

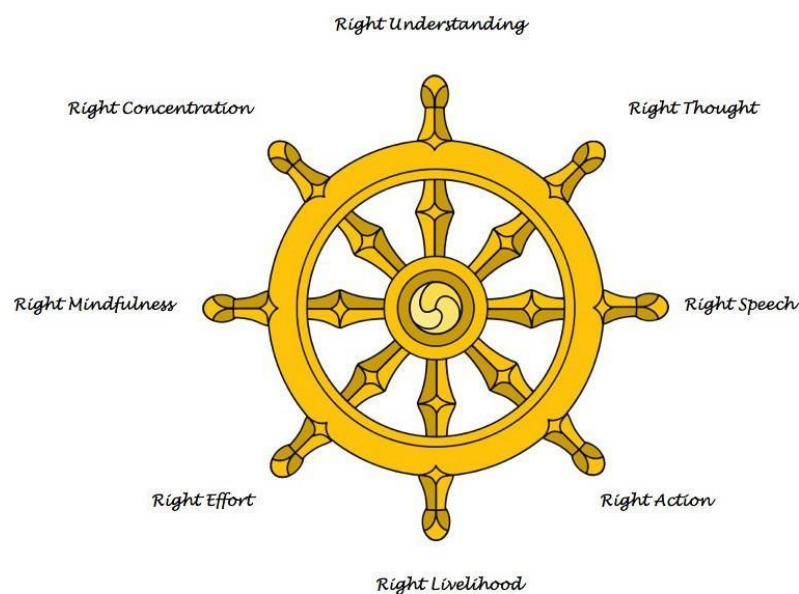
Ethics and Technology – Reflections of a Buddhist nun

By Emma Slade

At first I wondered how to make a helpful contribution to this debate as I pondered on the request to write something on 'ethics', 'technology' and 'medicine'.

I wondered if there was for me, as a Buddhist nun, a problem in separating out the idea of ethics into a distinct, separate category anyway? Whilst the word 'ethics' can be considered as a separated area of study I am tempted to see it more as the very ground in which all other disciplines and ideas thrive.

From a Buddhist point of view when supporting the development of the human being and their mind many things are talked about as developing together, in an inter-connected way rather than in separation. This is a living representation of the Buddhist philosophy of interdependence and, shown below as the eight spokes of a wheel, is it clear that overall change or movement is not possible with missing spokes! For example the eight fold path of the noble ones is often represented in this way:



In this illustration you can see the repetition of the word 'right' in front of all the qualities shown. In a sense this can be seen as a basic 'rightness' forming the very ground or the essential quality within the development of all other qualities. In some ways it could in itself mean 'ethical.'

So what might this basic quality of 'rightness' mean in the debate we have been asked to consider? What would you think if we said 'right technology' or 'right medicine?'

When 'right' is used in this way it implies a clarity of mind, un-afflicted by the negative qualities of anger, clinging or selfishness. These negative qualities are those seen to create suffering for oneself

and for others. In line with Buddhist thinking that the quality of the mind is most important as that determines the nature of the action or the words which arise from it.

Here we see a link between the emphasis of ethics and not cause suffering. As His Holiness the Dalai Lama stated in his book 'Ethics for the New Millennium' "an ethical act is one which does not harm others' experience or expectation of happiness....this points to a commonality of interest in respect to self and others."

In cultivating such an ethics we can expand this into the three pillars of Buddhist development;

1. to refrain from harm,
2. to practice doing good and
3. to train one's own mind.

It is clear that any human activity can always be viewed as an expression of this ground of ethics. Remembering it is not always so easy though (we can recall that the commonly used term of 'mindfulness' means just this – to remember what you are doing). Part of this capacity to be mindful is the capacity to know one's own mind; to be aware. This capacity is like a checking mechanism 'a watchman' as my Bhutanese Lama would describe it.

One can argue that there are circumstances which awaken this capacity for awareness and others which impede it or dull it down and in our training we consider these. However these reflections tend to centre around the development of an individual's mind and depend on building this capacity for reflection and awareness, the essential checking mechanism. This mechanism allows us to reflect on these three pillars above and check how it is going; did we follow them, deviate, do we need to regret and re-focus? This method thus relies on individual awareness and responsibility and willingness to change and learn from past experience.

It strikes me that whenever we have to place this method of awareness and the application of ethics into a less direct engagement as part of a hugely powerful structure this capacity can be lessened. It could be a version of 'out of sight, out of mind' or a 'hands off approach' on a much larger scale.

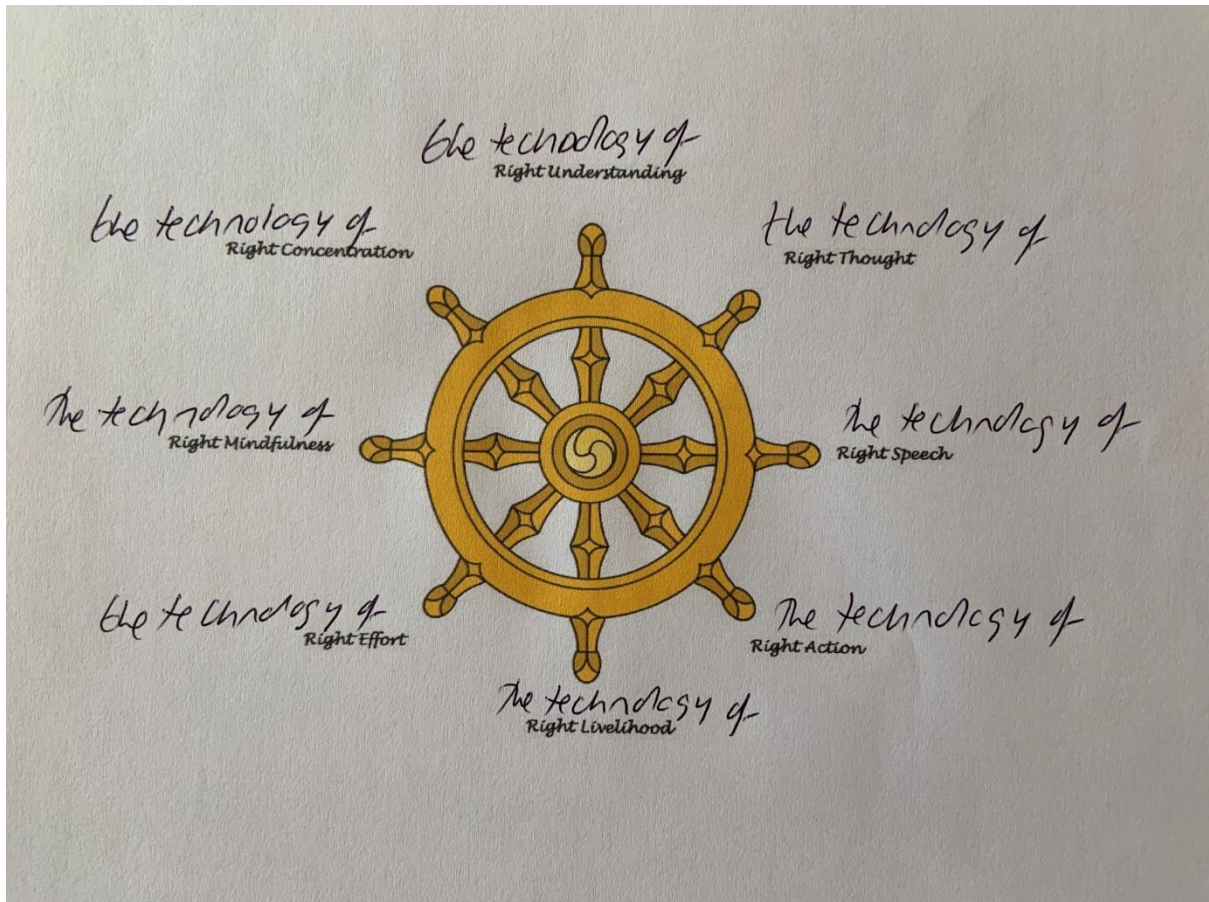
Do large technological structures help us express these ethical principles or do they risk us de-coupling from our own best self or from our stated ethical intentions? Indeed not only the intentions but the consequences of ethical or non-ethical behaviour which are freedom from the suffering of ourselves and others or the increase in suffering of ourselves and others. To be motivated to act ethically we need to be reminded or to see that our choice does make a difference.

From a Buddhist point of view basic human nature is seen as very positively; that it is inherently loving and caring but the capacity for this inherent nature to show itself in our everyday, embodied existence will depend on our capacity to not forget it and our understanding that it is - in its expression - that we accomplish our own happiness.

Here happiness is seen as originating from the positive interconnection with others in which we experience our own sense of positive meaning and purpose and which comes from the three pillars as described above. So I have to wonder how the rise of the predictive algorithms of Artificial Intelligence will help or hinder this? I presume that if ethical pillars (or constraints) are placed within the algorithms it could be hugely helpful, or a concern. Either way the shift between ethical

dilemmas and responsibility understood on an individual level -in the way Buddhist texts speak of - to a system itself which might require a mutually agreed ethical code and responsibility is significant.

You might think ah but technology can be the ultimate support for ethics. For example if we look back at the eight fold noble path we could modify it to look like this;



In some ways I have to wonder if the enabling support of technology is in fact the panacea to achieving a wonderfully ethical world driven by the wish to relieve suffering. My understanding is that the algorithms which are increasingly driving wellbeing apps are raising this possibility. If someone shows a propensity to study right mindfulness the algorithms will ensure they are offered more and more mindfulness support. Even more game changing would be the core principal of non-harming incorporated into a framework of algorithms. When we look at the world we witness again and again an ease with causing harm to others, to animals and to nature. Whilst more transparent interconnections have highlighted this in so many ways (environmental, supply chains and plastic use) how much further could it go, supported by technology.

