke.”* Bikkhu Bodhi

“It is said that in the course of his long training for enlightenment over many lives, a bodhisattva can break all the moral precepts except the pledge to speak the truth.” Bikkhu Bodhi

The antidote to false speech is to speak the truth.

#### **The Second Quality: Uplifting speech, not malicious or unkind.**

Malicious speech is slander which is to make a false spoken statement that causes people to have a bad opinion of someone. Slanderous speech “robs people of their good name and their credibility.”

Slanderous speech comes from hate and ill-will and is meant to create division. Even if the statement is true, if the intent is malicious (to hurt), it is unskillful.

Slanderous speech is Irretrievable. Once it is out, you can never take it back. As with an old Jewish folktale, it is like letting feathers out of a pillow. Once you let them go you can never get them all back.

What are the antidotes to slanderous speech? Uplifting speech, abstinence, and silence

#### **The Third Quality: Gentle, not crude or harsh speech**

Harsh speech is words spoken in anger. Examples include verbal abuse, profanity, sarcasm, hypocrisy, blunt or belittling criticism. Harsh speech can be called bullying with words.

What are the antidotes to harsh speech? Patience, speaking gently and kindly.

#### **The Fourth Quality: Moderate, not useless or frivolous speech**

Frivolous speech is talk that lacks depth or purpose. Gossip, if not slanderous, is a form of frivolous speech. Engaging in frivolous speech can tempt the mind to engage in the other forms of unskillful speech, lying, slander, and harsh words.

The Buddha mentioned the kinds of speech to be avoided: "Whereas some brahmins and contemplatives, living off food given in faith, are addicted to talking about lowly topics such as these — talking about kings, robbers, ministers of state; armies, alarms, and battles; food and drink; clothing, furniture, garlands, and scents; relatives; vehicles; villages, towns, cities, the countryside; women and

heroes; the gossip of the street and the well; tales of the dead; tales of diversity [philosophical discussions of the past and future], the creation of the world and of the sea, and talk of whether things exist or not — he abstains from talking about lowly topics such as these. This, too, is part of his virtue.”

In everyday life, these topics are hard to avoid as they come up in conversation with others. That is why it is important to be mindful in conversation.

The antidotes to frivolous speech are to be mindful of the consequences and to be silent.

### **When is the right time to speak?**

*“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.”* The Buddha

Remember that we often speak from a reaction due to our conditioning an experience. Therefore, it is important to be mindful when we speak after we experience unpleasant feelings, deluded perceptions and negative mental formations. There are three times to be mindful of speaking:

“The Buddha speaks to his son, Rahula about being mindful with speech:]

*Whenever you want to perform a verbal act, you should reflect on it....*

*While you are performing a verbal act, you should reflect on it.....*

*Having performed a verbal act, you should reflect on it.....”*

Recall the precepts of Insight Dialogue

- Pause
- Relax
- Open
- Trust emergence
- Speak the Truth
- Listen Deeply

**Listening is also an important part of communication. Listening from a space of silence can be beneficial to the speaker as well as the listener.**

*“Can one listen without any conclusion, without any comparison or judgment?*

*I think there is an art to listening, which is to listen completely, without any*

*motive, because a motive in listening is a distraction. If you can listen with complete attention, then there is no resistance, either to your own thoughts or to what is being said. But it is only the very silent, quiet mind that finds out what is true, not a mind which is furiously active, thinking, resisting.”*

Krishnamurti

Six impediments to listening from a truly quiet space:

- Judging what the other person is saying.
- Having ideas of how to “fix” the issue the person is presenting.
- Having ideas on how to “fix” the person being listened to.

- Reflecting on how the issues being presented are similar to the issues you are experiencing in your own life.
- Thinking about the past or future.
- Thinking of how you will respond to what the person is communicating.

As each of these thought processes are recognized, allow them to immediately pass out of consciousness and go back to listening from the space of silence.

When we do listen from this clear and open space and wait until the other person has completed their thoughts, our reply comes from our awareness and it will be more relevant and meaningful. The person to whom we are speaking will know that they were heard (truly listened to).

## Right Action

Skillful Action refers to how we conduct ourselves. Bhante Gunaratana (Bhante G.) notes “Some people want a simple list of rules to follow so that they can be sure that they are acting in a moral and proper way. Others need rules to feel secure that they will reach their spiritual goal, whether it be heaven or enlightenment. The Buddha did offer a code of conduct that prevents us from adding to our suffering, but truly ethical behavior goes far beyond any list of rules. Rather, it’s an interlocking set of principles concerning how our actions cause suffering to ourselves and to others— how each person’s moral choices impact the whole.” (EMTH p. 109).

*“And what is Right Action? Abstaining from killing beings, abstaining from taking what is not given, abstaining from sexual misconduct. This is called Right Action.”* The Buddha ([Maggā-vibhaṅga Sutta: An Analysis of the Path](#) SN 45.8)

These principles are called the Five Precepts:

- Abstaining from killing.
- Abstaining from stealing.
- Abstaining from speaking falsely (from Right Speech).
- Abstaining from sexual misconduct.
- Abstaining from misusing intoxicants such as alcohol (because this can lead to unskillful behavior).

Abiding by these precepts is putting ethics into action. *“We practice Skillful Action not because we want to avoid breaking the Buddha’s rules or because we fear that someone will punish us if we do. We avoid cruel and hurtful behavior because we see the consequences of such actions— that they lead to profound unhappiness for us and for everyone around us, now and in the future. We practice Skillful Action because we want our lives to be helpful and harmonious, not destructive and contentious, and because we want a calm and happy mind, untroubled by regret or remorse.....With more skillful behavior we encounter fewer obstacles to full realization (enduring enlightenment). The sooner you can start, the more fulfilling your life will be. Otherwise, it can be “like winning the lottery on your deathbed....Ethical action shifts our focus from what we personally want to what will most benefit us and others. When we are obsessed with our own desires, we are motivated primarily by hatred, greed, envy, lust, and other*

*selfish preoccupations. Then we have neither the self-control nor the wisdom to act rightly. But when we abstain from negativity, our mental fog clears a bit, and we begin to see that loving-friendliness, compassion, and generosity genuinely make us happy. This clarity of mind helps us to make ethical choices and to progress on the Buddha's path.” (EMTH p. 111-113).*

## **The Five Precepts**

### **Abstaining from killing**

This includes killing of all living things including insects. The guiding factor here is intention because we often inadvertently kill living beings by accident. For example, running over insects as we are driving an automobile. Bhante G. notes: “Understanding that there are different levels of impact, we make our choices and accept the consequences.” (EMTH p. 116).

### **Abstaining from stealing**

Bhante G. notes: “Stealing is an expression of our greed or envy.....Practicing Skillful Action of not stealing means making an effort to be honest and to respect the property of others.” This includes pointing out mistakes to those who have given you back too much change because they are not aware of what they have given.

### **Abstaining from speaking falsely.**

This was covered above with Skillful Speech above.

### **Abstaining from sexual misconduct.**

Engaging in sexual misconduct is a form of stealing as one is taking from someone else what is not freely given. In more general sense, sexual misconduct is abusing the senses. When we abuse our senses whether it be with sex or other addictions, we find that we can never get enough. Trying to get more leads to more unskillful behavior.

### **Abstaining from misusing intoxicants.**

The use of intoxicants can lead to unskillful behavior such as negligence, infatuation, and heedlessness. Medications used as treatment for a condition are not a problem as long as we are mindful of any side effects that can lead to unskillful behavior.

Using Intoxicants is a way that we can avoid being mindful. Consider other activities that you may engage in to avoid or escape mindfulness. This might include excessive reading, texting, listening to music, etc.

## **Summary of Skillful Action**

*“The observance of the Five Precepts is a voluntary act which each individual must take up on his or her own initiative. The Buddha did not formulate the precepts as commandments, nor did he threaten anyone with punishment for violating them. However, this much has to be said: The Buddha perfectly understood the workings of the universe, and he proclaimed the inviolable moral law of cause and effect: good deeds beget pleasant fruits, evil deeds beget painful fruits. The Five Precepts are the guidelines the Buddha has bequeathed us to steer us away from evil conduct and towards the lines of conduct that will*

*prove most beneficial for ourselves and others. When we mold our actions by the Five Precepts, we are acting in accordance with the Dhamma, avoiding future misery and building up protection and happiness for ourselves and others both here and in the hereafter. Thus the closer we live to the Five Precepts, the greater will be the blessing power of our lives.” (A Simple Guide to Life, Robert Bogota)*

*“The Buddha said, “All wholesome words, deeds, and thoughts have mindfulness as their root.” In other words, Skillful Action grows naturally out of mindfulness. Let’s look more closely at why this is so. Every intentional action of body, speech, or mind impacts us strongly. When we hurt someone or commit some other negative action, we often suffer physical stress and develop a confused, unhappy state of mind. Mindfulness helps us to see this harmful impact clearly. We see that an unwholesome action leads to feelings of remorse, which leads to worry, which prevents the mind from becoming calm. When the mind is agitated, we lose the ability to concentrate. The more negative our action, the more upset and worried we feel. A vicious cycle begins, in which negative states of mind influence us to engage in other unwholesome actions.*

*The converse is also true. With mindfulness, we see that when we act with loving-friendliness, our mind becomes peaceful and relaxed. A peaceful mind enhances our joy and helps us concentrate more deeply. Realizing this, we feel encouraged to pursue wholesome actions. We become healthier physically and mentally. This positive feedback keeps us moving in a good direction.” (Gunaratana, Henepola. EMTH p. 127)*

*“Skillful Action is not something invented by the Buddha. It is universally true that wrong actions cause suffering and perpetuate hatred. As the Buddha expressed this idea:*

*Hatred is never overcome by hatred.*

*Only through loving-friendliness does hatred cease.*

*This is an eternal law. (Dhammapada (Dhp) 5)*

*The Buddha did not claim credit for this law. It does not belong to Buddhists only or to anyone else. In his enlightened state, the Buddha could see clearly the negative consequences that inevitably arise from wrong action. If you “act or speak with a defiled state of mind,” he said, “suffering will follow you as surely as the cart wheel follows the foot of the ox.” If you act or speak with a pure state of mind, he continued, “happiness will follow as your shadow follows without departing from you.” (Dhp 1– 2) (Gunaratana, Henepola. EMTH pp. 129-130).*

## **Right Livelihood**

*“And what is Right Livelihood? Here a noble disciple having abandoned wrong livelihood, makes a living by means of Right Livelihood. This is called Right Livelihood.” The Buddha ([Magga-vibhanga Sutta: An Analysis of the Path](#) SN 45.8)*

The Buddha makes it clear that there are skillful and unskillful ways to make a living. Bhante G. adds: “Our means of sustenance should not interfere with our spiritual development.” (EMTH p. 148)

**Please note** that in the Buddha’s time, there was very little if any leisure time for lay people other than the upper classes. In our time, we can expand the Buddha’s teaching to include all activities that we engage in.

In the book, *Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness*, Bhante Gunaratana has created a series of questions to ask ourselves if we are engaged in Right Livelihood:

1. **Is my job or activity an inherently unskillful doing?** Does it cause harm by definition? For example, does it involve manufacturing, selling, or using weapons? Does it entail harming living beings? Does it support the formation of addictions such as gambling or drinking?
2. **Does my job or activity cause me to break any of the five core precepts?**  
Abstaining from killing  
Abstaining from stealing  
Abstaining from speaking falsely (from Right Speech)  
Abstaining from sexual misconduct  
Abstaining from misusing intoxicants such as alcohol
3. **Are there aspects of my job or activity which disturb my sense of peace?** (E.g. guilt, remorse, uncertainty, fear, or doubt).
4. **Does your livelihood or activity interfere with your spiritual development?**

Other questions about Right Livelihood to reflect on:

- Are you aware of your unique visions, talents and gifts? How does life express itself uniquely through you?
- Are you following your own creative visions or are compromising them for fear of not being approved or accepted?
- Do you work or volunteer for an organization that treats competitors as the enemy thereby fostering feelings of aversion? If so, do you personally avoid thinking in this manner?
- Does your organization see its clients or customers in terms of profits and is it rarely concerned about service? If so, are you still able to provide superior support and service to your customers or clients?
- Does your organization promote their products or services using fear tactics?
- Does your organization make exaggerated claims about its products or services?
- Are you too overburdened with work or another activity to give proper service to those you are dedicated to servicing?
- If you met the Buddha, would there be aspects of your work or activity that you would avoid mentioning since you knew they were unskillful?
- What are your core values and does your livelihood or activities support and nourish them?

### **Ethical Considerations**

As noted in the section on Right Action, we must be mindful of our behavior in our activities. As [Susan Elbaum Jootla](#) notes: *“Due to the interdependence of all phases of society and today's complex economic structures, it is very difficult to live as a layman and keep the perfect sila (virtues) the meditator strives for — a farmer has to use insecticides, public health workers kill mosquitoes and their larvae, a truck driver may sometimes have to transport arms or poison. Often one is in a position of having to exaggerate one's statements or omit disadvantageous facts, even if one does not like it. So we*

*must earn our livelihood as we have been trained, and as we find a position for ourselves in society while constantly making an effort to grow in Dhamma.”*

### **Managing Your Livelihood**

Krishnan Venkatesh in “[Why Right Livelihood Isn’t Just About Your Day Job](#)” notes: “In a lesser-known sutta from *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, the Buddha gives this advice to rich lay people: *Herein, Vyagghapajja, a householder knowing his income and expenses leads a balanced life, neither extravagant nor miserly, knowing that thus his income will stand in excess of his expenses, but not his expenses in excess of his income.*

*Just as the goldsmith, or an apprentice of his, knows, on holding up a balance, that by so much it has dipped down, by so much it has tilted up; even so a householder, knowing his income and expenses leads a balanced life, neither extravagant nor miserly, knowing that thus his income will stand in excess of his expenses, but not his expenses in excess of his income.*

On casual reading, this passage appears to be sensible advice for running an individual household. But on further reflection from a broader perspective on livelihood, we can see that the idea of a life in which income and expenditure are balanced encompasses the greater “household” of the socioeconomic and ecological world in which we live.

Right livelihood involves mindfulness of our place in the whole, and thus becomes the foundation for intelligent social activism and ecological responsibility.”

*Skillful Livelihood is a goal to be sought gradually as our spiritual practice matures.* (EMTH p. 148)

*A man’s value to the community primarily depends on how far his feelings, thoughts, and actions are directed towards promoting the good of his fellows.* Albert Einstein

### **Summary**

Following the virtue steps of the Eightfold Path (Skillful Speech, Skillful Action and Skillful Livelihood) are critical to our spiritual development. The wisdom steps (Skillful Understanding and Skillful Thinking) give us a basis for how we behave and the Practice Steps (Skillful Effort, Skillful Mindfulness, and Skillful Concentration) give us the means to renew our commitment to spiritual development on a daily basis.

The role of mindfulness in being skillful is particularly important. Bhante G makes a key statement about how mindfulness maintains our skillful behavior. *“but by definition, mindfulness keeps us in control of what we think, how we act, and what we say. It’s impossible to shout at someone mindfully, or to abuse alcohol mindfully. If you are truly mindful, you cannot do these things!”* (EMTH p. 106)

Remember that that mindfulness is the first factor in the seven factors of awakening. In order to experience the last factor, equanimity, it is important to pay attention to what your body tells you through feeling. When you experience an unpleasant feeling in relation to your livelihood or what you

do, investigate with energy but without judgement. See if there is anything in Right Speech, Right Action, and/or Right Livelihood that can guide you to a more skillful life.