

Notes and Quotes for August 20, 2023 *Dharma Reflections*:

What's On the Path?

Part Five: The Sila Paramita (Perfection of Ethical Behavior)

Let's review. First, we have recognized the call from our innermost being that wants us to wake up. Second, we have sensed, more or less dimly, that our world only seems to be one of separation, of duality, while actually being at heart a realm of interconnectedness, mutual reflection, and shared influence. And we have put these two insights together: waking up, yes; but there's no waking up alone, nor for ourselves alone. Perhaps the best and brightest path we could imagine is emerging for us, one that will fulfill our humanity and our search for meaning like no other—the Bodhisattva career.

The *Paramitas* were introduced as the “business” of a bodhisattva: the subject of our attention, the object of our aspiration, and the very stuff of how we comport ourselves (sometimes succeeding, sometimes failing—both part of the process) in striving to “perfect” our activities. The first, foundational, perfection that creates the causes to reinforce the conditions allowing all the others is *Dana*, or *giving* that arises from a generous heart.

The second, reinforcing, perfection is *Sila*, variously rendered as *upright behavior, morality, or ethical thought, speech, and action*. And while it is near the top of the list of the ten *paramitas*, as we will see, it is a complex, deep, subtle, and often a seemingly impossible set of concepts to bring into accord with our own lives and situations. In most Rinzai Zen lineages (and Soto lineages like the RZC and Diamond Sangha lines that have incorporated the Rinzai koan curriculum), the Sixteen Precepts (a paradigm set of considerations related to *Sila*) are taken up by a student at the *very end* of formal training, after having struggled with hundreds of koans and having scratched through the thousands of difficult-to-nail points pertaining to them.

But there's no time like the present to refresh our aspirations and clarify our direction, so let's dive in to what should be a lively topic for discussion!

The Three Treasures

I take refuge in Buddha, *and resolve that with all beings
I will understand the Great Way
whereby the Buddha seed may forever thrive.*

I take refuge in Dharma, *and resolve that with all beings
I will enter deeply into the sutra-treasure
whereby my wisdom may grow as vast as the ocean.*

I take refuge in Sangha, *and in its wisdom, example, and never-failing help,
and resolve to live in harmony with all sentient beings.*

The Three General Resolutions

I resolve to avoid evil.

I resolve to do good.

I resolve to liberate all sentient beings.

The Ten Cardinal Precepts

1. I resolve not to kill,
but to cherish all life.
2. I resolve not to take what is not given,
but to respect the things of others.
3. I resolve not to misuse sexuality,
but to be caring and responsible.
4. I resolve not to lie,
but to speak the truth.
5. I resolve not to cause others to abuse alcohol or
drugs, nor to do so myself,
but to keep the mind clear.
6. I resolve not to speak of the faults of others,
but to be understanding and sympathetic.
7. I resolve not to praise myself and disparage others,
but to overcome my own shortcomings.
8. I resolve not to withhold spiritual or material aid,
but to give them freely where needed.
9. I resolve not to indulge in anger,
but to practice forbearance.
10. I resolve not to revile the Three Treasures,
but to cherish and uphold them.

- Rochester Zen Center *Chant Book*, 2005.

“Without the precepts as guidelines, Zen Buddhism tends to become a hobby, made to fit the needs of ego. Selflessness, as taught in the Zen center, conflicts with the indulgence that is encouraged by society. The student is drawn back and forth, from outside to within the Zen center, tending to use the center as a sanctuary from the difficulties experienced in the world. In my view, the true Zen Buddhist center is not a mere sanctuary, but a source from which ethically motivated people move out to engage in the larger community.”

- *The Mind of Clover—Essays in Zen Buddhist Ethics*, Robert Aitken, 2000 (revised and corrected), North Point Press, p. 3.

“Moral discipline, the second of the six perfections, has three aspects. The first consists of reducing our harmful thoughts, words, and actions. The second includes creating virtue and dedicating the merit to all beings. The third involves making an unstinting effort to be of greater benefit through the skillful use of body, speech, and mind.

“Moral discipline is not a matter of correcting others, but of disciplining ourselves.... In each moment, we make a conscious choice, assessing what we are doing and why, without making excuses for ourselves. Just as we constantly adjust the steering wheel when we drive a car so we don’t veer to one side of the road, we constantly adjust the mind to prevent ourselves from deviating to extremes in our thought or behavior. When we consistently ascertain whether we are acting out of selfishness or selflessness, our positive qualities will increase and endure, and our negative habits will diminish and drop away. We will develop even greater discernment as we continue on the path.

“In a larger sense, moral discipline involves abandoning mind’s poisons, maintaining a good heart, and continually expanding our motivation to include all beings in the embrace of our thoughts and aspirations.

“Because we often unwittingly harm others, not only physically but also verbally, we must always be mindful. Words are very powerful and can cause great injury. Rather than speaking out immediately, we need to think carefully about what we want to say. Even though we may not harm anyone with our body or speech, if in our mind we have the intention to harm others, or rejoice in their misfortune, we still create negative karma.

“Moral discipline also involves doing everything possible to create virtue, developing useful skills or conditions to support our endeavors. This means being responsive to the needs of oth-

ers, explaining ourselves clearly in terms they can comprehend, and being sensitive to their culture or religion, as well as their receptivity. When someone is tired of listening or resistant to what we have to say, we should stop talking. People will reject what is imposed on them.

“Finally, moral discipline involves unsparing effort to help others. If there is anything we can do, we act selflessly without holding back, never claiming we’re too tired or busy or that what we’re doing is more important than coming to someone’s aid. If we perfect moral discipline, we can benefit anyone who sees, hears, touches, or remembers us.

- *Change of Heart* (Revised Edition)—*The Bodhisattva Peace Training of Chagdud Tulku*, Padma Publishing, 2015, pp. 258-260.

“It’s when movement toward our goals can justify indulgences that set us further back. Excuses like *I worked hard this week so I deserve it* fall into this category. [Citation: [Prinsen S, Evers C, de Ridder D. Oops I did it again: examining self-licensing effects in a subsequent self-regulation dilemma. *Appl Psychol Health Well Being*. 2016;8\(1\):104–26.](#)]

“This... draws from a larger literature on ‘moral licensing.’ Researchers have found a prior good deed can lead people to act questionably later on. Virtue can lead to veritable villainy. You’d think people would take pride in the integrity of moral consistency, but instead, being good appears to liberate us to be bad. [Citation: [Blanken I, van de Ven N, Zeelenberg M. A meta-analytic review of moral licensing. *Pers Soc Psychol Bull*. 2015;41\(4\):540–58.](#)]

“Consider this disturbing study out of the University of Toronto: People were randomly assigned to purchase items from one of two online shopping sites, identical except the products were described as environmentally friendly on one of the sites. Then, in a supposedly unrelated task, they played a computer game and were told to pay themselves out of a provided envelope of money for each correct answer. They were told no one was watching and it was all on the honor system. Who do you think acted more honorably? In actuality, the experimenters really *were* watching them, tallying up the actual number of correct answers, how many the subjects claimed they had gotten correct, and how much money they subsequently took. Shockingly, those randomized to purchase the green products were significantly more likely to then lie, cheat, and steal. [Citation: [Mazar N, Zhong CB. Do green products make us better people? *Psychol Sci*. 2010;21\(4\):494–8.](#)] Ethical acts may license unethical behaviors, and it may only take a molehill of virtue to create a mountain of immorality. [Citation: [Efron DA, Conway P. When virtue leads to villainy: advances in research on moral self-licensing. *Curr Opin Psychol*. 2015;6:32–5.](#)]

“Self-licensing can also involve self-delusion. The effect is so powerful that when people are presented with a temptation, they tend to exaggerate in their minds how well they’ve been eating in order to justify the indulgence. So not only may progress toward a goal rationalize lapses, but even misremembered distortions of progress can cause us to slide. [Citation: [Effron DA, Monin B, Miller DT. The unhealthy road not taken: licensing indulgence by exaggerating counterfactual sins. J Exp Soc Psychol. 2013;49\(3\):573–8.](#)] This is why it’s so important to be aware of the psychological tricks our minds can play on us so we can counter them.

“Even visions of *future* progress can trigger licensing and undercut our goals. How many times have you been tempted to slip ‘just this once,’ resolving to make up for it tomorrow? But ‘tomorrow’ may never come.... Our minds are always reaching for the rationalization. [Citation: [Khan U, Dhar R. Where there is a way, is there a will? The effect of future choices on self-control. J Exp Psychol Gen. 2007;136\(2\):277–88.](#)]

“Ironically, those with the greatest self-control are the most vulnerable to this kind of behavior. [Citation: [Khan U, Dhar R. Where there is a way, is there a will? The effect of future choices on self-control. J Exp Psychol Gen. 2007;136\(2\):277–88.](#)] They’re so sure they’re going to be able to resist the temptation—*next time*—they feel licensed to indulge now. To neutralize this effect, try to make each decision on its own merits in the here and now. In that present moment, regardless of what you did before or plan on doing later, consider the best choice to fulfill your long-term goals.”

- *How Not to Diet*, Michael Gregor, M.D., FACLM, Flatiron Books, 2019, pp. 432-434.

“You do not become good by trying to be good, but by finding the goodness that is already within you, and allowing that goodness to emerge.”

- Eckhart Tolle, October 27, 2020

“The ethical discipline of Bodhisattvas falls into three categories: restraint from faulty action, accumulation of virtue and work for others.... It is, however, preferable to regard the three kinds of ethical discipline observed by Bodhisattvas as related to their two main tasks—of making themselves and others mature.

“Anyone can practice this form of discipline [that of restraint from harmful actions]. Those who hold any type of individual liberation vow practice such restraint by observing their lay person’s or ordained person’s vow. If we hold no vows of this kind, we practice restraint from ten harmful actions. These consist of three physical actions: killing, stealing and indulging in sexual mis-

conduct. There are four harmful verbal activities: lying, using abusive or divisive language and wasting time on meaningless conversation. The three harmful mental activities in this context are covetousness, harmful thoughts and wrong views. Restraint from these ten activities is the basis for all Buddhist codes of conduct....

“Restraint from the ten harmful actions—even from just one of them—becomes a practice of those with the greatest capacity and a Bodhisattva activity when it is supported by the altruistic intention....

“In order to accumulate virtue Bodhisattvas train in eight main areas and we can emulate them. The first is to strengthen our practice of the three kinds of training—in ethical discipline, concentration and wisdom—and to develop the three kinds of understanding derived from hearing, thinking, and meditating. This creates virtue....

“The second principal way of creating virtue is in relation to special fields or sources of merit which include those who have helped us, such as our parents, those with excellent qualities, for instance our spiritual teachers, and those who arouse our compassion such as the sick. We accumulate virtue not just by giving them material gifts but also by showing them respect....

“The third way to create virtue is by developing a liking for good qualities and for those who have them. We remind ourselves to thank and praise those who teach us correctly about the true nature of reality and to appreciate and praise those who possess good qualities. When we hear others speak well of them, we should add our own praise without envy. Through this we can create as much virtue as those who possess the praiseworthy qualities. Training ourselves to rejoice in others’ admirable accomplishments and abilities is an essential Bodhisattva activity....

“The fourth source of virtue is patience. When we are harmed, two approaches are helpful. One is to think that through our own past actions we have set ourselves up as a target for this harm. Our present experience is the fruition of those actions. The other approach is to remember that the person who is inflicting the harm is dominated by the demon of disturbing emotions and is out of control. These emotions are not an integral part of their nature but something that temporarily overwhelms them and from which they can become free....

“Prayers of dedication and aspiration are the fifth source of virtue. We dedicate the merit from our physical, verbal and mental actions to our own enlightenment for the sake of others, to their peace, prosperity and happiness, and ultimately to their highest enlightenment. In this

way we share our merit with them and the virtue we create will not end until they have all attained enlightenment themselves....

“The sixth way to create merit is by making material offerings and offerings of our practice to the Three Jewels... We can offer the unowned natural beauty of rivers, lakes, forests, mountains, wildflowers and the sea as well as the creations of our imagination, but if we are in a position to make material offerings, we should not be too miserly to do so....

“The seventh way of creating virtue is by conscientiously directing our physical, verbal and mental activities away from non-virtue to virtue, such as the practice of the six perfections. And to create virtue in the eighth way the Bodhisattva is advised to practice in all aspects of the path of accumulation. This means concentrating on constructive activities with mindfulness and mental alertness....

“When a significant store of virtue has been accumulated, the Bodhisattva concentrates on working for others.... There are eleven main ways in which Bodhisattvas work for the good of others.

“The first of these is to help others by assisting them in their activities, such as farming and business, provided this does not entail negativity....

“The second way of working for others is to advise those who are confused about what means to employ. For instance, this might involve helping those who are suffering as a result of negative actions to understand what gives rise to suffering and what acts as a cause for happiness. On the other hand it may quite simply be a matter of giving them practical and clear advice on mundane matters and suggesting steps by which to proceed....

“The third way by which Bodhisattvas work for others is by returning the help they have received in the past.... Bodhisattvas behave in a friendly and welcoming manner to those whom they encounter, whether they know them or not. Even unasked, they provide or guide them to accommodation and food and do what they can to look after their needs.

“The fourth way is to assist and protect those in fear.... Although we may not find ourselves launching dramatic rescue operations to save people’s lives, there are many opportunities to save creatures from being burned, drowned, carried off by the wind or crushed by earth.

“The fifth way is to console those in grief....

“The sixth way is to help those in need. A Bodhisattva tries to provide whatever is required, such as food or shelter, companionship, good clothes and jewelry for those who feel they must keep up appearances, and even perfume and flowers for those who smell bad!

“The seventh is to act as a support to those who are searching for someone on whom they can rely. Without self-interest, Bodhisattvas look after those who seek a spiritual teacher, providing them with material and spiritual sustenance....

“The eighth is to help others according to their disposition and way of thinking. Bodhisattvas must understand the attitudes, aspirations and abilities of those they wish to help....

“The ninth way is to support and encourage those engaged in excellent enterprises, such as cultivating faith, observing ethical discipline, studying the teachings, practicing generosity and developing wisdom....

“The tenth way is to correct those who are not doing what they should and doing what they should not. It is misguided to tolerate and ignore their actions....

“Whereas we can begin to practice these ten ways of helping others, we cannot perform the eleventh, the accomplishment of miraculous feats, until we have developed certain powers based on a high degree of meditative stabilization and not the less reliable powers attained through the combination of substance and mantra.”

- *The Bodhisattva Vow*, Geshe Sonam Rinchen (trans. by Ruth Sonam), Snow Lion, 2000, pp. 102-113.

“In order to awaken to the complete significance of the bodhisattva precepts, it is necessary to understand the teaching of the Two Truths, first elaborated by the Middle Way (*Madhyamaka*) school of Buddhism in ancient India. These two truths are known in Buddhist teaching as conventional truth (*samvriti satya*) and ultimate truth (*Paramartha satya*).

“Conventional truth refers to our everyday, commonsense understanding of the existence of things. From this point of view, the precepts seem to be primarily concerned with doing good and not doing evil. Being grounded in the conventional meaning of the precepts is absolutely necessary, but not sufficient, for realizing their ultimate meaning. Ultimate truth is not circumscribed by our ideas. The ultimate meaning of the precepts transcends ordinary, conventional reality, and it is beyond our understanding. When we have given our thorough attention to the literal and conventional import of these great precepts, we are then able to step forward and enter into the realm of their ultimate meaning.”

- *Entering the Mind of Buddha- Zen and the Six Heroic Practices of Bodhisattvas*, Reb Anderson, Shambhala, 2019, pp. 31-32.

“As with generosity and the other perfections, the perfection of ethical conduct is of two types: mundane and supramundane. Candrakirti points out the difference between them...:

If there is any apprehension of the three-
forsaken by whom, what, and with regard to whom-
such ethical conduct is described as being a mundane perfection.
That empty of attachment to the three is supramundane.

“The unpolluted wisdom that does not grasp the inherent existence of the sphere of the three makes a bodhisattva’s practice of ethical conduct supramundane. The sphere of the three is (1) *by whom*, the person or agent who abandons the destructive action, (2) *what*, the object that is abandoned- that is, the destructive action, and (3) *with regard to whom*, the person who was not harmed- that is, the field with regard to whom the destructive action is abandoned. This wisdom is sometimes called ‘objectless’ wisdom or wisdom realizing the unapprehendable because it does not apprehend true existence and instead realizes the opposite, the emptiness of true existence of all persons and phenomena.

“In conclusion, Nagarjuna says...:

Bodhisattvas’ upholding of ethical precepts is not done on account of fear, nor is it done out of stupidity, or doubt, or confusion, or out of a private quest for their own nirvana. The upholding of ethical precepts is carried out solely for the sake of all beings, for the sake of success in the Buddha’s path, and for the sake of gaining all the excellent qualities of Buddhahood... This is what is meant by the perfection of ethical conduct... [In addition] if bodhisattvas’ practice is based on the unfindability of either misdeed or non-misdeed, it is at this time that it qualifies as the perfection of ethical conduct.

“He continues by explaining that because sentient beings are not findable under ultimate analysis, misdeeds and precepts aren’t findable either. ‘Findable under ultimate analysis’ means that when we search for exactly what a sentient being, misdeed, precept, or any other phenomenon is, we cannot isolate an inherently existent essence that it is. Everything depends on other factors that compose it. When we scrutinize an action of lying to find out exactly what it is, we see that although it depends on the motivation to deceive, the person who is lying, the false statement, the process of uttering the lie, and the other person understanding what was said, we cannot isolate one of these components and say, ‘This is the action of lying.’ However, although the action of lying cannot be found with ultimate analysis, it does exist dependently. We can’t say that there was no misdeed on the conventional level.

“In addition, Nagarjuna explains... ‘It is on account of the existence of the misdeed of killing that the corresponding ethical precept exists. If there were no misdeed of killing, there would be no corresponding ethical precept either.’ That is, the misdeed and the precept exist in mutual dependence. Because one exists, so does the other. Here, too, we find that things do not exist independently, but exist dependently on the conventional level.”

- *Courageous Compassion, Volume 6, The Library of Wisdom and Compassion*, The Dalai Lama and Thubten Chodron, Wisdom, 2021, pp. 51-52.

Possible Discussion Points:

1. “To neutralize this effect [of moral licensing], try to make each decision on its own merits in the here and now. In that present moment, regardless of what you did before or plan on doing later, consider the best choice to fulfill your long-term goals.” [page 5, above]
 - a. This practical advice from a physician specializing in nutrition points out how *za-zen* can strengthen ethical behavior; ethical behavior also strengthens our Zen practice. Discuss.
 - b. Were you aware of the phenomena of *moral licensing* before? Can you think of ways it has been an obstacle between you and your long-term goals?
2. “The ethical discipline of Bodhisattvas falls into three categories: restraint from faulty action, accumulation of virtue and work for others.... It is, however, preferable to regard the three kinds of ethical discipline observed by Bodhisattvas as related to their two main tasks—of making themselves and others mature.” [page 5, above]—heads off the long selection from *The Bodhisattva Vow*.
 - a. We often think of ethics or morality primarily as comprising things we should avoid. Did you find the long lists of positive (merit- or virtue-creating actions) a refreshing balance?
 - b. What do you think of the summary of the two main tasks of Bodhisattvas—making themselves and others mature?
3. “The ultimate meaning of the precepts transcends ordinary, conventional reality, and it is beyond our understanding.” [page 8, above]. If we’re not capable of understanding

the ultimate meaning, what are we supposed to do with it?

4. "Training ourselves to rejoice in others' admirable accomplishments and abilities is an essential Bodhisattva activity...." [page 6, above] This brings one to recall the third *Brahma-Vihara* (heavenly abode, divine abidings, or sublime attitudes), *muditha* (sympathetic joy, or taking delight in the success of others) that we discussed months back. Think of how all the "sublime attitudes" (great compassion, loving kindness, equanimity) are related to the perfection of ethical conduct.

5. "Moral discipline is not a matter of correcting others, but of disciplining ourselves.... In each moment, we make a conscious choice, assessing what we are doing and why, without making excuses for ourselves." [from *Change of Heart*, page 3 above] This is hard work, work that requires we be compassionate with ourselves, because we will not always be so aware in every moment. Walking this path involves effort.

On the other hand, Echart Tolle reminds us [page 5, above] "You do not become good by trying to be good, but by finding the goodness that is already within you, and allowing that goodness to emerge."

Does "allowing" involve effort? Can we "discipline ourselves" to "allow" what we already possess to emerge?

6. What is the most difficult aspect of *sila* for you? Has any of the material quoted here suggested how to work with this difficulty?