

Saturday, July 25, 2105

Practice of the Week - Ethics: Caring for Oneself by Caring for Others

As part of the series on the *paramis*, or Perfections of the Buddha, I suggest a practice for this week that focuses on ethical behavior. The practice involves working with one of the five Buddhist precepts for lay people, described after explaining how ethics fits into the *paramis*.

The *paramis* are qualities of the awakened heart that the Buddhist tradition say the Buddha-to-be perfected in his many lifetimes on his way to Buddhahood. These qualities are the foundations of the Buddhist spiritual path and they offer a powerful set of mind states towards which to orient. They are especially helpful as a set of practices to supplement meditation as they can be employed anywhere, anytime.

The ten qualities are: Generosity, morality, renunciation, wisdom, effort, patience, truthfulness, resolve, kindness and equanimity.

A distinctive feature of the Buddhist approach to the second *parami* of morality is that it is non-judgmental. Ethics are not cast in terms of right or wrong, or good or bad, but in terms of harm and benefit. Right and wrong are based on judgmental codes that are secondary to the true matter at hand - how our actions impact others. Such codes can actually divorce us from seeing the impact of our actions, as we are living by rules instead of being aware of our relations with others. The Buddha called beneficial actions skillful and harmful actions unskillful. Such language avoids the judgmentalism of "good and bad."

(To hear a fuller description of the flavor of Buddhist ethics, refer to the talk, "Ethics without Right and Wrong" on this page:

<http://www.truehomewithin.net/talks/>

Another distinctive aspect of Buddhist ethics is that they avoid dualism, based as they are upon the insight of interdependence. When we see clearly, we see that we are not separate selves but are deeply affected and conditioned by all those with whom we interact and all that has come before us. As Thich Naht Hanh reminds us, just as paper is made up of non-paper elements - the rain, soil particles, air and sunlight that went into the wood that became the pulp from which the paper was pressed - so, too, are selves made up of non-self elements. On the mental level, almost everything we have learned and been influenced by came from outside of us. On the physical level, our bodies come from outside of us, made of the food we eat and the air we breathe. At what point does the food which is now being digested in your belly - which is none other than the entire universe converted into plant or animal flesh - become a separate you?

Based on this understanding of inter-being, as Thich Naht Hanh calls it, we recognize that taking care of others is a way of taking care of ourselves. Coupling this perspective with the non-judgmental attitude of Buddhist morality, acting ethically can be a joyful act of self-care, rather than some guilt-ridden obedience to a set of rules.

The Five Precepts

When we see clearly the truth of things our hearts are loving and happy and we would not dream of harming others. We would only want to benefit. But since we are not always at our best, we need ethical reminders. The precepts serve this purpose. They are not moralistic rules or commandments, but prompts that wake us up to our behavior. The five precepts for laypeople are:

1. I undertake the training to refrain from killing any living being.
2. I undertake the training to refrain from stealing or taking what is not given.
3. I undertake the training to refrain from harming with sexuality.
4. I undertake the training to refrain from speaking what is not true.
5. I undertake the training to refrain from using alcohol or drugs that cause carelessness.

The use of the word "trainings" emphasize that these are practices, practices that make us more mindful.

Mindfulness is our real ally in acting ethically. For instance, if we want to take something that is not given, we can refrain from the action by becoming mindful of the mind state the action is arising from - very likely desire. Acting on the desire is an attempt to get rid of the emotion. The invitation of the precepts is that mindfulness itself can solve the situation. We don't need to get rid of desire, but rather we can handle it by being mindful of it. If we are attentive and non-reactive enough, the

mind state, like all things, will express its impermanence, and dissipate over time. We have resolved the desire without needing to act it out.

A key point is that the more that mindfulness rather than deprivation informs our restraint, the more gladdening it is to follow the precepts. The precepts, then, can be held in this spirit: Refraining from an action in order to increase mindfulness for the benefit of oneself and others.

THE PRACTICE: I suggest you take one of the precepts and work with it deeply. For instance, the second precept of taking what is not given can be applied to include not just the outright stealing of a material good, but not invading someone's privacy, reducing our impacts on the environment, biking safely around pedestrians, etc. Refer to the above to make your refraining from the action an act of increased consciousness rather than a deprivation or yet another way to feel bad about yourself.

The precepts offer a protection to others. We can rejoice in this. They are also inner protections, protections from our own remorse. In the heat of a difficult emotion, we may strike out with an unskillful act and later regret the harm our actions caused. Following the precepts protect us against this pain.

May you approach the precepts with the true spirit under them: Loving yourself and others. These ethical guidelines are essentially ways of expressing our care for and connectedness with others. When we take care of others we take care of ourselves.

Good luck!