**The Benefits Of Virtue**

Virtue is a core principle of all the world’s spiritual institutions. The word conveys morality, integrity, quality and utility. The Buddhist term for virtue is sila, (pronounced sheelah), manifested in speech, behavior and lifestyle. Here is the rendering provided by Wikipedia regarding virtue, found in the Sigalovada Sutta:

“The Sigalovada Sutta takes place when Lord Buddha encountered a youth called Sigala in his morning stroll. The young man, in drenched attire, prostrated and worshipped the four compass direction (East, South, West and North), plus the Earth (Down) and the Sky (Up). When asked by Lord Buddha why he did so, the youth Sigala replied that he had been told by his late father to do so and he thought that it was right to uphold his father's wishes. Lord Buddha then, based on Sigala's point of view, taught him on how a noble one (Pali: *ariya*) should worship the Six directions.

**Avoid evil ways**

The Buddha first describes fourteen evil ways that should be avoided by a householder. The Buddha enumerates these evil ways to be avoided as:

* the four defilements of action:
1. taking life (*panatipato*)
2. stealing (*adinnadanam*)
3. sexual misconduct (*kamesu micchacaro*)[[9]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sigalovada_Sutta#cite_note-9)
4. lying (*musavado*)
* the four causes of evil action:
1. desire (*chanda*)
2. hate (*dosa*)
3. ignorance (*moha*)
4. fear (*bhaya*)
* the six ways of squandering wealth:
1. indulging in intoxicants
2. wandering the streets at inappropriate times
3. frequenting public spectacle
4. compulsive gambling
5. malevolent companionship
6. habitual idleness

**Choose true friends**

The Buddha then elaborated on the importance of having and being a true friend, as he described what true friends are; and what true friends are not; and, how true friends will aid in attaining a blissful life.

**Protect close relationships**

Finally, returning to the topic of the six directions, the Buddha described the Four Compass Direction as : parents (East), teachers (South), wife (West), and friends and colleagues (North), and the two vertical directions as: ascetics and Brahmins (Up) and the Servants (Down). He elaborated on how to respect and support them, and how in turn the Six will return the kindness and support.

The householder's commitments and the reciprocal acts of those he honors, as identified by the Buddha, are represented below in accordance with the four directions on the horizontal plane (east, south, west and north):

|  |
| --- |
| **EastPARENTS** |
| ***commitments*** | ***reciprocal acts*** |
| Support themfulfill their dutieshonor traditionsdeserve inheritancehonor their passing | restrain from evilnurture goodnessteach skillsarrange marriageprovide inheritance |

|  |
| --- |
| **WestWIFE** |
| ***commitments*** | ***reciprocal acts*** |
| honor herrespect herfidelityshare authorityprovide gifts | organize dutieshospitalityfidelitywise budgetingskillfulness |

|  |
| --- |
| **NorthFRIENDS** |
| ***commitments*** | ***reciprocal acts*** |
| generositykind wordshelpfulnessimpartialityintegrity | supportivenessprotect your wealthprovide shelterloyaltyhonor your family |

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |

|  |
| --- |
| **SouthTEACHERS** |
| ***commitments*** | ***reciprocal acts*** |
| rise to greet themattend to themeager receptivityserve themmaster their teaching | thoroughly instructensure comprehensionprovide well-roundednessprovide referralsensure safety |

To the left are shown the householder's commitments to and the reciprocal acts of employees and servants (representing the nadir, below the practitioner's body).

To the right are shown the householder's commitments to and the reciprocal acts of religious guides (representing the zenith, above the practitioner's body).

|  |
| --- |
| **NadirWORKERS** |
| ***commitments*** | ***reciprocal acts*** |
| apt workjust wageshealth careperksleave time | rise earlystay lateno stealingwork wellallegiance |

|  |
| --- |
| **ZenithASCETICS** |
| ***commitments*** | ***reciprocal acts*** |
| loving actsloving speechloving thoughtshospitalitymaterial support | restrain from evilnurture goodnesslovingkindnessenlightenclarifyteach goodness |

The cultivation of virtue is a core practice for awakening. The perfection of this practice is represented as a Parami. It represents an essential element of the Noble Eightfold Path, manifesting as Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood. These three characteristics are qualified through Right Intention, which represents one half of Wisdom. The word “Right” has a quality of self-righteousness; I believe the traditional meaning of this term has to do with “The right tool for the task”. I prefer to use the word “Wholesome”, or “Benevolent” instead, as this conveys a more accurate and useful understanding of intention. In the classical sense, one’s speech, behavior and daily living routines would be influenced by the cultivation of metta, (lovingkindness) and all the subsidiary qualities associated with metta: karuna (compassion), mudita (empathetic joy), and upekkha (equanimity). This can be represented graphically:

**WISDOM**

WHOLESOME UNDERSTANDING/**WHOLESOME INTENTION**

METTA, KARUNA, MUDITA, UPEKKHA

**VIRTUE**

WHOLESOME SPEECH, ACTION, LIFESTYLE

The Buddhist understanding of virtue emerges from what are called “the three characteristics”:

*anicca*-impermanence, the transient nature of experience.

*anatta*-the absence of a separable, enduring self.

*dukkha*-distress and confusion, the result of craving and clinging to the notion of an autonomous, “in control” self.

Anatta is closely associated with *sunnata,* voidness, the realization of interdependence. Interdependence recognizes the ultimate inseparability of the universe, that is, the mutually influential functions of all reality, including subjective experience. Because of this subjective, mutually influential complexity, virtuous action furthers the harmony of life.

Ajahn Buddhadassa, a well-respected Thai master, has this to say about anatta/sunnata and virtue:

All Virtue In Voidness

 To put it simply, in a moment of voidness, all the virtues are present. There is perfect mindfulness and self-awareness (sati-sampajanna); perfect sense of shame about doing evil (hiri), perfect fear of doing evil (otappa), perfect patience and endurance (khanti), perfect gentleness (soracca), perfect gratitude (katannu-katavedi), and perfect honesty (sacca). And, in voidness, there is the knowledge and vision according to reality (yathabutha-nanadassana) that is the cause for the fruition of the path and the attainment of nibbana.

….. Nowadays there seem to be many callous people who have no sense of fear or shame with regard to doing evil. Being that way, they are able to do improper things and insist on doing them continually. Even when they see that their actions will create disaster for the whole world, they still persist, and so the world is being destroyed because it lacks even this small virtue.

 Or, we may take an even humbler virtue, that of gratitude (katannu-katavedi). With just this one virtue, the world would be at peace. We must recognize that every person in the world is the benefactor of everyone else. Never mind people, even cats and dogs are benefactors of humanity, even sparrows are. If we are aware of our debt of gratitude to these things, we will be unable to act in any way that harms or oppresses them. With the power of this single virtue of gratitude we can help the world.

 It follows that those things that take the name of virtue, if they are real virtues, have an identical nature: every one of them has the power to help the world. But if virtues are false, they become obstructive, a disordered mass of contradictions. When there is true virtue—one that is void of “I” or “mine”—all of the Dhammas and all of the Buddhas can be found in it. From “Heartwood Of The Bodhi Tree”, pgs. 20-21.

As mentioned above, virtue has a central place and function in all the world’s spiritual traditions. What value does virtue have in current secular life? I have some thoughts about this. At one point in human history, language emerged. We don’t know how or when this capacity first emerged in humanity, but we do know that there is a process called epigenesis. It is understood that the DNA spiral contains many crosslinks; some are active at birth, while others are sensitive to environmental stimuli, which either activate or deactivate the functions of the crosslinks. It seems that some of these activated or deactivated crosslinks are passed on to the next generation.

I believe that the social conscience we call virtue is one of these evolutionary developments, and likely emerged in harmony with speech, as well as the evolutionary emergence of empathy. The capacity for speech is highly developed in contemporary human culture. It would seem that virtue is not as well developed. I believe that spiritual practices are also evolutionary, and contain within them a cultural reinforcement for kindness, compassion, generosity and tolerance.

Mindfulness meditation cultivates virtue, combined with clear awareness, resulting in wisdom, as expressed in the Noble Eightfold Path. The more individuals in any cultural circumstance, religious or secular, train the mind to manifest clear awareness and benevolent intention, the more strongly virtue will become as prevalent as human speech.