

The Perfections – Virtue Reflections and Practices

The following reflections and practices are offered as ways to continue your exploration of the Perfection of Virtue. Both the reflections and the practices can be enriched by discussing them with friends, fellow practitioners, strangers, and if you have chosen to have one, with your Dharma Practice Day buddy.

A useful way of engaging with the reflections is to spend a few days with each one, perhaps rereading the reflection to see what new perspectives repeated readings provide. It can be nice to devote some quiet time to focus on these reflections, perhaps while going for a walk or drinking tea.

Suggested readings: the chapter on “Virtue: the Five Precepts” in the Issue at Hand, and my articles titled “Ethical Sensitivity” and “On Non-Harming” found on the Article page of IMC’s website.

Reflections:

1. Our attitudes toward ethics and virtue are often conditioned by how ethics was viewed and practiced in the family and culture we grew up in. Spend some time considering how you may have been influenced by this conditioning. What are the formative influences that shaped your relationship to ethics. What ethical training and teachings did you receive growing up? If you can, talk with someone from your family of origin to help you understand how your family related to ethics. You might also talk to someone from a different cultural background as you and explore the similarities and differences in how ethics is viewed in your two cultures.
2. When in your life do feel your were most ethical and when do you think you were least ethical? What personal and social conditions existed that encouraged you to be ethical or unethical? What important lessons did you learn from times you were most ethical or most unethical?
3. Which ethical virtues are strongest in you? Which are weakest for you? To help with this reflection, here are a list of ethical virtues: compassion, caring, generosity, truthfulness, honesty, integrity, service, purity, gratitude, unselfishness, justice, morality.
4. Spend an extended period of time considering the ways others benefit when you are ethical. As you reflect on this and discuss this topic with others, write down a list of the ways others benefit. Stretch your thinking so you can make the list as long as possible.

Practices:

1. **The first precept, to refrain from harming living beings:** Spend one day with a heightened commitment not to be involved in harming other living beings, including insects. After this day, reflect on how hard or easy it was to adhere to this commitment. How were you affected by living with greater than usual concern for the first precept? How important is the first precept for you? If you ever feel justified in not following the first precept, what justification do you use?
2. **The second precept, to refrain from taking what's not given:** Spend a day with a heightened commitment to not taking what is not given. Be very careful not to take anything which has not been offered to you in explicit or clear, implicit terms. What do you learn about yourself when you follow this precept strictly? How can you follow this precept so it helps you be more peaceful?
3. **The third precept, to refrain from causing harm with your sexuality:** Dedicate yourself to a period of time to not cause any, even minor harm with your sexuality. Follow this precept as it relates to increasing your respect of others and to not taking what is not given. If you are not sexually active, how can you view your relationship to your sexual or non-sexual nature so as not to harm yourself?
4. **The fourth precept, to refrain from false speech:** Spend a day committed to being as impeccable as possible with speaking the truth. Don't talk authoritatively about things you are not sure are true. Avoid exaggerating or pretending things are other than how they are. With this practice don't speak the truth lightly if it is going to hurt someone. What were your biggest challenges in being truthful? How did you benefit from being truthful?
5. **The fifth precept, to refrain from taking intoxicants that cloud the mind and cause heedlessness:** If you drink alcohol or take recreational drugs, commit yourself to not consuming either for a period of time that is significant for you. What challenges does this avoidance have for you? What does this period of time of not drinking or taking drugs teach you about what motivates your use of drugs and alcohol? How does it benefit you and others when you don't consume drugs or alcohol? If you don't normally drink or consume alcohol, follow this precept by avoiding some activity, such as watching television or surfing the internet, which you might do to avoid being present with your life.

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www.insightmeditationcenter.org/books-articles/articles/theparamis/