

Sila - Virtue, Ethics, Morality

By David Cohn

Virtue as a Gift

The Buddha describes Virtue as a Gift, a gift to others and to ourselves. Others can feel safe with us, if we are dedicated to the precepts. They know we will not lie to them, we will not talk about them behind their backs, we are not interested in the sexual attention of their spouse or partner, we will not put them down to elevate our standing in the eyes of others, we will not harm them in any way. What a gift we are to others. Our commitment to virtue affords security, trust, well being, and happiness to them, the greatest gifts we can give them.

And it is a gift to us as well. Try saying to yourself, "I do not lie." Or, "I will not harm anyone today." How does that feel? Remember, this is for our own benefit, so we don't feel the painful isolation of sanctimoniousness about that, or superiority---just, in our relatedness to others, our conscience is clean, whole, and free of the stains of harmful behavior. We have done nothing wrong, free from worry and regret. "I will not take what is not given to me, perhaps even including interrupting others in a conversation so I can have the attention."

The Buddha describes five gifts of virtue

- 1) We will not experience remorse and regret, but feel confidence in ourselves instead.
- 2) Others look on us with trust and confidence, and will praise us. (Think about how you feel when you are with someone who is benevolent and trustworthy, how you can relax and feel valued and happy with him / her.)
- 3) We will have confidence when going into an assembly of others, not fear. (Instead of going into a social situation, anxious and wondering what kind of recognition or lack of it you will receive, going into that room dwelling in your good intention to simply be kind to whomever you meet, fearless, free and happy Not looking around for a better conversation for me. The results of your interactions are not important. Abiding in your good values are important, keeping you safe and peaceful, regardless of the social conditions and outcome.)
- 4) As we approach death and as we die we are not confused. (All issues are settled, we are not in conflict.)
- 5) Maybe not relevant to us: after death we enter into realms of well being.

Virtue as Protection

There is a story about a Chinese master, Hsu Yun, who died in 1959 at the age of 120. He was on a bus that was besieged by robbers. When they got to him at the

back of the bus, they recognized his goodness and venerability, and said they would take nothing from him, they would not harm him. He said, if that is the case, you should give everything back to the rest of the passengers. They gave back everything they had taken to all the passengers and peacefully left the bus. Hsu Yun's great virtue protected everyone on the bus, including the robbers. Wouldn't it be nice to be with Hsu Yun? We can work on being Hsu Yun, in our own way. We are all a work in progress, with our goodness beckoning to us.

Virtue deepens our own freedom

Virtue is most useful to us if it is not superficial, but we let it settle into our hearts, our intentions, into our bones. Then it can really strengthen us and deepen our own freedom. If our non harming and generosity are not coming from a habit or a cultural conformity "to be nice," but come from a sensitivity to and respect for others, for our interrelatedness, a deeper sense of our own goodness is cultivated and develops. We can tenderly observe, even a pig wants to live, just like us, and, in its own way, to be happy. In many ways they are wonderful beings, and superior to us--easily content, don't need much, just some mud and slop, and seem to be happy even in inclement conditions. Bugs are amazing in their resourcefulness and seeming courage and selflessness. All sentience is worthy of our deep respect, and especially ourselves, our own desire for happiness and well being.

Virtue inclines the mind toward the wholesome

There has been a lot written and said lately about neuroplasticity. Virtuous speech and action rewire our minds. And the deeper our intention, the stronger the reconditioning. A mind left to its own conditions may easily turn to obsessions, addictions, distractions, fear, seeking pleasure and power. Our default mode can involve judgement, blame, dwelling on what has been done to us, our own inadequacies, frustrated wanting. When we arouse our awareness of mutuality with all beings, we relate to this truth with a natural compassion and kindness. Our narrow and self destructive conditioned wants and fears dwindle and yield to the deeper pleasures of love, generosity, sharing, respect, contentment and friendship. Values that promote clinging dwindle and yield to values that fill our good hearts with ease and well being. We can enjoy what is truly ours, and not taken--a bigger happiness than the small brief happinesses based on self centeredness and deluded conditionings.

Our good speech and actions nourish and deepen our meditation. A mind that is free of corrosive thoughts of regret, fear and shame can relax our mind so that we can settle more easily into quiet, peace, and concentration.

Virtue stabilizes the mind

As we develop this strength we don't feel so needy. We enjoy what is truly ours, the bigger happiness connected to the heart. With each act of generosity, respect, and kindness our heart is fulfilled, and we find meaning in freedom, rather than clinging. Maybe not complete freedom, but more freedom is sensed. (The stress in striving for freedom needs to be sensed and released as well.) It is a useful tool to

stabilize the mind through reflection on our goodness. This reflection can open us toward samadhi, and the unity and satisfaction felt in samadhi will lead us toward more virtue in our daily lives.

Practice 1

Take some time, perhaps in the beginning of your meditation or before bed, to reflect on some good deeds you have done or kind words you have said, or harmful words or actions you have refrained from, recently or in the past. Write three of these reflections in a journal before bed i.e. three virtuous actions I have done today. Notice the impact this practice has on your mind and/or your sleep.

Practice 2

When talking with someone, reflect, "I will not harm you." How does that feel? Other intentions around speech could be around, "I will not take from you by interrupting you, I will not take up more than my share of conversational space, I will not build myself up to seem superior, or gossip about others. I will withdraw from using harsh speech and arguing."