

Friday, December 7th, 2012

Practice of the Week: Ethics without Right and Wrong

Here is the daily life practice I suggest for this week. It involves working with one of the five Buddhist precepts for lay people. I offer, first, some perspective on Buddhist ethics, with the practice suggestion at the bottom.

Ethical action in Buddhism is cast not in terms of right/wrong or good/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 bearing 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."

The precepts are guidelines for practice, not rules or commandments, and they are designed to wake us up to our behavior. They are essentially mindfulness prompts that remind us when we are acting mindlessly and unskillfully. The precepts offer a protection to others. We can rejoice in the gift of protection that we give others if we are following the precepts. 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. Lastly, the precepts remind us how we would act if we were at our best. At times when our hearts are clear, open, loving and happy, we wouldn't dream of harming others. We would only want to benefit. When we are not at our best, the precepts help us "Fake it until we make it."

Here are the five precepts:

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, while without needing to act it out.

It is important to emphasize the mindfulness component of refraining from harm. The more we emphasize mindfulness when restraining ourselves, rather than deprivation or stricture, the more gladdening it is to follow the precepts. The precepts can be held then in this spirit: Refraining from an action in order to increase mindfulness.

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 personal space or 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.

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.

Good luck!