UNDERSTANDING THE VALUE OF VIRTUE

On of the most important influences in the development of my character was the time during which I was a boy scout I became an Eagle Scout in 1960, I believe. A core concept in that system is the Scout Law: *a scout is…trustworthy, loyal, helpful friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, clean, brave and reverent*. Those virtues have stayed with me since then, whether I lived up to those standards or not.

Virtue has two characteristic renderings: as a function of moral character, such as being trustworthy, and as the capability of manifesting that function, such as “His virtue is his ability to follow through on his commitments”.

Variations of what in the West we call the Golden Rule are found in cultures all over the world: *Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.*  This is another way to understand virtue, that is, a defining aspect of human society, a way that we agree to treat each other decently, with the expectation that such behavior will be reciprocated.

Traditionally, one becomes a follower of the Buddha by committing to these virtuous precepts:

I undertake the rule of training to refrain from killing living creatures.

I undertake the rule of training to refrain from taking what is not given.

I undertake the rule of training to refrain from wrong conduct in sexual pleasures.

I undertake the rule of training to refrain from false speech.

I undertake the rule of training to refrain from distilled and fermented intoxicants which are the occasion for carelessness.

In the Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path, virtue is a key element fostering the growth of Wisdom during the process of Awakening: Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood. These virtues are a manifestation of benevolent intentions, that is, intentions that are organized through the filter of kindness, compassion, celebration of others well-being, generosity and tolerance.

One list of virtues which are widely promoted in Buddhism are the [Paramitas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/P%C4%81ramit%C4%81) (perfections) - [Dana](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/D%C4%81na) (generosity), [Sila](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C5%9A%C4%ABla) (proper conduct), [Nekkhamma](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nekkhamma) (renunciation), [Panna](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Praj%C3%B1%C4%81_(Buddhism)) (wisdom), [Viriya](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/V%C4%ABrya) (energy), [Khanti](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kshanti) (patience), [Sacca](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sacca) (honesty), [Adhiṭṭhana](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adhi%E1%B9%AD%E1%B9%ADh%C4%81na) (determination), [Mett](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mett%C4%81)a (Good-Will), [Upekkha](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Upekkha) (equanimity).

These intentions are initially understood as part of Buddhist doctrine, that is, you hear about or read about virtue and mimic those attitudes. The hope is that these intentions will be sufficiently repeated and reinforced so that they will come to mind and be applied when the situation warrants virtue. It is also understood that a sign of spiritual maturity is when a person’s manifestation of virtue emerges naturally from the attainment of deep Wisdom, as the experience of nirvana reveals and makes clear the fundamental value of kindness and compassion. The deep Wisdom relates to the direct experience of sunnata (soon-yah-tah), emptiness. In this context, emptiness is not like interstellar space; rather, emptiness is the realization that there is no central self that needs to be defended or gratified. Once this is directly experienced, there is a natural opening to generosity and compassionate action. It could be said that because there is no personal self, all humanity is deeply interconnected, therefore kindness, compassion, the celebration of others well-being, generosity and tolerance are to be freely distributed. Another expression of this non-self concept is *Love Your Neighbor As Yourself.*

How is virtue useful on a psychological and social level? Because humans are inherently social, we all share empathic attunement, hardwired into the brain. This means that we are stimulated by the behaviors of others, whether we are consciously aware of this or not. This stimulation is interpreted by our personal history, particularly related to our interactions with others. We develop a personality (not a self, but an aggregation of mental experiences shaped into a more or less coherent subjective process over the course of a lifetime) from our social experience.

We can imagine something, and, when it seems threatening to be truthful, we imagine a false reality, a lie, in order to avoid punishment or get what we want. The problem with lying comes from having to remember to whom you lied, about what, and in what social circumstance. When you do something hurtful, either physically or emotionally, that creates a social dissonance, for the person who is hurtful as well as the person who was hurt. When this sort of interaction provides an advantage socially or materially, greed fosters repeating such actions and they become part of a personality structure. When a personality has these characteristics, the ability to be sensitive to others is impaired; there is a lack of conscience, and this impairs the balance of one’s social life. The stress that accumulates as a result of this social dislocation can have a negative impact on one’s health.

In Buddhist societies, children are taught virtue before they learn to meditate. In the West, children are exposed to virtue, but without the mental discipline of meditation practice, craving and clinging interfere with one’s ability to manifest virtue.

The Buddhist assumption is that the foundation for spiritual attainment is built upon the understanding of virtue. Here is a quote from the Pali Canon:

“Householder, there are these five benefits for the virtuous in the perfecting of virtue. What five?

1. Here, householder, one who is virtuous, possessed of virtue, obtains a large fortune as a consequence of diligence; this is the first benefit for the virtuous in the perfecting of virtue.
2. Again, of one who is virtuous, possessed of virtue, a fair name is spread abroad; this is the second benefit for the virtuous in the perfecting of virtue.
3. Again, whenever one who is virtuous, possessed of virtue, enters an assembly, whether of khattiyas (warrior- nobles) or brahmans or householders or ascetics, he does so without fear or hesitation; this is the third benefit for the virtuous in the perfecting of virtue.
4. Again, one who is virtuous, possessed of virtue, dies unconfused; this is the fourth benefit for the virtuous in the perfecting of virtue.
5. Again, one who is virtuous, possessed of virtue, on the breakup of the body, after death, reappears in a happy destiny, in the heavenly world; this is the fifth benefit for the virtuous in the perfecting of virtue”

-- DN 16

Additionally, virtuous conduct provides a platform for spiritual development:

"Thus in this way, Ananda, skillful virtues have freedom from remorse as their purpose, freedom from remorse as their reward. Freedom from remorse has joy as its purpose, joy as its reward. Joy has rapture as its purpose, rapture as its reward. Rapture has serenity as its purpose, serenity as its reward. Serenity has pleasure as its purpose, pleasure as its reward. Pleasure has concentration as its purpose, concentration as its reward. Concentration has knowledge & vision of things as they actually are as its purpose, knowledge & vision of things as they actually are as its reward. Knowledge & vision of things as they actually are has disenchantment as its purpose, disenchantment as its reward. Disenchantment has dispassion as its purpose, dispassion as its reward. Dispassion has knowledge & vision of release as its purpose, knowledge & vision of release as its reward.

"In this way, Ananda, skillful virtues lead step-by-step to the consummation of arahantship."

--[AN 11.1](http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an11/an11.001.than.html)

It may be worth your time and effort to reflect on the values described above for cultivating a more peaceful, productive and beneficially virtuous lifestyle. It doesn’t require pretense or a guilty conscience; rather, the benefit comes from cultivating the inner awareness that comes from regular meditation practice and an ongoing commitment to be kinder, more compassionate, more generous and patiently tolerant of yourself and others.