THE VIRTUE OF RIGHT SPEECH

A key component of the Noble Eightfold Path is the Virtue Aggregate, which includes Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood. This talk provides an overview of the value of virtue, with a specific focus on Right Speech.

There is an ongoing conflict regarding the spreading of Buddhist mindfulness practices into Western culture—some have wittingly applied the term “Mcmindfulness” to describe how the concepts and disciplines of traditional Buddhism are being applied to contemporary life. It seems that a number of contemporary mindfulness teachers provide training intended to support someone’s ability to cope more effectively with the stresses of working, family life, economic uncertainty, and political strife, without including important considerations regarding the ethics that guide how we live—are we being honest, kind, compassionate, and generous, or are we primarily conditioned by consumeristic values.

The word for virtue in Pali is sila (see-lah), which provides an orientation of the mind towards harmlessness, compassion, and generosity. These personal ethics relate, first of all, to our internal thoughts, and then to how we speak and how we listen in the world. The world is stressed, changing rapidly in multiple ways, and we need to rethink and reprioritize our values and actions.

Consumerism in this context doesn’t just involve purchasing things, but also considers consuming rigidly exclusive cultural and political views unquestioningly. Virtue isn’t important regarding just these issues, but also includes the consequences of environmental irresponsibility. Virtue is a prosocial valuing system that is a manifestation of Wisdom.

This analysis is organized around the Buddhist Wisdom Aggregate—Right Understanding and Right Intention. Right Understanding analyses the effects caused by craving and clinging—distress and confusion regarding how to function in this complex and internally contradictory culture. Right Intention focuses attention and discipline regarding the innate impulsive reactivity that, when poorly managed by each of us, is a driver of our choices regarding craving and clinging.

The cultivation of Wisdom, from the perspective of the Noble Eightfold Path, develops an essential characteristic of our lived experience—the interaction between internal subjectivity and external factors, mostly interpersonal, but also, to some extent, relative to the environment. In the Four Foundations of Mindfulness discourse, a refrain is repeated throughout each of the foundations: “In regard to (the body, feelings, the mind, or mental phenomena), he abides…internally, externally, both internally and externally.” *Regarding the elements of Right Speech, Action and Livelihood, there is a fundamental investigation of how internal functions interact with external conditions in an ongoing way.*

What value does virtue have in society? There’s an area of research called *evolutionary psychology*, which explores how evolutionary principles might generate personality traits and strategies for survival. Protohumans began to cooperate millions of years ago, and therefore we are all fundamentally social creatures. I’ve often commented on the discovery of mirror neurons in areas of the brain that produce empathy and mimicry in consciousness, which means we “vibe” off each other, mostly outside of conscious awareness. Current thinking also suggests that cooperation among different beings in a system promotes benefits for the system and the individuals in it, a form of altruism, an aspect of virtue. Cooperation means that each “player” in the system fulfills a particular niche role, and the outcome of that role play either benefits or hurts the other players.

When I was growing up, we were taught that Darwinian evolution is organized around competition; “survival of the fittest” was taken to mean that human survival depends upon aggression, fighting over resources to guarantee the survival of offspring. I believe that notion is culturally biased, as Darwin’s theory was being presented during a time in America when the “Robber Barons” and “The survival of the fittest” was incorporated into the culture. It is indeed true that the most primal human emotion is fear, and that fear is the basis for aggression. It is also true that the survival of an individual person to reproductive age and to mix her DNA with male DNA is necessary for the next generation to be born. It is also true that the dramatic increase in human population has put mounting pressure on environmental resources, and the increasing scarcity does create aggressive tendencies, as recent conflicts in the Middle East demonstrates.

Current research into interpersonal and social psychology indicates a different view of evolutionary pressures that is more benign. A balancing function to aggression is cooperation, the ability to share resources. Regarding Buddhist notions of virtue, lovingkindness, compassion, and a willingness to shar resources are the antidotes to aggression. Evolutionary theorists now believe that genetic survival also requires empathy and cooperation, that is, sensitivity to how one’s behavior affects others and the environment. Species survival depends more on effective, harmonious interspecies integration as on competition. Current ecological destruction demonstrates how insensitivity to environmental consequences is threatening our survival. It is also becoming increasingly evident that harsh and punitive social conditioning, rather than benevolent intention, is increasingly disruptive regarding social cohesion and personal health. I believe that spiritual practice, the intentional cultivation of Wisdom and Virtue, is an evolutionary function of life.

Sitting and meditating, in order to manifest Wisdom and virtue, has obvious adaptive value for the survival of the species. There’s even an emerging realm of research called epigenetics, which investigates how different links within the DNA spiral are either activated or inactivated according to environmental stimuli. This mostly applies to nutrients or toxins, but I believe that it can also apply to behaviors and lifestyle organization, such as meditation and benevolent intention. This suggests that the cultivation of Wisdom and Virtue can change the structure of DNA and may even be passed on from one generation to the next!

Humans have evolved culturally at a relatively slow pace until quite recently. In this fast-paced society, we are conditioned to comply with the demands of work and to be overstimulated by media influences, at great and increasing cost to physical and emotional well-being for millions of Americans. These considerations indicate that social cultivation of interpersonal kindness, compassion, generosity, and tolerance improve the likelihood of individual and species survival. Survival depends upon basic resource use, while “thrival” depends more on the cultivation of Virtue, that is, applied Wisdom.

Recent sociopolitical surveys reported that, while a majority of Americans regard themselves as *financially secure and relatively safe*, when asked their opinions about the direction our culture is headed, a majority reported that *our economy is headed in the wrong direction*! *In my opinion, this indicates that, despite relatively secure lives, a majority of us feel uncertain and uncomfortable about American cultural norms*. The solution may not be as much about more jobs, but rather about our lifestyle expectations.

Another aspect of virtue that is especially relevant for Buddhist practitioners is the distinction between virtue as an *orientation of attention* as compared to virtue as *defining one’s character*. When we think of humans as comprised of an ongoing self, then virtue becomes an aspect of character; either I’m a virtuous person or I’m not. From a Buddhist perspective, virtue provides a direction, a “compass heading” for actions that decrease or eliminate suffering.

Another consideration regarding the cultivation of virtue is that of integrity. We think of integrity as honesty, and that’s certainly a virtue. I also think of integrity as uniformity, consistency, or cohesiveness of application. When we learn something, the application is inconsistent and awkward in application, but with the practice of Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration, the training aggregate of the Noble Eightfold Path, Virtue becomes more routine. In modern psychological terms, it becomes much like the systematic way we decide which clothes to wear.

What does this have to do with Right Speech? First, a quick review of the traditional characteristics of *Sammavaca* (sah-mah-vah-cah), which is the Pali rendering of this element of Virtue. Classically, this is defined as speech that is truthful, conducive of interpersonal and societal harmony, reliable, beneficial, timely and avoiding self-aggrandizement. Right Speech is, first of all, internal and private, but its public manifestation is essential for participating in society.

Our internal self-talk effectively creates who we think we are and how the world is. This self-talk is essentially a fabrication based on a lifetime of prior experience. Karma describes any actions based on these personal, historical fabrications and can either be wholesome or unwholesome. We tend to interpret the speech and actions of others through the filter of this self-experience. In this way, we are socially interdependent in relationships—as we converse, we are participating in co-creation, either directly through interpersonal dialogue or indirectly through our participation in the various medias we interact with.

We have grown up in a consumerist culture, which strongly conditions desire regarding whatever products are being advertised, either materially or in the context of social status, or through fear, regarding whatever we witness through the media that is cruel or otherwise seems to be threatening us materially or in the context of social status. We are mostly unaware of this conditioning, through the pervasiveness of billboards, commercials, and systemic social biasing such as racism, ethnic and religious prejudice, classism, and other conditioning functions that have been with us from our earliest life experiences. Because of this ever-present reinforcing, we see ourselves and the world through these karmic filters.

Our social environment is also contaminated by greed, hatred, and ignorance, the three primary causes of dukkha. Instead of mindfully listening and investigating the ways the mind is making meaning of what we hear from other people and through the media, we identify ourselves and others through prejudicial narratives related to the color of a person’s skin, what sort of clothing is worn, or other ways conditioning creates societal distress and confusion.

Countering this conditioning involves a variation on Right Speech, perhaps termed as Right Listening, which involves careful critical analysis of what is being presented through the media—this analysis is supported by Mindfulness meditation. This doesn’t just involve the written or spoken word, but also the imagery we are presented with—I watched a commercial recently that showed a beautiful woman smiling, leaning against, and then driving a battery-powered Cadillac—the overlaid commentary described her as a leader, a trend-setter for society. Aside from the likelihood that those watching the commercial couldn’t afford to buy a Cadillac, the setting creates an idealized view of what success and leadership is, along with what constitutes effective environmental responsibility.

We are all subject to what contemporary social science terms “confirmation bias”, that is, how prior conditioning fosters overlooking or denying other, perhaps more wholesome, ways of thinking and acting. This sort of biasing is at the core of the false information that can easily be found online, particularly through social media such as Facebook. From a Buddhist perspective, we are afflicted with the hindrance of skeptical doubt; one of the antidotes for this condition is to consult with someone knowledgeable about the how to skillfully counter that doubt.

This conditioning and our subsequent actions are creating many of the current critical stressors that we are affected by these days. Undisciplined, unquestioned consumerism has manifested behaviors that have despoiled the environment through global warming, soil depletion, poisoning water sources and polluting the oceans. These behaviors have become so routine that we hardly give a moment’s thought to the nature of and the consequences of this karma for ourselves and the following generations, not to mention the wildlife.

In this way, consumer indoctrination fosters self-talk that is self-defining—however, with appropriate application of Right Mindfulness and Right Effort, we can understand the self-talk as just a mental fabrication that can be changed rather than an enduring self. A core aspect of the Noble Eightfold Path is consideration of Wisdom—the cause-and-effect of our choices and actions—to avoid dukkha and promote liberation of the mind (and the planet) from the consequences of uncritical thinking, which creates an ideal that is unrealistic, but affects one’s self-image.

As a psychotherapist, a core part of my interventions involved encouraging clients to use mindfulness to apply what is called *cognitive behavioral therapy*, which involves monitoring irrational internal self-talk that distorts subjective experience and is associated with anxiety and depression. For example, the belief that one must always be right and perform perfectly is irrational, but much of contemporary social expectation is organized around such distorted beliefs. My clients were trained to mindfully notice such distorted thinking and substitute more rational self-talk such as “I don’t have to always be right and everyone makes mistakes, so I can too”.

There are several inventories available that list irrational beliefs or schemas, along with suggestions for countering them. The ability to identify them and let go of the urgent impulsivity associated with them requires non-reactive self-awareness, and mindfulness of breathing practice cultivates these skills. A resource that I have used and recommended for reading about a psychological approach to Right Speech is “Emotional Alchemy: How the Mind Can Heal the Heart” by Tara Bennett-Goleman, a psychologist and meditation teacher. The book is well-researched and includes various categories of cognitive distortions and how to use mindfulness to cultivate more wholesome self-talk.

How can regular mindfulness meditation practice offer some clarity, discipline and confidence in how we are interpreting and responding to current life circumstances?

* Use mindfulness and investigation as resources that can be applied as you absorb the information. Pay attention to how you are responding emotionally to the stimulation. One of the well-researched “hooks” that advertisers, propagandists, trolls, and spammers use is to create a headline or image that stimulates some sort of emotional response, and then fill in some plausible copy that has a history of getting a lot of attention. Note how your body is tensing up and the characteristics of your emotional state. I frequently monitor these reactions in myself as I watch commercials on TV; they are cleverly designed to grab your attention and to make you want something or, in the case of current events, to make you anxious. I have trained myself to notice the stirred up physical, emotional, and mental train of experience to inform myself as to how the hook operates and then how to see through the manipulation and cultivate a more grounded quality of Right Speech for myself.
* Remind yourself that everyone is subject to greed, hatred, and delusion, including those who create and broadcast the misinformation. Learn to cultivate insight and compassion in regard to the ignorance and delusional quality of what is being presented—you are witnessing suffering. This provides an antidote to anger.
* Be alert to the distortions that are presented as facts. One of the things I consider when watching commercials is how unrealistic or distorted the images and ideas are. If you buy some “new, improved” product you will be more satisfied with “whiter teeth” or be surrounded by beautiful, happy people if you drink the advertised beverage.
* Educate yourself as to the consequences of your lifestyle on others around us and the environment. Much current conflict relies on a misperception of liberty and freedom, without regard for consequences. The most damaging application of this misperception over the last few years are the consequences that result from indiscriminate burning of fossil fuels—the increasing average temperature readings all around the world, which create abnormal and destructive weather events. These sorts of issues involve our socially normative speech that seems to take such behaviors for granted.