

Yoga Begins and Ends with Virtuous Action

by Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.

Virtue is for most Westerners an old-fashioned word and an equally antiquated and impractical concept. In the spiritual traditions, however, virtue is considered a foremost principle of action. While, in Yoga, the ultimate Reality is thought to lie beyond good and evil, there is a recognized need for the cultivation of virtuous deeds, words, and thoughts.

Virtue is traditionally connected with the idea of merit. Thus thoughts or actions are deemed meritorious or demeritorious depending on whether they spring from virtue or vice. Merit (*punya*) is really the fruit of good karma, that is, the positive momentum generated in the mind as a result of positive physical, verbal, or mental behavior. Positive behavior is associated with kindness, compassion, love, nonharming, generosity, patience, contentment, correct understanding, etc. It leaves imprints of a positive nature in the depth of the mind. Negative behavior is connected with self-delusion, anger, greed, harming, miserliness, inconsiderateness, impatience, etc. It too creates karmic deposits in the deep levels of the mind. These imprints or deposits serve as seeds that will sprout in the future, bringing good or bad consequences. As Je Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Gelugpa Order, notes in his magnificent *Lam Rim Chen Mo* (Chapter 13):

All happiness in the sense of feelings of ease—whether of ordinary or noble beings, including even the slightest pleasures such as the rising of a cool breeze for a being born in a hell, arises from previously accumulated virtuous karma. It is impossible for happiness to arise from nonvirtuous karma. All sufferings in the sense of painful feelings, including even the slightest suffering occurring in an arhat's mind-stream—arise from previously accumulated nonvirtuous karma. It is impossible for suffering to arise from virtuous karma.*1

The question is how can virtuous behavior lead to the ultimate transcendence of good and evil, as aspired to in all yogic traditions? Should we not expect that virtuous behavior simply leads to greater goodness? Does the belief in an ultimate Reality that is inherently transmoral not make nonsense out of all ethical behavior? The masters of Yoga do not think so. Nonvirtuous behavior, according to them, results in future suffering, whereas virtuous behavior brings joyous experiences. Put in theological terms, one culminates in hell, the other in heaven.

Significantly, however, the Yoga adepts have as little interest in heaven as they have in hell. They endeavor to go beyond all conditional states of existence and attain liberation (*nirvâna*). The only reason they are eager to cultivate virtuous behavior is that it reduces the mental factors causing suffering (*duhkha*). But even joyous experiences are inherently limiting, because they presuppose an ego-personality who has experiences of enjoyment and very likely becomes attached to them, thus keeping the vicious cycle of conditional existence (*samsâra*) perpetually in motion.

Only liberation is total freedom from suffering, that is, from the law of cause and effect. Liberation, or enlightenment, alone guarantees that we end the beginningless chain of karmic conditioning leading to lifetime after painful lifetime in various limited realms. After carefully pondering the question of the relationship between ethics and liberation, Je Tsongkhapa offered the following answer, as disclosed to him by Buddha Manjushri himself:

Suppose you fail to devote some part of your practice to thinking over the various problems of cyclic life, and the different benefits of freedom from it. You don't sit down and meditate, keeping your mind on trying to open your eyes to the ugliness of life, or holding it on the wonders of freedom. You don't reach the point where you never give a thought to the present life. You never master the art of renunciation.

And let's say you go out then and try to develop a skill in some great virtuous practice—the perfection of giving, or that of morality, or forbearance, effort, or staying in concentration. It doesn't matter what. None of it can ever lead you on to the state of freedom. People who really long for freedom then should forget at first about all those other supposedly so deep advices. They should use the "mental review" meditation to develop renunciation.

People who are trying to practice the greater way should set aside some regular periods of time for considering how harmful it is to concentrate on your own welfare, and how much good can come from concentrating on the welfare of others. Eventually these thoughts can become habitual; nothing that you ever do without them will ever turn to a path that leads you anywhere.*2

Thus there are three necessities—called the "three principal paths"—for a successful spiritual life: the cultivation of correct view, renunciation, and the wish to attain enlightenment for the benefit of others. Correct view consists in recognizing that there is no independent self in us or anything; everything is, in the language of Mahâyâna, "empty" (*shûnya*). Yet, everything is arising in interdependence by the force of karma. Renunciation is simply letting go of attachment, especially our attachment to the notion of being an independent entity, or self. The phrase "concentrating on the welfare of others" captures the practice of *bodhicitta*, or the intention or firm resolution to attain enlightenment for the sake of all beings—the essence of the Mahâyâna Buddhist ideal of the *bodhisattva*. Following these three "paths," the practitioner accumulates merit (*punya*) and wisdom (*prajnâ*).

For virtuous behavior to have not merely moral/religious but spiritual relevance, it must unfold in the context of the above three "paths," or their equivalents. Virtue is an integral part of authentic spiritual practice. In Classical Yoga, morally sound behavior is the first limb of the eightfold path leading to liberation. The same is true of other forms of Yoga as well. We cannot be rogues and hope to grow spiritually. Rather, as practitioners, we are expected to harmonize our interpersonal relationships through the time-honored virtues of nonharming, nonstealing, truthfulness, greedlessness, and chastity.

These and others are recognized as universally valid principles of behavior in all religious and spiritual traditions of the world. They should be bountifully present in those claiming to be enlightened or close to enlightenment. Even in the case of initiates employing the unconventional tactics of a "holy fool" or "crazy adept," we should see

clear evidence of their having mastered their "lower" impulses and stably realized the great virtues.*3 The path to freedom goes through rather than around morality—not the bourgeois morality of anxious individuals but the heartfelt morality of those who profoundly care for the welfare and freedom of others.

Notes

1. Tsong-kha-pa, *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*. Transl. by The Lamrim Chenmo Translation Committee (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion, 2000), p. 210.

2. Tsongkhapa, *The Principal Teachings of Buddhism, With a Commentary by Pabongka Rinpoche* (Howell, N.Y.: Mahayana Sutra and Tantra Press, 1998), pp. 34-35.

3. On unconventional behavior prior or subsequent to enlightenment, see my book [Holy Madness](#).

© Copyright 2002 by Georg Feuerstein. All rights reserved.
Reproduction in any form requires prior permission from Traditional Yoga Studies.