RIGHT SPEECH AND THE SELFING STORY

A foundational concept within Buddhist doctrine is *sila* (see-lah), which is translated as *virtue* or *morality.* Sila is an extension of *samma sankappa* (sah-mah-sahn-kah-pah), *Right Intention*, part of the Noble Eightfold Path. Virtue shapes a person’s thoughts and actions through the benevolent intentions that we know as kindness, compassion, generosity and equanimity—these qualities of character are found in all the religions of the world. What sets Buddhism apart from the other religions is the strong emphasis on developing the internal discipline through dedicated meditative training that increases the likelihood that a person can actually manifest virtue as a character trait. The importance of virtue is evidenced by the prominence of Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood , three of the elements of the Noble Eightfold Path.

Virtue often has been described in religious or humanistic ways, either authorized and required by a Higher Power, or, with humanism, as a prosocial quality that is culturally desirable. I want to describe the value of virtue in the context of the Buddhist principle of *sunnata* (soon-yah-tah), which is translated as *emptiness*; I don’t find that terminology useful and prefer an alternative understanding that is based on *the non-dual nature of reality*.

We live subjectively in a world that is perceived as dual—I am the observer or subject, and whatever occurs other than my immediate conscious awareness is the other, sensed through seeing, hearing, etc. This understanding is also represented conceptually as *anatta* (ah-nah-tah), *the absence of an enduring/autonomous self*. Misunderstanding the concepts of sunnata and anatta can lead to a nihilistic, cynical, or hedonistic view of life. A person’s subjectivity is malleable, shaped benevolently through Right Intention and Virtue, when the mind is sufficiently trained by Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration, and guided by Right Understanding, the remaining elements of the Noble Eightfold Path. We are ultimately free to create a self, either affected by greed, hatred, and ignorance or shaped by the elements of the Noble Eightfold Path, and we all have the responsibility to realize that potential or suffer the consequences.

An important co-occurring element that supports virtue is integrity, which is a “malleable” personality characteristic. Integrity represents the integration of the various elements that come together to create a personality. This integrative process can be shaped by unvirtuous or virtuous elements. The process of Awakening requires a foundational self-organizational process that is virtuous.

Contemporary psychological research supports this wholesome integrative process. Neuroplasticity, the dynamic reorganizing of neural links that either increase or decrease in potency, depending on how the channeling of energy passes through them.

Martin Seligman, along with others, developed Positive Psychology as a field for study and the practice of psychotherapy. A basic premise of positive psychology involves the integration of thoughts and behaviors that emphasize gratitude, social well-being, and meaningfulness into character traits. Another contribution is the concept of Emotional Intelligence, which emphasizes the value of empathetic interpersonal attunement and the ability to respond in effective, prosocial ways interpersonally.

The rest of these notes refer specifically to Right Speech, and the other virtuous elements, Right Action and Right Livelihood, will be reviewed in future talks.

Right Speech

*Samma Vaca* (sah-mah vah-kah) is the Pali rendering of Right Speech, which is characterized as *speech that manifests kindness, truthfulness, timeliness, and which produces interpersonal harmony*. Here is a quote the Pali Canon regarding Samma Vaca:

[1] In the case of words that the Tathāgata knows to be unfactual, untrue, unbeneficial [or: not connected with the goal], unendearing & disagreeable to others, he does not say them.

[2] In the case of words that the Tathāgata knows to be factual, true, unbeneficial, unendearing & disagreeable to others, he does not say them.

[3] In the case of words that the Tathāgata knows to be factual, true, beneficial, but unendearing & disagreeable to others, he has a sense of the proper time for saying them.

[4] In the case of words that the Tathāgata knows to be unfactual, untrue, unbeneficial, but endearing & agreeable to others, he does not say them.

[5] In the case of words that the Tathāgata knows to be factual, true, unbeneficial, but endearing & agreeable to others, he does not say them.

[6] In the case of words that the Tathāgata knows to be factual, true, beneficial, and endearing & agreeable to others, he has a sense of the proper time for saying them. Why is that? Because the Tathāgata has sympathy for living beings.” MN 58

The term Tathagata (tah-tah-gah-tah) is translated as “thus gone”; I prefer to understand it as “mastery of suchness”. After his Awakening, the Buddha always referred to himself with this word, refusing to use a personal pronoun.

David Kalupahana, in his book entitled “A History of Buddhist Philosophy”, summarizes on page 51 the eight possibilities of Right Speech:

1. True useful pleasant
2. True useful unpleasant
3. True useless pleasant
4. True useless unpleasant
5. Untrue useful pleasant
6. Untrue useful unpleasant
7. Untrue useless pleasant
8. Untrue useless unpleasant

Further in the book, on page 105, he describes the relevance of these possibilities:

“…the relevance or goal-directedness of speech provides a moral justification for avoiding wrong speech, such as falsehood, slander, harsh words, and frivolous talk or gossip. Right speech is thus defined as ‘that which does not lead to one’s own torment (*tapa*) nor to another’s injury (*vihimsa*).’ Positively, it is speech that is pleasant to others without simultaneously contributing to evil. The best speech leads to the cessation of suffering and the attainment of freedom, and such speech is attributed to the enlightened ones.”

The issue of morality is a core consideration supporting the process of Awakening, as is the case with other religions. Contemporary cultural values are largely secular, however. How can virtuous thoughts, beliefs and behaviors be relevant in this commercialized, competitive, and individualized society? Living a virtuous life can be meaningful humanistically, in the context of mental health and well-being. These considerations are largely addressed through mental health counseling, and I want to describe how I perceive virtue in this context.

I was a student and practitioner of Buddhism before I went to graduate school and brought the intention to integrate the values and skillsets of Buddhism within the practice of psychotherapy--I regard the Buddha as the first psychologist in human recorded history. An important and well-researched component of psychotherapy is called cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), and when I was studying this in grad school, I was astonished to learn that CBT made no mention of the importance of affect, that is, the emotional potency associated with our thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors. Buddhism recognizes that mindfulness of feelings, that is, non-reactive awareness of affective drives, is a key to mastering CBT. Since I was in grad school, the integration of affective discipline has created Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy, (MBCT), and this is becoming a standard of clinical psychotherapy practice. The assumption is that when a person becomes mindful of how thoughts and beliefs determine one’s mood, and redirecting thoughts and beliefs into more effective patterns improves moods, supporting relief from anxiety and depression. Mindful attention to the urgent demands of dysfunctional thoughts and behaviors and renouncing them supports that relief.

Tara Bennett-Goleman, a practitioner of MBCT, wrote “Emotional Alchemy”, and Tara Brach, another psychotherapist who also practices Buddhism, wrote “Radical Acceptance”; I have recommended these books to many people over the years as excellent resources to understand how MBCT represents a contemporary form of Right Speech.

Another contemporary psychotherapeutic practice is called *Narrative Therapy*, which emphasizes that our sense of self emerges from conditioned internal narratives, and when a person views their self-defining narratives as constructs rather than solid truths, and then creates alternative narratives that are more wholesome and adaptive, positive changes in their personality structure can occur.

How we talk to ourselves creates our internal and interpersonal/social identities. Whenever we talk to another person, the comments we make are shaped by our internal narratives about ourselves and the world, and this process is inherently dualistic—self and other. When practicing mindfulness of breathing meditation, we are encouraged to view the internal narrative processes as the “selfing story”, a fabrication that emerges from prior experiences, that is, karmic influences, and that we can monitor the narratives as impersonal phenomena that can be modified. These modifications are guided by the principles of Right Speech.

The first modifications involve reorganizing the selfing story away from the influence of greed, hatred, and ignorance, creating more wholesome renditions through the characteristics described as Right Speech. The first transformation reorganizes our view of ourselves and others, and then is applied interpersonally, in prosocial ways, through emotional intelligence concepts and practices.

The second, and more spiritually liberating modifications are nonverbal, that is, the issues of Right Speech are set aside subjectively, and the duality of personality identification is investigated. This ultimately leads to direct, non-dual, experiential awareness of sunnata/anatta—the unconditioned, Nirvana.