

## Virtue



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For those who missed this talk, Jim gave one on the same subject at IMC last week. You can listen to it here:

[http://www.audiodharma.org/mp3files/2009-06-25\\_JimPodolske\\_ParamisVirtue\\_3of10.mp3](http://www.audiodharma.org/mp3files/2009-06-25_JimPodolske_ParamisVirtue_3of10.mp3)

### ***The Ten Perfections***

Virtue is one the Ten Perfections. These perfections (*parami*) are qualities of the mind and heart which perfect the virtues, can be developed, and lead to purification of karma and freedom from suffering. These virtues are:

1. *Dana*, or generosity, is the virtue of giving unconditionally, without seeking something in return. This is learning how to let go, sharing with others, and seeing the joy this gives. In this country, we are often taught that to be happy, one must acquire things. Dana is the antithesis of this practice of acquisition: happiness comes from giving rather than acquiring.
2. *Sila* is virtue, ethics, morality, or proper conduct. Virtue is an intentional action of ethical behavior. This is about developing the way we interact with other. (We'll discuss this more later.)
3. *Nekkhamma*, or renunciation, is giving up the world, and leading a life free of lust, craving, and desire. What is it we really need in order to live? What are doing to complicate our lives in a way that doesn't really serve us?
4. *Panna* is wisdom, insight, or understanding. This is developing an ability to really see how things work in the world. When I do this, what happens? This is discerning the conditions that lead to certain other conditions.
5. *Viriya* is diligence or effort. Practice takes effort. Although meditating doesn't seem like it should be much work, seeing into things takes effort. It doesn't just happen because we sit.
6. *Kanti* is patience, or being able to stay present, even when things are not the way we want them to be.
7. *Sacca* is truthfulness or honesty. This is developing a way not only to be truthful with others, but also to be truthful with ourselves. What is it that's really going on here, versus what it is that we wish were going on.
8. *Adhitthana*, or determination. In mediation practice, we can see this as we continue to return. We may be sitting, and suddenly find ourselves thinking about dinner. We come back to sitting, and let go of the thought for dinner. No matter what, we keep coming back.

9. *Metta*, or loving-kindness. This is developing an attitude towards others of kindness and acceptance. This can often be very hard.
10. *Upekkha*, or equanimity, develops an inner stability. There are often forces in our lives which tend to knock us about: pleasure, pain, gain loss, praise, blame, etc.

The talk this week is on *sila*, or ethical behavior.

### ***Insights that lead us to sila***

There are several insights that put us on the path to ethical behavior. First, we notice that we are suffering, that we are not satisfied with our lives. Then we have enough wisdom to investigate: why are we suffering? What is suffering? When does it happen? As we investigate our suffering, we discover that there is a cause for our suffering, it is not random – we *want*. We want more of the things we like, we want things we cannot have or cannot keep. We want things to be the way we want them, and no other way. We realize that as we stop the *wanting*, if we let go of clinging, our suffering dissipates. But how do we stop the wanting? The final insight is that the proper combination of wisdom, ethical behavior, and concentration can take us to freedom.

These insights are known as the **Four Noble Truths**:

1. Suffering occurs
2. The cause of suffering is craving
3. The possibility for ending suffering exists
4. The cessation of suffering can be attained through the Noble Eightfold path.

The **Noble Eightfold Path** is a combination of wisdom, ethical conduct, and concentration:

#### **Wisdom (*Panna*)**

1. Right understanding
2. Right thinking

#### **Ethical Conduct (*Sila*)**

3. Right speech
4. Right action
5. Right livelihood

#### **Concentration (*Samadhi*)**

6. Right effort
7. Right mindfulness
8. Right collectedness

Right understanding, or right view, is the application of the wisdom of the Four Noble Truths in how we look at things. Right thinking is the intention of harmlessness. Ending our own suffering at the expense of the suffering of others is not sustainable.

The three components of the Eightfold Noble Path which focus on ethical conduct, are about the way we relate to people around us. The way we treat others has an effect on the way we are. We cannot escape the consequences of our action.

For example, Right Speech, which is usually thought of in terms of honesty, includes intention. Telling the truth with the intention of harming others or causing disruption is not right speech. If you beat someone over the head with truth in order to make yourself look good, or to prove that you are better or smarter, this is not right speech. Right speech is useful, timely, and kind. It can be forceful, as long as the intention is not to abuse or harm. Slander and gossip are not right speech: they do not come from good intentions. Idle chatter is not useful – its underlying intention may be to distract or cover up some other issue. Idle chatter may represent discomfort with silence, but it does not accomplish anything useful in itself.

Right livelihood, or how we make our living, is part of ethical conduct. The Buddha did not specify which livelihoods are “okay”, but he did discuss some which are not. Work which involves dishonesty, or the selling of weapons or poisons, the trading of human beings, is not right livelihood. Jim felt blessed that he has been able to work as a scientist for 40 years, an occupation where honest and accuracy in describing experience is prized and rewarded. This doesn’t mean that scientists can’t be deluded, or engage in work that is not right livelihood, but there is a strong support for truth in science.

The training guides for helping us develop Right Action and ethical conduct are the Precepts. Different levels of training have a different number of precepts to follow. Monastics take a vow to follow hundreds of precepts, while the laity only have five:

1. For the purpose of training, I refrain from taking life.
2. For the purpose of training, I refrain from taking what is not freely given.
3. For the purpose of training, I refrain from sexual misconduct.
4. For the purpose of training, I refrain from false speech.
5. For the purpose of training, I refrain from intoxication that causes heedlessness.

The precepts are worded as actions to abstain from. It may seem strange to explain basic ethical behavior in terms of negatives, but, in his talk on *Going for Refuge and Taking the Precepts* (<http://www.accesstosight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/wheel282.html>), Bhikkhu Bodhi tells us:

*First, in order to develop the positive virtues we have to begin by abstaining from the negative qualities opposed to them. The growth of the positive virtues will only be stunted or deformed as long as the defilements are allowed to reign unchecked. We cannot cultivate compassion while at the same time indulging in killing, or cultivate honesty while stealing and cheating. At the start we have to abandon the unwholesome through the aspect of avoidance. Only when we have secured a foundation in avoiding the unwholesome can we expect to succeed in cultivating the factors of positive performance. The process of purifying virtue can be compared to growing a flower garden on a plot of uncultivated land. We don't begin by planting the seeds in expectation of a bountiful yield. We have to start with the duller work of weeding out the garden and preparing the beds. Only after we have uprooted the weeds and nourished the soil can we plant the seeds in the confidence that the flowers will grow healthily.*

The precepts are training guides, not commandments. The more you follow them, the greater your benefit. Let’s examine these in more detail.

***For the purpose of training, I refrain from taking life.***

This precept is much easier to follow in a retreat than it is in everyday life. At a retreat, the food is vegetarian, so nothing has to be killed to feed us. Screens keep bugs out, but if one does get in, bug traps are provided so that insects can be gently escorted outside.

To refrain from killing in daily life is a tall order. As a homeowner, Jim has had termite infestations, spiders, rats, and even a swarm of 50,000 Italian Honey Bees in his spa. The termites and rats, he had exterminated. After the rats were exterminated, he put protective coverings over the entrances to the house, so he would not have to exterminate again.

The bees were a problem. For \$100, he could have them exterminated. However, for five hundred more he could have them moved. Jim was fortunate to be able to afford to relocate the bees. He contracted with Mr. Bee to lure the bees away from the spa and set up an alternate hive over several weeks. When the queen was finally lured out, Mr. Bee packed up the hive, and took it to Central Valley, where the bees were able to live useful and productive lives in the agriculture business.

At Spirit Rock, some exterminators were preparing to kill a nest of wasps that had taken up residence in one of the retreat buildings. Hearing about this activity, one of the teachers intervened on behalf of the wasps, and chased the exterminators off the property. Now, at retreats, students get an extra special layer of teaching as they do walking meditation towards the window where the wasps made their nest. Approaching... will I get stung? Will it hurt? Can I duck or shoo them away? Turning around and walking away for another circuit, ahhh... the relief of escaping... until walking takes them back towards the window for another cycle...

The choices are not always easy, for example, would you let termites eat your house for the sake of not killing? An important principle in these decisions is to avoid acts which reflect delight in killing. Is it really necessary to stomp a spider or a cricket? Refraining from killing helps us grow compassion.

***For the purpose of training, I refrain from taking what is not freely given.***

This is not just about burglary or grand theft auto. At work, if you make personal calls or answer personal emails, are you taking something not freely given? Were you freely given the time, the computer, and network access to do web surf or write personal emails?

What if you download pirated music from the Internet? Did the artists freely give you the right to take their music? How about copying a DVD of a movie you like? It doesn't hurt the original, you did the copying and used your own blank DVD... is that taking something that was not freely given?

Restraining from taking what is not given develops the qualities of honesty and contentment with what we have.

***For the purpose of training, I refrain from sexual misconduct.***

The human race probably owes much of its continued existence to the sex drive. Sex can be pleasurable and establish a connection with another person. But if not done wisely, sex can cause jealousy, despair, violence, and some pretty unwise behavior. Look at that governor from South Carolina – his running off to Argentina to be with his mistress has caused damage in many places.

The explicit definition of sexual misconduct may change over time or be different for other cultures. In the Sixties, "free love" endorsed an "anything goes" attitude. At other times, sex outside of marriage was considered misconduct. The principle of harmlessness is a good decision tool here, in defining what misconduct is. (Darlene Cohen gives a talk on this subject at [http://www.darlenecohen.net/lectures/DarleneCohen\\_zen\\_practice\\_and\\_sex\\_Gay\\_Buddhists\\_talk.mp3](http://www.darlenecohen.net/lectures/DarleneCohen_zen_practice_and_sex_Gay_Buddhists_talk.mp3)).

Will harm come to any person, including yourself, if you engage in this behavior? Rape and child molestation, for example, are harmful behaviors. Adultery can harm all parties involved. Sex which takes what is not freely given is harmful. Other harm can come from hiding behavior that may shame one of the parties, or cause loss of reputation. An activity that causes regret is misconduct. Misgivings before, during, or after sex indicate misconduct.

The quality that emerges by abstaining from sexual misconduct is fidelity.

***For the purpose of training, I refrain from false speech.***

False speech is speech that is not Right Speech. Again, this is not just lying, but speech (or absence of speech) which causes harm. Insults, abusive language, creating false impressions, slander, idle chatter, gossip, divisive or disruptive speech are all false speech. The intention behind the words defines whether speech is false or right.

The quality that emerges with abstaining from false speech is honesty.

***For the purpose of training, I refrain from intoxication that causes heedlessness.***

This one refers to drugs or alcohol that intoxicate the body or mind. This does not necessarily mean that everyone has to abstain from drinking even a single glass of wine. Intention and heedlessness are critical factors. If you become impaired or lose your inhibitions with a single glass of wine, then abstinence is a better path. If you can't tell when you are impaired, and you think you're fine when you are not, abstain. If you need alcohol or drugs to be happy, stay away. If happiness is always just one more drink than what you've had, you may want to review your conduct in this area.

How many stories about outrageous and crazy behavior you engaged in once, begin with "Remember that time when we got really drunk and..."? When comparing notes with the other participants of wild and crazy times, did you ever notice that no one remembers them the same way?

The challenge now is to see how the precepts work in our lives. Which seem relatively easy and which ones are a real challenge? You may want to talk to other members of the sangha about these issues, as a way of support. You may also want to read <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/wheel282.html> which might be especially helpful).