

Leslie Booker

*Guidelines for an Ethical Life*

Week 3: "Resting in Renunciation and Skillful Speech"

December 19, 2020



Hello, dear friends, and welcome back. This is part three of our four-part series, "Guidelines for an Ethical Life," where we have been exploring and working with the five precepts through the lens of dharma, embodied wisdom, and social justice. Today, I want to emphasize justice and equality as we will be looking at the third and fourth precepts: caring for the sexuality of myself and others and skillful speech.

In my experience, there's been a lot of teachings out there amongst us Western convert Buddhist teachers around the tenants of right speech, or skillful speech, and making sure that our language is not false, caught in idle chatter, abusive, or divisive. So in our brief time together today, I'm going to be weaving those tenants so that we can see how they support and protect the precept of caring for our sexuality. And we'll keep looking at ways in which we can take a sacred pause to reflect upon and consider our impact as we move through the world and engage with others.

Let's begin with resting in renunciation and skillful speech. You might have noticed that most of the conduct rules and guidelines around sexual behavior, including the teachings offered before, during, and after the Buddha's time, are typically rooted in patriarchy, misogyny, homophobia and transphobia when it comes to who is allowed to express their sexuality, with whom they are allowed to express their sexuality, and how they are allowed to express our sexuality.

In our conversation today, I want to bring our intention in all of these precepts to the forefront, and that is to not cause harm. So we're not going to get caught up in the acts, but rather how the continuity of our practicing the other precepts lays out how to support and uphold the third. I don't think that the placement of the precept around sexual behavior should be lost on us. It's just right in the middle of the five, encouraged and influenced by the first two precepts, protecting life and cultivating generosity, and on the other side are the fourth and fifth precepts, the use of our skillful speech and taking care with intoxicants, any input that might cloud the heart and mind.

It's important for me to bring the concept of *nekkhamma* into this conversation, the Pali word for renunciation. In the past, when I thought of renunciation what popped into my head was all the things I couldn't have: all the things that I can't do, all the things I was going to deprive myself of. But then these things become the enemy and renunciation turns into this bad word; it becomes associated with a rigid asceticism completely void of joy.

But the word *nekkhamma* doesn't point to that at all. It is made up of two different words, *ne* which means "out," and *kkhamma*, which means "to go" or "come out." It's not about what you're leaving behind, but what you're entering into, which is this expansive space of what you can gain through this exploration of leaving harmful behaviors behind. So I want us to hold this third

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precept with this view: not a view of what we can't have, but what possibilities are available to us when we hold these precepts close to our hearts as we move through our lives off the cushion.

I've been inspired by Sonya Renee Taylor's life work and her book, *The Body Is Not an Apology*. In it, she lays out three aspects that I would like to adopt for this conversation. She speaks of radical honesty, radical vulnerability, and radical empathy.

I see radical honesty as a path that honors and respects who one is and what one needs in a way that honors and respects who they might be in relationship with. It considers the intentions, expectations, the level of commitment, and the reality of what's possible. And this does not mean that we need to be in a heteronormative or monogamous relationship, but that whatever arrangement we have is rooted in integrity. It's about transparency, truthfulness, and being direct about what we need, so that our partners can respond and make the best decisions for them from an informed place.

Radical honesty doesn't just live within our personal relationships. It can expand and bring up a knowledge of how deeply interconnected and intertwined our lives are, leading to tenderness and radical vulnerability. And true allyship can arise from this place of radical vulnerability.

So when we see acts of desperation like street harassment or an abuse of power manifesting as sexual misconduct through speech or actions happening within our organizations and religious institutions, we need to actively engage in protecting others.

The poet Adrienne Rich said, "Lying is done with words, and also with silence." So this shows up not only when we are protecting this third precept, but also when we are speaking truth to power. To speak up, even when it's uncomfortable, is asking us to step into radical vulnerability; it's metaphorically stepping into the another's shoes to get a hint of their pain and suffering. And sometimes we are asked or forced to give up something in this righteous act, and sometimes, we can't bear to hold on to whatever it is that keeps others in harm's way.

And this leads us to radical empathy. I was recently reading an article about a study on empathy amongst a group who have long suffered discrimination in Hungary and those who had been the perpetrators of this harm. In this study, they simply had folks walking next to each other, not speaking, but being just close enough to see the other person's feet. It reminded me of a way that I taught compassion for many years. I would have people mill around the room, walking amongst each other, and on my cue, they would pause and turn to face another person. I would offer phrases of compassion as they gazed deeply into the eyes (but sometimes down at the socks!) of the other person. It gave folks a moment to pause and to hear how this phrase of

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compassion could apply, not just to themselves, but to the human who was standing in front of them. Waking up their empathy, and possibly moving them towards compassion.

This study hypothesizes that synchrony—literally walking alongside others—unifies humans. It says that “mirrored behavior blurs boundaries between self and other in a kind of neural coupling between brains.” And with this blurred boundary between self and other, we can know clearly and unmistakably that we belong to each other.

Dear Ones, we are coming to the end of our time together again, and I hope that this teaching on the connection between how we care for our sexuality and that of others, and skillful speech, has been useful to you and has offered you a lot to reflect upon.

In the Buddha’s teachings to his son Rahula, he asked him to investigate his bodily actions before, during, and after each action. In this reflection, Rahula was to ponder if the action brought affliction to himself or the other person, would it bring a painful consequence to him or the other, or would it bring joy and peace to himself or the other.

Again, the time in between these offerings, when we move off of our cushions and into the world, is where we really get to know our practice. So I invite you to reflect upon every bodily action that you make and consider its impact before, during, and after. Not just to yourself, but how your thoughts, words, and actions might ripple out, impacting the world around you.

Next week will be the fourth and final time that we will meet together in this form. We’ll recap where we’ve been over these past four weeks and speak on the delight of living a life free of intoxicants that cloud the heart and mind. We’ll be looking at some different ways in which we are not able to see things right-sized because of the filters that have been put on through our culture, society, and social locations.

So, Dear Ones, it has been an absolute joy to be with you again, and I’m looking forward to our time together next week. Thank you for your kind attention, and I’ll see you next time.