

Ethics as Practice, Practice as Ethics

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I've been reflecting a lot during these complicated times about ethics in our practice. I recall that, in a meeting of teachers, Zen Master Seung Sahn responded to a complicated situation by saying, "You're all religious leaders." That's stayed with me as a reminder of the responsibility we carry as teachers, and that we all carry as practitioners of the path. How do I engage painful and hurtful moments personally and as a teacher? I need to hear my own voice and the voices of others, and I realize that many in the sangha look to the teachers for guidance.

These times have strengthened my appreciation for inquiry as the heart of practice. It's also clarified for me that, when inquiry fades, suffering increases. As the ancients said, if there's even one hair's breadth, heaven and earth are separate. It's also clarified both the long arc and the specific moments of how cause and effect unfold, how views emerge, and how this leads naturally to where we are now.

The intensity of our times highlights how we all participate individually and together. To speak is to participate. Not to speak is also to participate—and either way, you say something. How do I speak from the fundamental? Naturally, this can only reflect what I see from where I stand, and what I see from the posture I take in the space I'm in. That's a benefit and a limit, as well; all the more reason to promote investigation. At best, then, our ethical inquiry reflects right view, right understanding, and right speech, and it promotes right action. Do we see speaking and listening in ordinary moments as practice as well?

Practice involves approaching difficult matters with care and viewing them with the same spirit of inquiry that we bring to the cushion. Of course, it also involves approaching simple matters with care. Approaching simple matters with care strengthens our capacity to exercise the same care with more difficult matters. How do we approach both and embrace this as dharma? Where do wisdom, compassion, and responsibility fit into all this?

The three poisons are the source of suffering. The three poisons are also the source of wisdom. If greed, hate, and delusion generate greed, hate, and delusion, how do we use that to turn the dharma wheel, so that, by tracing back the radiance, they generate wisdom and compassion? If we avoid these as qualities of mind, we avoid our own true nature.

Greed, hate, and delusion suppress the eyes, the ears, the heart, and the voice, internally. Externally, they oppress the eyes, ears, hearts, and voices of others. In light of this, what does it mean to walk the path?

Precepts and ethics are essentially investigation, not a set of proscriptions or prescriptions. They are a

voicing of what emerges from inquiry into our nature. There's a fundamental trust in that, a trust from experience that if we inquire, we see clearly. From inquiry emerges right view. From right view emerges right understanding. From right understanding emerge right speech and right action.

How is it that sangha is one of the practice jewels? Without sangha, the jewels in Indra's net have no relationship with each other. If one jewel shines, all jewels shine. If one jewel is damaged, all jewels are damaged. Ethics is the network of threads among the jewels. Naturally, the bodhisattva can't enter nirvana alone. It's not that it's altruistic; it's that it's impossible.

If ethics is the thread, then one effect of the three poisons is to break the thread. Ethical action restores the thread. Greed, hate, and delusion harm connections. Internally, they harm connections with our fundamental nature. Externally, they harm connections among us all. If we take dukkha and samsara seriously, we see that there will always be damage: delusions are endless, after all.

One way to look at the root cause, then, is as being disconnected. From that view, practice is restoring, preserving, and sustaining connection, and the ethical response, then, is to do that. What we do after the harm has happened rests on what we have already done before that. If we have done the work before, then the effect is more present and enduring; something of value has already been built.

Naturally, this has layers. I, myself, in my life, in the place I occupy—What is my posture? What are my activities? What is my practice? How do I honor my day-to-day, moment-to-moment connections? The communities I belong to—How do we honor our connections with each other—especially my home sangha? My multiple communities—How do I live in those connections? And where and how are they connected? And the broader society—How do we relate to that large space? Each layer is an inquiry. Each layer is an opportunity. Activity in each layer ripples through all layers.

Practice is refuge; connecting is refuge; healing is refuge; sangha is refuge. To have a place of refuge is to already have a place to go to heal when there has been harm. We can heal only in the before-harm place. We heal together in the before-harm place together. Then right view inquires: Where is this place? Right understanding is how to live in this place. Right speech is to speak from this place. Right action is to act from this place. If we join with this mind, then we join others with this mind as well; we become refuge together. ♦