

2. Decency

March 9, 2017

“What have I always believed? That on the whole, and by and large, if a man lived properly, not according to what any priests said, but according to what seemed decent and honest inside, then it would, at the end, more or less, turn out all right.”

— [Terry Pratchett, *Small Gods*](#)

Tonight we begin our exploration of the second of The 10 Most Excellent Practices. It is another of those universal values, "not derived from religion, but preceding it." (Christopher Hitchens). It is even a basic belief on *Discworld!* And guess where we're going to start? In the dictionary of course. As usual, I don't like the common translations for the sanskrit word *sila*, but I'm having a hard time coming up with another word that fits. Usually *sila* is translated as "morality" or "virtue." These words have come to mean many things to many people, but rarely do they mean *sila*.

Before it was used in the context of Buddhist teaching, the Sanskrit word meant simply "nature, character, habit, or behavior." Since its adoption into Buddhist teaching, it has evolved to mean "*good* nature, *good* character, *good* habit, or *good* behavior." In fact, I am told by a native speaker that in India, the word *sila* is a common word which still implies "good behavior." Which is fine, so long as it is perfectly clear what is meant by "good." We'll get to that in a minute.

First, let's look at the characteristics that are included in this definition. According to Merriam Webster, *nature* refers to "the inherent character or basic constitution of a person or thing; essence." *Character* is "Personality, temperament, mentality." *Habit*, (as many of us sadly know) is "a behavior pattern acquired by frequent repetition ... an acquired mode of behavior that has become nearly or completely involuntary." And behavior I think doesn't need detailed elucidation. So what we have here is a single word that means our intrinsic essence, our general personality, our acquired involuntary behaviors, and our actions in the world. That's about all there is to *us*, isn't it? Everything that we might use to define or describe who we are is *sila*. It's the activity of self-aware existence.

Next, we need to define what is meant by *good*. Well, you can guess for a start that it has nothing to do with some checklist of do's and don'ts. It has to do with what everything in this practice eventually comes down to: reducing suffering or increasing fulfillment for ourselves and others. *Sila* in essence means Existing In a Way that Reduces Suffering and Increases Benefit for Ourselves and the World. See why I'm having trouble coming up with a simple english translation?

I've read a lot of different attempts at putting this into sensical words. *Sila* is "a commitment to harmony." "A wholehearted commitment to what is wholesome." "Internal, aware, and intentional behavior." "Making non-abuse a way of life." The description I like best, though, is from Aristotle, who was not trying to define an Indian noun, but was rather laying out his own ethical principles. He described "developing one's character by cultivation of wholesome inclinations and dispositions which conduce to the goal of human flourishing."

The only word I can think of that comes close to fitting for me is Decency. Decent character and conduct.

Good. So now we know that the second Most Excellent Practice is Decent Beingness. That's a pretty tall order. Do we have any specific guidelines for how we might cultivate such an existence? Well, as a matter of fact, we do. First of all, the Buddha is said to have praised these as the two greatest virtues: self-respect and the regard for consequences. Why would these be so important? Because if you have self-respect, you will not be inclined to cause harm to others, and if you have regard for consequences of your actions, you will be more able to assess whether your actions are likely to cause harm. These two characteristics will pave the way for spontaneous Decency. We can establish our cultivation of Decency by cultivating self-respect and learning to consider the consequences of our conduct.

Secondly, it will help to note that, as with Generosity, Decency includes both internal and external elements. There is a mutually dependent relationship between your decent character, and your decent behavior. And as with Generosity, the action fosters the mind state, and the mind state leads to the action, on and on. So we know that one way to develop internal decency is to practice external decency. And this really works.

[story of Adrian and chivalry (he pretended to be a knight until it became second nature to act like one)]

It's a sort of Fake it 'til you Make it thing, only you're not really faking anything. You are making a conscious decision to act in a way that does not harm, regardless of what you feel like doing.

If you want more detailed guidelines, the practice of Decency can be broken down into two aspects of action: avoidance (*varitta*) and performance (*caritta*). Avoidance Decency refers to refraining from activities that cause harm, specifically, the list that makes up what is known as the Five Precepts:

1. Refraining from killing.
2. Refraining from taking what is not freely given.
3. Refraining from sexual misconduct.

4. Refraining from unskillful speech.
5. Refraining from abuse of substances which cloud the mind.

Performance Decency means actively *doing* things which bring benefit. Three areas of action are listed in the Eightfold Path:

1. Exercise decent speech.
2. Engage in decent action.
3. Embrace decent livelihood.

Remember, though, that these are guidelines, not lists of rules. Just as with Generosity, it is up to you to determine what is appropriate in any given situation. What is appropriate for you at a particular time might be inappropriate at another time, or for a different person. You must assess your speech and actions at every turn. And that means being aware of what's going on in any given situation. Learn to be mindful all the time. Be present in every situation so that you can make wise decisions about what the decent thing to say or do is. Funny how everything I talk about seems to boil down to the same thing: *Be mindful and do no harm.*

It can be helpful to have lists and definitions and guidelines. It can be helpful to consider the details and scope of our own intentions. But the bottom line always comes down to this: ask yourself if what you are about to say or do leads to more suffering or less? Does it bring benefit or deny it? Only you can make that assessment. The more you practice, the better you get at it. That's why these are called Practices.

Let me close by quoting a conversation recounted in Pali Canon about the rewards of Decency, or wholesome conduct, as it is translated here.

"Ananda asked the Buddha, "What, O Venerable One, is the result and blessing of wholesome conduct?" The Buddha answered, "Freedom from remorse, Ananda."

"And what is the result of freedom from remorse?" "Joy."

"And the result of joy?" "Rapture. And of rapture, tranquility. And of tranquility, happiness. And of happiness, concentration. And of concentration, knowledge and vision according to reality. And of knowledge and vision according to reality, turning away and detachment."

"And what, O Venerable One, is the result of of turning away and detachment?"

"Liberation, Ananda."

Liberation. The final result of Decency. Seems like it might be worth the effort.

The 10 Most Excellent Practices for Enduring the Flood and Reaching the Other Shore

Decency Exercises

This week, try to notice when other people do something that strikes you as decent. It could be in person, or someone on the news, or even in a movie. When you get that feeling that someone did something decent/committed to harmony/wholesome/non-abusive, pause for a moment and:

1) *Notice that feeling.*

Is there a physical sensation or an emotional response (something more than just a cognitive acknowledgement of a decent action)? Notice what that feels like and enjoy it. As you become more sensitive to this feeling, you will see more and more decency in the world, and you will also be more subconsciously motivated to act decently.

2) *Ask yourself why this particular action is decent.*

Does it reduce suffering? For whom, and how?

Does it bring benefit or fulfillment? Again, to whom, and how?

Is it avoiding a harmful act that would have been easier to take than to avoid?

Get to know what's behind this intrinsically understood concept. That can help at times when you are unsure of what the decent thing to do it.