

## Morality As Easing Suffering

by Lisa Hoffman

I was annoyed with a close friend. I had just confided that my chronic pain condition had spiked recently, needing to say out loud what I had been bearing in silence. She began making suggestions, including a homespun arthritis remedy that she'd heard about from a friend in the Midwest. "Problem-solving really isn't what I need right now," I said. And that ended the conversation. I felt unease along with irritation as I went home.

The Buddha's teaching of morality filled my mind, along with his words: "I teach one thing, and one thing only: the end of suffering." Morality in Buddhism is not about good or evil, right or wrong. It's about whether I cause pain through my actions or words. And that pain might be between me and someone I'm intimate with, or it might be how the way I eat and what I buy affects workers in China and the planet.

Morality was among the Buddha's first lessons, and it became known as Shila Paramita. Both words are Sanskrit, an ancient Indian language. Paramita means perfection, and in Zen Buddhism a group of six Paramitas reveal how to cultivate freedom and ease suffering. The other five are: dana or generosity; kshanti or patience and inclusiveness; virya or energy; dhyana or how and what we focus on; and prajna or wisdom - am I separate or connected?

When I arrived home, I felt quite separate from my friend. She had made an offering to me with her suggestions, and my response had shut down our communication. I knew I needed to address it with her. Teachings about Shila usually include the 16 Bodhisattva precepts, which are a commitment to live in a way that causes no harm. They are very practical, addressing sex, intoxication, slander and other actions that do or can inflict suffering.

The precept that arose in relationship to my friend was the central vow not to kill. There are so many ways of killing, from the obvious to the subtle. In this situation, my unease stemmed from my words chilling our discussion. For me, this is actually a kind of violence that does "kill." It kills intimacy and connection. It cuts off the possibility of deepening understanding and relationship.

The precepts had their origins in the community of followers, or Sangha, that grew around the Buddha. He realized that he needed to point his Sangha toward harmonious living and expressed his early teachings in a set of guidelines called The Eightfold Noble Path and the Codes of Vinaya. The latter numbered hundreds and were intended for monastics. They eventually informed the development of the Bodhisattva precepts, which are practiced by monastics and laypeople alike.

Following these precepts is a commitment to Sangha - both immediate community and the global and universal village that includes everyone and everything. It's part of a vow to embody Buddha and Dharma -- his teachings, as a way of life. In fact, the first three precepts are a commitment to take refuge in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, which Buddhist practitioners formally vow when they are lay or priest ordained. Robert Aitken, in [The Mind of Clover](#), has a

beautiful and poetic description of these refuges: "Buddha, Dharma and Sangha can be understood here to mean realization, truth and harmony."

It is easy to approach the precepts as absolute rules. But they are actually alive, and it's in developing a relationship with them that they are realized. I had a vivid lesson in this shortly after I was priest ordained. I went over to friends' home for dinner, and they were very proud of a special organic poultry meal they had spent many hours shopping for and preparing. They had forgotten that I had become vegetarian after ordaining. This choice wasn't something I had planned, but arose from deep within as a quiet way to honor the precept of not killing.

What to do in this interesting situation? Should I simply eat the chicken? Should I remind my friends that I wasn't eating meat, which would undoubtedly make them feel pretty bad, especially since they were at my ordination? What did not causing harm mean under these circumstances? I decided to mentally bow to the chicken and accept what being so joyfully offered to me. I knew that other people might choose differently, as an expression of their understanding of Buddhist practice, and that is the beauty of the precepts. "The 16 bodhisattva precepts... are 'skillful means' for us to use in guiding our engagement with the world," writes Aitken "They are not commandments engraved in stone, but expressions of inspiration written in something more fluid than water."

And in what I hope was the spirit of such fluidity, I had a heart-to-heart talk with my friend. I observed that my reaction to her suggestions had shut off our conversation, and she acknowledged that this was true. She felt hurt. Ultimately, we agreed that I would precede such exchanges by letting her know what it was I needed. And she would hold back a bit on the brainstorming. We parted ways feeling closer, having cared for our 20 year friendship and deepened our understanding of each other. I felt deep appreciation for the wisdom of Buddha's Way.

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