

# *Everywhere & Always*

## *The Buddha's Categorical Shoulds*

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One of Buddhism's distinctive features is that its founder started out imperfect, so he knows what it's like for us to face our own imperfections. The story of his quest for awakening tells of one mistake after another, as he sought happiness in many of the wrong places. More importantly, though, he admitted his mistakes and mastered the skill of how to learn from them so as not to repeat them. That's how he was able to attain awakening.

On the night of his awakening, he saw the mistakes he had made not only in this lifetime, but also in countless previous ones. At the same time, he saw the mistakes that all other beings throughout the cosmos had been making and were continuing to make, causing themselves and one another a great deal of suffering. The main reason he decided to teach the Dhamma after gaining this knowledge was to help others to avoid those mistakes and the suffering they caused.

He knew that he couldn't impose his new knowledge on others. After all, he wasn't their parent or creator, so he couldn't place obligations on them, but that doesn't mean he wasn't secure in knowing which actions were skillful and which ones were not. His *shoulds* were conditional—if you want to put an end to suffering, this is what you have to do—but once you accept that condition, they hold in all cases.

He made a list of unskillful actions to avoid, and the list is quite clear-cut. He divided it into three categories: bodily, verbal, and mental actions. The bodily actions to avoid were killing, stealing, and illicit sex. The verbal actions were telling lies, speaking divisively, speaking coarsely, and engaging in idle chatter. The mental actions were inordinate greed (the type that would lead you to kill or steal), ill will, and wrong view—in particular the wrong view that skillful actions don't lead to pleasure, and unskillful actions don't lead to pain. Skillful actions he defined as refraining from the first nine of these unskillful acts, and as actively developing right view to replace wrong view.

This list is pretty conventional. Where it gets unconventional is in the Buddha's explanation of it. Conventional morality admits exceptions to these standards, saying that there are times when you have to kill or lie for the greater good, and viewing these exceptions as a necessary part of life. The Buddha, though, was a radical. He never admitted any exceptions of this sort. When asked if there was anything whose slaying he approved of, he answered with only one thing: anger (SN 1:17). As for lying, he said that if you feel no shame

over telling a deliberate lie, there's no evil you might not do (Iti 17). He even told his son, Rāhula, never to tell a falsehood even as a joke (MN 61).

For him, the principle that unskillful actions should be avoided and skillful actions should be developed was a "categorical" teaching (AN 2:18). In other words, it was always true, always beneficial, so it should be adopted in all situations, everywhere and always. That's saying a lot. Of all the many other teachings he gave, only one qualified as categorical in his eyes: the four noble truths (DN 9). Not even the three characteristics—or, more accurately, perceptions—of inconstancy, stress, and not-self qualified as categorical, because even though they're always true, they're not always beneficial perceptions to adopt (MN 136). The same with the principle of acceptance: There are some things you should accept, and others you shouldn't (MN 2).

So the Buddha obviously saw the distinction between skillful and unskillful actions as highly important. His explanations of this distinction were clear-cut, not out of a desire to be punitive, but out of compassion: He wanted people to stop harming themselves through their ignorance. That's why he warned them that mistakes in these areas were really serious. As far as he was concerned, it wasn't a compassionate act to leave people to their own devices in trying to figure out which actions would or would not lead to suffering. After all, he himself hadn't figured these things out until he had gained full awakening, and that had required an immense amount of effort and time.

So, it wasn't that he simply wanted to pass judgment on the actions of others. Instead, he wanted to teach people how to pass skillful judgment on their own past, present, and future actions so that they could avoid repeating the mistakes that had been causing them suffering all along.

It may seem strange to hear that the Buddha expected his students to pass judgment on their actions, given all that has been said about how he taught a non-judging and accepting attitude toward all things. Actually, though, he stated that the skillful use of your powers of judgment plays a crucial role in practicing the Dhamma. For instance, when discussing the steps that lead from hearing and pondering the Dhamma to actually awakening to the truth, he cited four: desire, willingness, judgment, and exertion. First there has to be the desire to practice, then the willingness to measure your actions against his teachings, followed by acts of judgment in which you weigh how your actions have measured up. Only then can you make the effort to abandon unskillful behavior and develop the skillful behavior that leads to awakening (MN 95). And the act of judgment doesn't happen just once. Throughout the practice, you have to repeatedly pass skillful judgment on your actions to make sure that you stay on course and improve your mastery of the skills of the path (MN 61; MN 121). For him, judgment is not a final verdict. It's a matter of judging a work in progress until it arrives at its goal.

His compassion in giving his categorical teaching on skillful and unskillful actions can easily be seen in his instructions for how to judge your own past mistakes in a way that encourages you to learn from them.

There are five steps in all (MN 61; SN 42:8):

1) Recognize the mistake as a mistake, and that it was not right to do it.  
 2) Talk it over with someone more advanced on the path, to get ideas on how not to repeat it.

3) Develop the proper attitude to your mistake. This is the most delicate part of passing judgment. On the one hand, you shouldn't wallow in feelings of remorse, for that doesn't erase the mistake you've made, and actually can sap your confidence that you can learn from it. On the other hand, you should be ashamed of the mistake, although here it's important to understand what the Buddha meant by "shame": not the debilitating shame that's the opposite of pride, but the conscientious shame that's the opposite of shamelessness. The shame the Buddha's recommending here is actual a part of healthy self-esteem: You value yourself so much that you see harmful actions as beneath you, and you'd be ashamed to stoop to doing them.

4) Resolve not to repeat the mistake.

5) Spread thoughts of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity to all beings in all directions. Goodwill for others motivates you not to harm them ever again. Goodwill for yourself motivates you not to harm yourself with useless recriminations, and encourages your conviction that you are worthy of following the path.

The fact that these steps in judging your past actions could bear fruit in present and future happiness is based on the Buddha's analysis of how the results of action play out. As he had seen on the night of his awakening, skillful actions tend to lead to fortunate rebirths, unskillful actions to unfortunate rebirths. The word "tend" here is crucial. He had also seen that the workings of karma were complex. For instance, some people engaged in unskillful actions but gained a fortunate rebirth in the next immediate lifetime. This was because they had either done skillful actions beforehand, had changed their ways and done skillful actions afterward, or had adopted right view at death. These mitigating factors didn't erase the bad karma of their mistake, but it did give them something of a reprieve.

This means that if you recognize a mistake and learn not to repeat it, you can delay its results, which would give you the opening to practice for the sake of awakening and gaining release from the results of past actions entirely.

The Buddha's understanding of karma, along with the steps he recommended in judging your past mistakes, help to avoid two extreme ways of passing judgment that can actually get in the way of learning from them.

The first extreme is based on the deterministic interpretation of karma that whoever does bad things is destined to suffer in a bad destination. This extreme was taught by other sectarians in the time of the Buddha, and as the Buddha

said, if you believe it and then reflect on your past mistakes, you see no escape from suffering. It's as if you were thrown into hell in this very lifetime (SN 42:8). This thought discourages you from making an effort to change your ways, as you feel you're doomed no matter what.

The other extreme is to deny that your mistakes matter. In the Buddha's time, this extreme was also taught by other sectarians, some of whom argued that actions were unreal to begin with, while others argued that there was no such thing as right or wrong (DN 2). At present, this view is held by those who believe that, because right and wrong are just artificial conventions, we're better off not passing judgment on one another's behavior at all. That way, we can all maintain our self-esteem. This attitude, of course, makes it impossible to learn from your mistakes because it refuses to recognize that there are such things.

From the Buddha's point of view, both extremes are heartless and irresponsible. Mistakes really are mistakes, and people really suffer from them. Sadly, they don't see the connection between their actions and their suffering, so they keep on making the same mistakes again and again. But because they can alleviate the results of their past unskillful actions when they learn of the connection, the most compassionate thing is to show them the connection and to teach them a wise and effective way to put that knowledge into practice.

As the Buddha saw it, the duty of any good teacher was to give protection to one's students and to end their bewilderment (AN 3:62). In his experience, people actively sought reliable advice on how to end their suffering, regarding advice of this sort as an act of kindness, rather than an imposition (AN 6:63). In his case, he protected students from their ignorance about the results of their actions, and ended their bewilderment by giving them a firm grounding in deciding what should and shouldn't be done. In providing his categorical teaching on skillful and unskillful behavior, he was simply doing his duty and responding to his listeners' most genuine needs.

A common complaint, though, is that the Buddha's teachings on this topic lack nuance. Aren't some unskillful actions more unskillful than others? What about instances when you want to do an action listed as unskillful but with a compassionate intent? And what about times when you're faced with conflicting moral obligations, as when, in wartime, you want to protect your loved ones from enemies who threaten rape or murder, and you see no other way out than to kill the enemy? How could a fully awakened being be an absolutist in such situations?

Actually, the Buddha does address these issues. In listing the results of the different unskillful actions, he does note, for instance, that the results of killing, lying, and wrong view are much worse than the results of idle chatter (AN 8:40).

As for the remaining questions, he gives a framework for answering them in a set of six discourses in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (4:233–238), where he divides actions into four sorts: bright; dark; dark and bright; and neither dark nor bright, leading to the end of action. Bright actions correspond to following the five

precepts or training rules based on the list of skillful actions. Dark actions break those precepts. Actions that are dark and bright are defined as involving both injurious and uninjurious intentions. The Buddha doesn't give examples of this category, but apparently it would cover cases of breaking the precepts with compassionate intentions or out of a sense of conflicting moral obligations.

As for the destinations to which these actions can lead: Bright actions lead to the high levels of heaven, dark actions to hell, and dark-and-bright actions to the realms in between, from the realms of deprivation up through the human world and to the lower levels of heaven. The wide range here shows that actions in this category can vary greatly in their level of skillfulness, and that, given the complexity of karma, an action that would send one person to a level of a low level of heaven could send another person to deprivation.

Nowhere in this set of six discourses does the Buddha give advice on what to do when faced with a moral dilemma of conflicting shoulds and obligations. For that advice, we have to look elsewhere in the Canon.

What we find is that he never advised people to engage in actions that were both dark and bright. The only actions he advised were in the categories of bright or neither dark nor bright. It's easy to understand why: Given that you don't know your full karmic background, he'd be asking you to take a great risk if he recommended an action that could possibly lead to a lower realm.

We also find that, when weighing conflicting shoulds, he didn't regard all shoulds as having equal weight. Here again, it's easy to see why. If every should had equal value, two conflicting shoulds would cancel each other out—like a proton and an anti-proton annihilating each other—and you'd end up with no shoulds standing. This would be a severe weakness in his teachings: Precisely when you most need guidance as you're faced with conflicting obligations, the Buddha would be abandoning you, offering you no protection at all.

Instead, he was clear in stating which obligations took precedence over others. Here, though, we have to note that he never used the language of obligations. Instead, he simply offered his advice to people on the basis of their desire for happiness: If you really want to take on the training leading to a long-term reliable happiness, the principles of action dictate that this is how you have to weigh your shoulds against one another.

He notes that it's good to offer protection to those threatened with danger and fear (AN 4:184; Iti 31) but he doesn't list it as a precept. That alone should indicate that he holds the precept against killing as more important than the desire to provide physical protection. On top of that, he notes that there are five types of loss: loss of relatives, loss of wealth, loss through disease, loss in terms of virtue, loss in terms of views. He then goes on to show that loss of relatives, loss of wealth, and loss through disease are relatively minor, whereas loss of virtue and loss in terms of views are serious. The former forms of loss won't send you to a bad destination after death, whereas the latter two would (AN 5:130).

The Buddha's way of ranking these forms of loss flies in the face of many conventional domestic values, but it does provide comfort of an important sort: The losses that he ranks as important are largely under your control. It's

inevitable that someday you'll be parted from your relatives, your wealth, and your health, but you can lose your virtue and right views only if you yourself abandon them. If you don't abandon them, no one can take them away from you.

And your virtue and right view don't save their rewards only for the next life. The Buddha lists them as the prerequisites for right mindfulness (SN 47:16) and as qualities conducive to group harmony here and now (AN 6:12).

Given the way the Buddha states these values, it would appear that his advice in the case of war would be to find ways of stopping enemies from causing harm but without killing them. This requires exercising your imagination and discernment to find alternatives to killing—but then, if you're serious in your quest for happiness, this is what training in skillful action is for. It's not a mere matter of obeying rules. It's aimed at forcing your discernment to grow.

As for the fourth category of action—neither dark nor bright, leading to the end of action—the *Āṅguttara* discourses explain it in three different ways. In every case, though, they show that it doesn't mean abandoning conventions of right and wrong, or the categories of skillful and not. Instead, it means adopting skillful behavior in a way that transforms it to serve a higher purpose than a good rebirth. It becomes the skillfulness of achieving total freedom. This is reflected in the fact that the Buddha, when describing his own path to full awakening, said it was a quest for what is skillful (MN 36). And when he taught the path to awakening to others, he defined it as the eight right factors of the noble path, to distinguish them from eight wrong types of action (MN 117).

In fact, one of the discourses, AN 4:237, defines the category of neither-dark-nor-bright action as the noble eightfold path itself. The factors of this path are well-known—right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. What's rarely been noted, though, is that these factors include within them the Buddha's list of skillful actions: Skillful bodily actions come under right action, skillful verbal actions, under right speech, and skillful mental actions under right view and right resolve.

These factors then form the basis for the factors of right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration, and a heightened level of right view, all of which transform them to a level of skill that can lead the mind to a state of total freedom from intention. This state is described in AN 4:235's definition of neither dark-nor-bright action: the intention to abandon all actions in the present moment, whether bright, dark, or both. This intention can be fulfilled only inwardly—primarily when in meditation—and leads directly to awakening.

After awakening, you're said to be beyond both skillful and unskillful actions, but again, this doesn't mean that you don't continue to act in skillful ways. Instead, you're described "virtuous, but not made of virtue" (MN 78). In other words, your behavior is in line with the precepts, but you don't define yourself in terms of your virtue. That's one of the ways in which your mind, when awakened, is free.

This is where the Buddha's teachings on skillful and unskillful action lead. They're a necessary part of the practice for total freedom. And this is why he taught it as a categorical truth that you should develop skillful actions and abandon unskillful ones. Although he wasn't a doctrinaire absolutist, he wasn't a doctrinaire relativist, either. After all, he had seen through his awakening that some truths were beneficial to use only under certain conditions, whereas others were beneficial everywhere and always.

In particular, he had seen that the guidelines for skillful action, if you stick to them, are for the sake of your genuine happiness. As he once said, if it were impossible for people to stick to these guidelines, he wouldn't have taught them. And if following them didn't lead to long-term happiness, he wouldn't have taught them, either (AN 2:19). The message is that you have it within you to adhere to these principles through thick and thin, and that you'll be more than glad that you did.