

Virtues without Rules:
Ethics in the Insight Meditation Movement

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INTRODUCTION

Observers have commented that for Buddhism to take firm hold in the West it needs to develop a well-articulated ethic. This chapter is a study of how Buddhist ethics is taught within one rapidly growing movement of Western Buddhism: what I will be calling the Insight Meditation movement. While the movement has so far published no overview of its ethics, enough material is now available for us to discern some general points.

Among Buddhist movements in the West, the Insight Meditation movement is unique in that it is not simply a transplant of an Asian Buddhist tradition. Rather, it can be seen as a new tradition taking shape in the West around particular meditative practices of *vipassanā*, often translated as “insight meditation” or colloquially as “mindfulness practice.” *Vipassanā* practice is clearly derived from the Theravāda Buddhism of South and Southeast Asia, where it has a central soteriological role. However, in bringing this meditation practice to the West, the founders of the Insight Meditation movement have consciously downplayed (or even jettisoned) many important elements of the Theravāda tradition, including monasticism, rituals, merit-making, and Buddhist cosmology. Without these and other elements, the Insight Meditation movement has been relatively unencumbered in developing itself into a form of Western Buddhism. In doing so, it has retained only a minimal identification with its Theravāda origins.

Ethics, morality, and virtue have central roles in the Asian Theravāda tradition. All three of these English terms can be used to translate the Pāli word *sīla* that appears in the important three-fold division of the Therāvadin Buddhist spiritual path: *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā* (ethics, meditative absorption, and wisdom). The primary question I ask here is: In what ways has the Theravāda concept of *sīla* been translated in the Western Insight Meditation movement? Other questions asked are: How central is ethics to the Insight Meditation movement? How are Buddhist ethical teachings understood? Are there innovations or developments particular to the movement or to its Western setting? My hope is that addressing these and other issues will contribute to an understanding of the major cross-cultural issue of how ethics and codes of conduct travel from one culture to another.

One of the unique features of this movement is that it consists predominantly of laypeople engaged in meditative practices traditionally associated with monastics. Historically, the Theravāda

tradition's teachings on lay ethics were addressed to people who, by and large, did not meditate. Teachings to the laity did not, therefore, emphasize a relationship between ethics and meditation. Lay ethics was advocated by stressing the benefits and merits, or the harm and demerits, that various actions would bring in this or future lives. For the majority of Western lay Insight Meditation practitioners, however, the ideas of merit and rebirth hold little sway. Rather, meditation is the primary Buddhist activity providing the basis for understanding Buddhist teachings. How then, does the movement view the relationship between meditation and ethical behavior?

The next section will give a general introduction to the Insight Meditation movement, including a definition. This is followed by a study of the movement's ethical teachings, including a detailed discussion of the role of the five lay precepts. While these precepts do not always have a prominent role, the way they are handled provides a useful reference for understanding the movement's approach to ethics.

THE INSIGHT MEDITATION MOVEMENT

Currently no clear institutional, doctrinal, or membership boundaries exist for the wide range of Western practitioners of the Theravāda practice of *vipassanā*, that is, the meditative cultivation of undistracted, and at times highly concentrated, attentiveness to what is being experienced in the present. However, the subject of this study and what I am calling the *Insight Meditation movement* are those *vipassanā* practitioners, teachers, institutions, and publications with either formal or close informal affiliation with the Insight Meditation Society (IMS) in Barre, Massachusetts, and Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Marin County, California. This includes the meditation centers and sitting groups led by teachers or practitioners affiliated with these two. IMS and Spirit Rock are the most visible and active *vipassanā* centers in North America. Furthermore, the largest, best-organized and most clearly bounded groups of Western *vipassanā* teachers are those associated with these centers.¹ In defining the Insight Meditation movement in this way, it is important to recognize that this definition might obscure some real differences in teachings among the movement's teachers.

It is also important to remember that this Insight Meditation movement is a subset of a much larger movement of *vipassanā* teachers in the West. On one end of a broad spectrum are Theravāda monks and nuns teaching the practice within the religious context of their Theravāda temples. On the other end are people with no personal affiliation with, or even interest in, Buddhism, who teach Theravāda-derived mindfulness practices in such secular applications as pain and stress reduction. In between are many people and centers teaching the practice independent of any affiliation with the Insight

Meditation movement. Of particular importance is the influential network of meditation centers operating under the direction of the Indian *vipassanā* teacher S.N. Goenka.

The Insight Meditation movement had its origin in the Theravāda Buddhism of Thailand, Burma, and modern India. During the 1960s, young Westerners traveling in Asia and American serving in the Peace Corps encountered Theravāda meditation teachers under whom they trained in *vipassanā* or insight meditation.² A few of these Westerners were ordained as monastics; others practiced intensively as laypeople. By the early 1970s, some of them were returning to the West and beginning to teach *vipassanā*. Those who had been ordained while in Asia left the monkhood, so from its inception in North America the Insight Meditation movement was led by lay meditation teachers. The early *vipassanā* teachers primarily taught meditation, consciously choosing to leave out many of the doctrines, practices, rituals, and other elements of traditional Theravāda Buddhism.³ This choice was not necessarily innovative, but rather was a continuation of the style of practice found in some of the meditation centers in which they trained in Asia. This simplification contributed greatly to the growing popularity of the meditation practice, in part by making the practice accessible to people with little or no interest in Theravāda Buddhism.

The best marker for the beginning of this movement are the meditation courses that Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield taught at Naropa Institute during the summer of 1974.⁴ From that start, the movement has grown quickly. Over the years the number of teachers has steadily increased, so that by 2000 the IMS and Spirit Rock network of *vipassanā* teachers consisted of about seventy-five people.⁵ In its first issue in 1984, the movement's national journal, *Inquiring Mind*, listed 9 residential retreats around the United States. Its Spring 2000 issue listed about 120. Since the founding of IMS in 1976, there has also been a slow but steady increase in affiliated centers and sitting groups. In 1984, *Inquiring Mind* listed 15 weekly meditation groups around the country; in 1995, it listed 150; and in 2000, 230. A conservative guess is that these numbers represent about half of the actual total.

The growth of the movement is paralleled in the number of books either written or edited by its teachers. The first book, Joseph Goldstein's *The Experience of Insight*, was published in 1976. Jack Kornfield published *Living Buddhist Masters* in 1977. In the 1980s, four books were published, the most significant being Goldstein and Kornfield's *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom*. During the 1990s, the IMS/Spirit Rock network of teachers published twenty-one books—a more than five-fold increase over the previous decade.⁶ These books provide evidence for some of the shifts that have occurred over time in the teachings and concerns of some of the major figures in this movement.

Not all these books are specifically or explicitly about insight meditation or even Buddhism. Some discuss meditation without reference to Buddhism and were probably intended for a popular audience broader than the Insight Meditation community. However, all the books are expressions of the

spiritual vision and teachings of the movement's teachers. And for some of the teachers, this is a vision of spiritual universalism, that is, they see the teachings as common to a range of spiritual traditions but as also having an existence independent of any specific tradition.⁷

At its inception, the Insight Meditation movement primarily focused on meditation, intensive meditation retreats, and personal discovery. This is seen clearly in Goldstein's first book, *The Experience of Insight*, which is based on transcripts of his talks during the Insight Meditation movement's first residential retreat in 1974. Speaking to these first retreatants on the second evening, Goldstein said, "We have all begun a journey. A journey into our minds. A journey of discovery and exploration of who and what we are." Throughout the book, *vipassanā* practice is presented as a gnostic path, that is, a path of understanding. Goldstein says this explicitly when he says the first and last step is "right understanding" and "wisdom is the culmination of the spiritual path."⁸

However, this gnostic dimension is not confined just to insight meditation or the *vipassanā* retreat journey. Goldstein sees it as the essential aspect of all spiritual practice:

The elements of mind: thoughts, visions, emotions, consciousness, and the elements of matter, individually are called "dharma." The task of all spiritual work is to explore and discover these dharmas within us, to uncover and penetrate all the elements of the mind and body, becoming aware of each of them individually, as well as understanding the laws governing their process and relationship. This is what we are doing here: experiencing in every moment the truth of our nature, the truth of who and what we are.⁹

In this book, we see that in the mid-1970s Goldstein presented spiritual practice as an individual concern, focusing on personal understanding and change. While this may be understood as reflecting the particular teaching focus of an intensive retreat, it is also representative of traditional Theravāda soteriology, in which the path of liberation is primarily one of personal cultivation (although in the orthodox presentation personal cultivation also includes interpersonal elements of generosity, loving-kindness, and morality).

Several of the movement's teachers have also noted that a focus on personal meditative experience characterized the early years of the Insight Meditation movement in the West. For example, in *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom* Jack Kornfield wrote, "*vipassanā* in the West has started by placing a great emphasis on inner meditation and individual transformation."¹⁰

However, Kornfield also clearly believes that there is more to Buddhist spirituality than the personal transformation. He continues:

Buddhist teachings have another whole dimension to them, a way of connecting our hearts to the world of action. Their first universal guidelines teach about the basic moral precepts and the cultivation of generosity. These are the foundations for any spiritual life. Beyond this, Buddhist practice and the whole ancient Asian tradition is built upon the spirit of service. For some, service may seem to be simply an adjunct or addition to their inner meditation. But service is more than that; it is an expression of the maturity of wisdom in spiritual life.¹¹

While making a distinction between a personal and an interpersonal dimension of Buddhist practice, Kornfield also bring them together: ethical guidelines support spiritual practice, and the wisdom of practice is expressed in service. Certain forms of ethical behavior are seen as a means to a goal, and another form, service, is seen as an expression of the goal.

The next section will show that the Insight Meditation movement's teachings do have a strong emphasis on morality, both as a means for spiritual development and as a goal of the spiritual practice.

THE ROLE OF ETHICS IN THE INSIGHT MEDITATION MOVEMENT

It is common for books written by the Insight Meditation teachers to have emphatic statements concerning the importance of both morality and the precepts. However, among the first of these books this emphasis is not supported with much in the way of explicit teachings on either Buddhist ethics in general or precepts in particular. We begin to find more detailed discussions of these topics in some of the books published in the 1990s.

On the first page of *The Experience of Insight*, Goldstein states that an “indispensable foundation for meditation practice is following certain moral precepts.” However, in this book Goldstein provides few overt ethical teachings, except for a brief mention of behavior that supports meditation practice, such as the five precepts and some of the perfections. Rather, he expresses his faith that “if you’re mindful, automatically there’s right action.”¹² The ethical ideal that Goldstein holds up in the book is that of the Taoist sage who, with a mind empty of striving and a sense of self, allows his or her own nature to express itself and is thereby in harmony with the present situation.

In *Living Buddhist Masters*, Kornfield stresses that “[d]iscipline and morality are essential tools in the path of purification.” In introducing the five precepts in *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom*, he explains, “For spiritual practice to develop, it is absolutely essential that we establish a basis of moral conduct in our lives.” But again, these two books give little explanation or interpretation of Buddhist teachings on either morality of the precepts. The longest discussion is four pages discussing the precepts, found in

Seeking the Heart of Wisdom. This emphasis on the importance of morality continues in some more recent books. For example, Christopher Titmuss, in his discussion of the precepts in *Light on Enlightenment*, insists that “[m]editation without morality is mental gymnastics.”¹³

The importance of ethics is also seen in the descriptions of the goal of insight practice. Most commonly, the ultimate goal is seen to have an ethical component, in that certain moral virtues and behaviors are expected to accompany it. In the quote above, Kornfield states that service “is an expression of the maturity of wisdom in spiritual life.” Goldstein points to freedom as the goal of the practice, “because from freedom comes connectedness, compassion lovingkindness, and peace.” Titmuss calls morality a “sure signal of a transformed life,” and says

“true morality belongs to realization. There is an effortless acknowledgement and appreciation of the five precepts.”

Salzberg explains:

“We cannot create suffering for ourselves without creating suffering for others, nor can we create suffering for others without creating suffering for ourselves. So the model of perfection for the highest development of the human being is someone who has come to a complete end of suffering himself or herself, and therefore will never create suffering for others.”¹⁴

The above examples suggest a strong ethical dimension to the Insight Meditation movement. To further understand the movement’s general approach to ethics it is useful to study its teaching on precepts.

THE FIVE LAY PRECEPTS WITHIN THE INSIGHT MEDITATION MOVEMENT

Theravāda Buddhism offers a rich variety of teachings on ethics. Probably no single Western theory of ethics adequately encompasses this range. Within the tradition, we find rule-based approaches that stress strict adherence to precepts. We also find virtue orientations that focus on developing the practitioner’s character. In addition, we can find principle-based approaches, involving concepts like *non-harming*. However, within the tradition the minimum ideal for lay Buddhist conduct is the observation of the five precepts (*pañca-sīla*; more accurately translated as “the five virtues”). These are often referred to as training precepts (*sikkhāpada*). Their formulaic Pāli wording can be translated as follows:

I undertake the training precept to abstain from harming breathing beings.

I undertake the training precept to abstain from taking what is not given.

I undertake the training precept to abstain from sexual misconduct.

I undertake the training precept to abstain from false speech.

I undertake the training precept to abstain from alcohol, liquor, or spirits that are a cause for heedlessness.

In addition to these five precepts, the Asian Theravāda tradition has other sets of ethical guidelines for lay Buddhists. Of particular importance are the eight precepts. These include the five precepts, except that the precept on sexuality is one of celibacy. The additional three involve abstaining from eating between noon and dawn the following day, avoiding various forms of entertainment and the use of adornments, and avoiding the use of high and luxurious beds and seats. The five precepts are said to be applicable to all circumstances, whereas the eight precepts are usually meant for special situations, such as visiting a temple, during the lunar observance days, or during meditation retreats. At most Theravāda ceremonies and during visits to Buddhist monasteries and temples, Theravāda laity will chant a commitment to undertake either the five or the eight precepts for at least the duration of the ceremony or visit.

The eight precepts are rarely mentioned in the Insight Meditation movement. One exception is during the annual three-month retreat at the Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts, where some practitioners commit voluntarily to the eight precepts. Another exception is during the occasional retreats taught by Theravāda monastics at Spirit Rock and IMS.

The presence or absence of the five precepts within the Insight Meditation movement varies considerably in different areas of the movement. One of the clearest areas where the precepts do not appear is in the movement's journals, magazines, and newsletters. *Inquiring Mind* is a semiannual magazine that calls itself "a journal of the *vipassanā* community" and contains articles and interviews with teachers on issues that are important and topical for the editors and contributors. From its inaugural issue in 1984 through the Spring 2000 issue, the *Inquiring Mind* has given no indication that the five precepts have an important role in *vipassanā* practitioners' lives. The first reference to precepts was not until the eleventh issue—not in an article about *vipassanā* practice, but in reflections on the role of commitment in author Susan Moon's Zen practice. Even in its Spring 1993 issue on "Buddhist Ethics," the focus was on social engagement, not on the challenges of personal morality. Not until the Fall 1999 issue did an article specifically on Buddhist precepts finally appear. Even here, the discussion was not framed within a *vipassanā* context, but recounted the author's struggles in coming to terms with the five precepts in the context of a Vietnamese Zen community. The only substantial presentation of the five precepts was in the twice-published "Insight Meditation Teacher's Code of Ethics (Fall 1991 and Spring 2000 issues). Someone learning about *vipassanā* practice only through *Inquiring Mind* could easily conclude that the precepts have no role at all in an average practitioner's life.

Searching through the newsletters and magazines of Spirit Rock and IMS, one finds even fewer references to the precepts than in *Inquiring Mind*. The closest statement by a teacher on this topic comes from an interview with Larry Rosenberg in the Spring 1999 issue of IMS's *Insight* magazine. Here he expresses his preference for having virtue arise from the practices of wisdom and concentration.

The five precepts appear prominently in a few areas of the Insight Meditation movement. They have an important role in virtually all residential *vipassanā* retreats. They are usually introduced and discussed briefly at the opening session, when all participants are expected to commit themselves to adhere to the five precepts for the duration of the retreat. The five precepts are usually modified, in that the third precept is changed to one of celibacy.¹⁵ However, because of the intensive meditation schedule and the almost complete absence of speech on these retreats, for most people it is the retreat format itself, and not the precepts, that delimits their behavior.

The five precepts also have an important role in the recently formulated code of ethics for teachers. In the wake of a series of ethical scandals in American Buddhist communities during the 1980s, Jack Kornfield took the initiative to compose a teachers' code of ethics based on the five precepts.¹⁶ This document explains specific ways in which the IMS and Spirit Rock teachers commit themselves to following the precepts. Some of these commitments are in line with what will be shown below to be the Insight Meditation community's preference to see the precepts as guidelines for reflections and not as rules of restraint. For example, for the precept not to kill, teachers "agree to refine our understanding of not killing and non-harming in all our actions" and to "fulfill this precept in the spirit of reverence for life." However, the precept on refraining from sexual misconduct is unambiguously prohibitive in its specific application to teachers.¹⁷

Additionally, some *vipassanā* practitioners do take the precepts quite seriously outside of retreat and grapple with trying to live in accordance with them. Furthermore, among teachers there are considerable differences in how the precepts are taught. Some mention them frequently, while others rarely refer to them.

Among the thirty books written or edited by the Insight Meditation teachers as of September 2000, seventeen make some mention of the precepts.¹⁸ Among those books specifically about meditation practice, the rate of mentioning the precepts is considerably higher (approximately seventeen out of twenty-one). In some, the mention is brief, the briefest being a single sentence defining the precepts as "the intention to cultivate clarity that manifests as kindness and compassion."¹⁹ In the seven books published prior to 1993, the longest discussion is four pages long (in Goldstein and Kornfield's *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom*, mentioned earlier). The longer discussions are relatively recent, starting in 1993. These are in five books that have a chapter devoted entirely, or almost entirely to the precepts.²⁰

To place this discussion in a wider context, we can compare this to the books published in English on insight meditation but written by teachers outside of the Insight Meditation movement. A great majority of these books have no mention of the precepts. The books without any reference to the precepts span the range from those written by Theravāda monastics to those composed by lay teachers with minimum affiliation with Buddhism. Among those lacking reference to the precepts are nine of the first ten insight meditation books published in English in the West, all books written by either Theravāda monastics or former monastics.²¹ The exception is Sobhana Dhammasudhi's 1965 book, *Insight Meditation*, which briefly mentioned the role of the five precepts in creating personal peace without stating what the five precepts are.²² In fact, Joseph Goldstein's *The Experience of Insight* (published in 1976) was the first Western *vipassanā* book to provide a list of the precepts and to emphasize their importance. Given that many books without reference to the precepts are specifically books about meditation practice, it is understandable that they might not cover other areas of traditional Theravāda Buddhist practice.²³ We may note, however, that the practice of insight meditation is presented quite easily without its traditional context of ethics. Furthermore, we see that the Insight Meditation movement's teachers are more likely than *vipassanā* teachers outside the movement to include references to the precepts in their books.

TEACHINGS ON THE FIVE PRECEPTS

On those occasions when the precepts are discussed, one of the most salient features of the presentation is that they are not to be understood as strict or absolute rules. Goldstein states: "Following these moral precepts as a rule for living keeps us light, and allows the mind to be open and clear. It is a much easier and less complicated way to live. At this level of understanding, the precepts are not taken as commandments but are followed for the effect they have on our quality of life. There is not a sense of imposition at all because they are natural expressions of a clear mind." Kornfield insists that the precepts are "not given as absolute commandments." And Salzberg writes, "In Buddhism morality does not mean a forced or puritanical abiding by rules," and observes that the five precepts "are not intended to be put forth as draconian rules."²⁴ Christopher Titmuss elaborates on the distinction between Buddhist ethics and "commandments":

There is a difference between an ethical training and abiding by commandments. A major authority will impose commandments upon us. We either believe them or we don't, and there is a lack of opportunity to enquire into their relevance. Religious baggage also accompanies commandments. They cannot be separated from the book, the prophet or the saviour. Morality is of a different order. The outcome may be

the same but the attitude is very different... The Five Precepts, or ethical guidelines are a training in inner discipline. The training therefore is not a series of *thou shalt nots*, but a code of practice.²⁵

The teachers' insistence that the precepts are not commandments is also reflected in the seeming reluctance to apply them specifically as rules of restraint with any particularity. For example, in explaining the first precepts, Salzberg recommends the avoidance of killing. While this may be her implied intent, what she explicitly recommends is using the precept as a reflection on the "oneness of life." In discussing the precept not to lie, she doesn't recommend the avoidance of lying but rather the more vague "attempt not to lie."²⁶ And in discussing the fifth precept, she writes about the usefulness of temporarily "experimenting" with avoiding intoxicants. Salzberg and other teachers who explain the precepts do so mostly in general terms, focusing on principles behind them, such as non-harming and a sense of interconnection.

Not treating the precepts as rules or commandments goes along with how the observation of the precepts is explained. The most common instruction is to use precepts as tools for reflection. In the quote above, the "opportunity to enquire" is what Titmuss sees as a defining difference from commandments. For Harrison, the precepts "direct us toward considering our behavior in relationship to the world." Kornfield refers to the "spirit" of the fourth precept as a request to "look at the motivation behind our actions." Salzberg recommends experimenting with the precepts as a way of refining our understanding. Rosenberg sees the precepts as "warning signs" of avoiding trouble. Similarly, for Kornfield the precepts are signals of "when we are about to lose our way, when our fears and delusion entangle us so that we might harm another being." Elsewhere, Kornfield refers to the precepts as guidelines to "become more genuinely conscious."²⁷

This avoidance of clear-cut application of the precepts may be, in part, a result of the role of the teachers in the Insight Meditation community. The Insight Meditation teachers generally consider themselves "spiritual friends" (*kalayāna-mitta*) who give "guidance, instruction, and inspiration" but whose views are not to take precedence over a student's "own inner moral sense."²⁸ Furthermore, the Insight Meditation community is perhaps too loosely bound for teachers to assume authority for establishing rules for how students are to live.

THE BENEFITS FROM OBSERVING THE PRECEPTS

The reasons given for why one should observe the precepts further illuminate the role of ethics in the Insight Meditation movement. Over the years, there seems to have been a significant shift in what are explained as the benefits and justifications for observing the precepts. Specifically, the early literature of

the movement emphasized how the precepts support the practitioner's negotiation of the soteriological path. In the later literature, the emphasis is on how living ethically benefits others. In none of this literature is there any mention of the effect the precepts have on a person's future rebirth. This is a significant contrast with traditional ethical teachings found among Asian Theravāda teachers.²⁹

With its focus on personal insight practice, Goldstein's *The Experience of Insight* emphasizes the personal utilitarian benefits of the precepts for one's meditation practice: "Following the precepts will provide a strong base for the development of concentration, and will make the growth of insight possible." More specifically, he discusses the precepts from the perspective of three levels of importance. First, they serve as protection from creating "unwholesome karma." Second, they improve one's "quality of life" by keeping the mind light, open, and clear. Third, they help establish a purity of action and a mind free of remorse and anxiety, which in turn supports tranquility, concentration, and thus insight.³⁰

Kornfield says much the same in *Living Buddhist Masters* and *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom*. In addition, he mentions that adhering to the precepts is an important support in the spiritual work of giving up selfishness and desires. In *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom*, Goldstein broadens the scope of the precepts beyond their personal value. He states that observing the precepts is a "gift of trust to everyone we meet, because we are clearly stating in our actions and way of being that no one need fear us" and "[w]e work with the precepts as guidelines for harmonizing our actions in the world. Kornfield also mentions that moral rules are ways of keeping society harmonious and peaceful.³¹ However, even with these exceptions, in Goldstein and Kornfield's books published in the 1970's and 1980s, the precepts are primarily justified for the personal spiritual benefit they offer.

In contrast, most of the Insight Meditation movement's books published in the 1990s that mention the precepts stress their interpersonal importance. In *A Path with Heart*, Kornfield writes that the precepts are a means "to expand our circle of understanding and compassion into the world around us." Elsewhere, he stresses that the precepts "actively express a compassionate heart in our life."³²

Gavin Harrison's *In the Lap of the Buddha* places the precepts almost exclusively in the context of interpersonal relations and caring for the world. Harrison does not mention their role in either meditation practice or traditional Buddhist training. Rather, he sees the precepts as areas of reflection on the question, "Does our action lead to happiness and unity among beings, or toward sorrow and division?" No utilitarian or prohibitive roles for the precepts are given, except as tools for exploring the question of non-harming. Indeed, for Harrison, the basis for *all* Buddhist morality is non-harming and compassionate loving-kindness.³³

Sharon Salzberg explicitly associates *sīla* with relationships. She writes, "*Sīla* works on all levels of our relationships: our relationships to ourselves, to other people, and to the environment around us," and then defines morality as the manifestation of care and connectedness arising from a "heart full of

love and compassion.” Furthermore, she emphasizes that “if we truly loved ourselves, we would never harm another, because we are all interconnected.” Salzberg’s ethical teaching rests firmly on the vision of interconnection and on the idea that the spiritual aspiration for freedom is inseparable from our relationship to all life.³⁴

Both Harrison and Salzberg teach that ethical behavior arises as an expression of motivations of non-harming and inner states of compassion and love. In Steven Tipton’s typology of styles of ethical evaluation, this is akin to *expressive ethics* that is “mainly oriented toward the agent’s feelings, the feelings of others around him, and to the particular situation in which they find themselves.”³⁵ Harrison’s and Salzberg’s ethics could also be called *relational*, since the behavior is evaluated based on our relationship to others and to the world. This expressive and relational framing of the precepts is also found in the writings of Steven Armstrong and Christopher Titmuss.³⁶ Downplayed or absent in these later writers is any teaching on the personal utilitarian rationale for precepts stressed by Goldstein’s and Kornfield’s early writings.

The relational dimension of ethics is seen among those teachers who claim that the inner personal developments that give rise to ethical actions include a vision of interconnectedness and sensitivity toward others. Salzberg says, “Moral conduct is the reflection of our deepest love, concern, and care.” Closely connected with this is a vision of interconnectedness. So, Titmuss writes, “Morality springs from the awareness of interconnection.” And Salzberg writes, “Our deepest insights into happiness and lovingkindness, as well as the perception that we are all interrelated, give rise to a natural inclination that seeks to act according to precepts.”³⁷

This expressive and relational rationale for the precepts is close to the Western category of *virtue ethics*, in which ethical behavior is seen as the expression of the character of a person.³⁸ Repeatedly the Insight Meditation teachers explain that as character and virtue are developed, ethical behavior automatically follows. For example, Kornfield writes, “We use the form of rules until virtue becomes natural. Then from the wisdom of the silent mind true spontaneous virtue arises.” Elsewhere he writes, “Our actions come out of a spontaneous compassion and our innate wisdom can direct life from our heart.” Referring more specifically to the precepts, he writes, “When our heart is awakened, [the precepts] spontaneously illuminate our way in the world.”³⁹

The implication of the teaching that a person with spiritually developed character and insight will naturally act ethically is that, for such a person, the precepts themselves become unnecessary. Harrison says this most explicitly: “The Buddha said that if we are deeply established in awareness, the precepts are not necessary.” Larry Rosenberg says, “The wisdom of the practice combines with the mindfulness we develop and eventually makes the precepts, not exactly unnecessary, just perfectly obvious.”⁴⁰

To summarize up to this point: ethical behavior and the cultivation of ethical virtue are regarded as important within the Insight Meditation movement. The movement specifically does not advocate a rule-based approach to observing the precepts, except in the specialized environment of a retreat. Instead, the teachers encourage a more virtue-based approach in which the precepts are used to encourage both an increased reflection on and transformation of one's own motivations and an increased sensitivity to the needs of others. In other words, the precepts are used as adjuncts to the movement's central focus on mindfulness and meditative practices.

THE CULTIVATION OF VIRTUE

The longest and most intensive *vipassanā* training course offered by the Insight Meditation movement is the three-month retreat at IMS every fall. In January 2000, I asked a woman who had just completed the three-months course how much the precepts were discussed. Without hesitation, she replied, "All the time." But then, on reflection, she corrected herself, saying that she could not recall the precepts being discussed at all after the formal taking of the precepts at the retreat opening. She continued by saying that there was a strong ethical component in the retreat teaching, but not through the vehicle of the precepts; her initial response came from automatically associating ethics with the precepts.

This anecdote points to the need to look beyond explicit discussions of the Buddhist precepts to better understand the means of ethical development advocated by the Insight Meditation movement. What we find is that teachers in this tradition rely primarily on meditation and mindfulness for cultivating the various virtues that motivate ethical action. These teachers have a strong conviction that inner spiritual development leads to virtue. In particular, mindfulness practice is taught with the expectation that it will have a transformative effect on the practitioner's ethical relationships to the world. This is expressed succinctly by Christina Feldman:

Meditation is not ethically neutral nor is it solely a path of inner transformation intent upon achieving exotic states of inner experience. It is directed towards not only the cultivation of calm and wisdom, but also compassion, sensitivity, forgiveness, love, and generosity. Meditation is a path not only of inner change, but a path that enables us to touch our relationships and the world around us with compassion, care and peace.⁴¹

Elsewhere we find claims that mindfulness “leads to compassionate action” and that the practice “brings a caring, loving, and impeccable quality to how we live.” Salzberg writes that with the practice of meditation “our lives are transformed...[and our] actions flow from a wellspring of genuine caring.”⁴²

Certainly we find that many of the teachings on insight meditation have ethical implications. In particular, instructions encouraging awareness of, and freedom from, impulses of greed and hate would, if followed, decrease unethical behavior. Furthermore, explicit instructions to be mindful of intentions support the possibility of basing ethical analysis on the nature of one’s motivation, rather than on codes of behavior. And indeed, for Salzberg, Buddhist ethics is “a system of morality that is based on awareness of one’s intentions having consequences rather than an arbitrary external structure.”⁴³ Also, the Insight Meditation movement’s teaching on the role of mindfulness in developing sensitivity and connection with others includes an expectation that this will lead to an increased ethical sensitivity.

In addition, the frequent teachings on practice of loving-kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karunā*), and the other *brahma-vihāras* aim at cultivating virtuous character and ethical behavior. Kornfield writes that “valuing metta becomes a strong motive for refining our understanding and practice of harmonious action, the non-harming of self and others....”⁴⁴

So, rather than focusing on rules of behavior and restraint, *vipassanā* teachers focus more on the development of insight and virtuous character that provide the motivation for ethical behavior. This is expressed succinctly in Sharon Salzberg’s 1997 book, *A Heart as Wide as the World*: “Our deepest insights into happiness and lovingkindness, as well as the perception that we are all interrelated, give rise to a natural inclination that seeks to act according to the precepts.”⁴⁵

Jack Kornfield has observed that the primary focus on meditation practice reverses the traditional sequence of training ethics, concentration, and wisdom. Furthermore, he suggests that this is one of the unique features of how Buddhism has been developing in the West. He writes,

In the East, it is taught that one successively develops morality, concentration, and finally wisdom....In the West in some ways it has been the reverse. Many people here have experienced dissatisfaction with their lives or the society around them. Some have had glimpses of other deeper understandings through psychedelics. Some wisdom has arisen first. They’ve often gone from that taste of wisdom to learn concentration, to explore various ways of stilling and directing the mind. Finally people are realizing, both in relation to themselves and society, that it is essential to also develop a way of being that is not harmful or injurious to those around them. So in the West we find this reverse development—first of wisdom, then of concentration, then of morality; which is of course cyclical and will develop, in turn, greater concentration and more wisdom.⁴⁶

In other words, interest in ethical sensitivity and training is understood to result from meditation practices. And since insight meditation and mindfulness in daily life are the main avenues for cultivating virtue within the Insight Meditation movement, we would expect this interest to be primarily channeled back into further meditation practice.

CONCLUSIONS

The Insight Meditation movement teachings on ethics are teleological, that is, there is an ideal ethical goal to which the practice leads. The path to this goal is through an inner transformation of the practitioner's motivations and his or her sensitivity to others. Meditation is regarded as the primary vehicle advocated for this transformation. Meditation practice is expected to weaken and perhaps eliminate motivations leading to unethical behavior while strengthening those that lead to ethical behavior.

In relying on meditation as the means to ethical transformation, the Insight Meditation movement can be seen as reversing the traditional Theravāda training sequence of ethics, meditation, and wisdom, which has been normative at least since the time of Buddhaghosa in the fifth century. While this study has not determined the extent to which this is unique to the modern Insight Meditation movement or whether it is a phenomenon received from the Asian Theravāda tradition, it is perhaps interesting to point out that at least some Theravāda monastics strongly oppose this form of change.⁴⁷ Michael Carrithers, in his book *The Forest Monks of Sri Lanka*, tells of trying to convince some forest monks that the traditional relationship between ethics and meditation should be reversed. He reports that the monks strongly opposed the idea. He writes, "The impatience and even outrage with which the monks heard it and the unity of view with which it was rejected left no doubt that the monks place moral purity in the central position I had wished to accord with meditative experience."⁴⁸ Are there different consequences depending on whether moral purity or meditative experience is given central position in spiritual practice? Can one rely exclusively on meditation when engaged in the Buddhist path? Jack Kornfield has suggested that for most people this does not work. He claims that the "various compartments of our minds and bodies are only semipermeable to awareness." This raises some question about the viability of such claims as "if you are mindful, automatically there's right action."⁴⁹

It may also be interesting to notice that whereas the Insight Meditation teachers claim that mindfulness practice naturally brings on ethical action, the only Insight Meditation practitioners who are explicitly expected to abide by specific rules of prohibited behavior are the teachers (through the "Teacher Code of Ethics"). In that the teachers are representative of the most developed practitioners

within the movement, one would expect that, by the movement's own logic, they would be the ones with the least need for rules.

While the Insight Meditation movement has consistently seen meditation as the basis for transformation, when we compare its earliest books on *vipassanā* to the more recent ones a noteworthy change is seen in the type of transformation envisioned. In the earlier writings, the rationale for ethical behavior was mostly based on the personal benefits of pursuing the goal of liberation, while the later books place an increasing emphasis on the benefits ethical behavior has for others. Further study may reveal whether or not this represents a significant change in both the path and the goal advocated by the movement. Certainly it suggests an increased valuation of interpersonal ethics. It may also represent a shift toward emphasizing this-worldly and humanistic values over traditional Buddhist soteriological ones. In fact, we find Joseph Goldstein concerned that Americans “often practice the dharma in the service of human values,” in contrast to the goal of transcendental awakening.⁵⁰

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NOTES

¹ For a fuller introduction to the movement, see my “Insight Meditation in the United States: Life, Liberty, and the

² An autobiographical account of one Westerner's encounter with *vipassanā* meditation in Asia during the early to mid-70s is found in Eric Lerner, *Journey of Insight Meditation: A Personal Experience of the Buddha's Way* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977).

³ Discussed more fully in Jack Kornfield, “American Buddhism,” in *The Complete Guide to Buddhist America*, edited by Don Morreale (Boston: Shambhala, 1998), xxvi.

⁴ For a description of this beginning and early history of the insight movement, see Tony Schwartz, *What Really Matters: Searching for Wisdom in America* (New York: Bantam, 1995), 305-37.

⁵ In preparing for the 2002 teachers' meeting for the movement, Spirit Rock's invitation list has seventy-seven teachers.

⁶ The following is a bibliography of books authored by the Insight Meditation movement's teachers as of September 2000.

1976 Joseph Goldstein, *The Experience of Insight* (Boston: Shambhala)

1977 Jack Kornfield, *Living Buddhist Masters* (Boston: Shambhala); 1996 as *Living Dharma*

1985 Jack Kornfield and Paul Brieter (eds.), *A Still Forest Pool* (Wheaton, Illinois: Quest Books)

1987 Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom*, (Boston: Shambhala)

1989 Christina Feldman, *Woman Awake* (London: Penguin/Arkana)

1989 Christopher Titmuss (ed.), *Spirit of Change* (London: Green Print [The Merlin Press])

1991 Christina Feldman and Jack Kornfield, *Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart* (New York: HarperCollins)

1993 Joseph Goldstein, *Insight Meditation* (Boston: Shambhala)

1993 Jack Kornfield, *A Path with Heart* (New York: Bantam)

1993 Jack Kornfield and Gil Fronsdal (eds.), *Teachings of the Buddha* (Boston: Shambhala)

1993 Christopher Titmuss, *The Profound and the Profane* (Totnes, U.K.: Insight)
 1994 Christina Feldman, *Quest of the Woman Warrior* (London: Aquarius)
 1994 Gavin Harrison, *In the Lap of the Buddha* (Boston: Shambhala)
 1995 Sylvia Boorstein, *It's Easier than You Think* (New York: HarperCollins)
 1995 Sharon Salzberg, *Lovingkindness* (Boston: Shambhala)
 1995 Christopher Titmuss, *Green Buddha* (Totnes, U.K.: Insight)
 1996 Sylvia Boorstein, *Don't Just Do Something, Sit There* (New York: HarperCollins)
 1996 Gil Fronsdal and Nancy Van House (eds.), *Voices from Spirit Rock* (Nevada City, California: Clear and Present Graphics)
 1997 Sharon Salzberg, *A Heart as Wide as the World* (Boston: Shambhala)
 1997 Sylvia Boorstein, *That's Funny, You Don't Look Buddhist* (New York: HarperCollins)
 1998 Christina Feldman, *Principles of Meditation* (London: Thorsons)
 1998 Wes Nisker, *Buddha's Nature* (New York: Bantam)
 1998 Larry Rosenberg, *Breath by Breath* (Boston: Shambhala)
 1998 Rodney Smith, *Lessons from the Dying* (Boston: Wisdom)
 1998 Christopher Titmuss, *Light on Enlightenment* (Boston: Shambhala)
 1999 Christopher Titmuss, *The Power of Meditation* (New York: Sterling)
 1999 Sharon Salzberg (ed.), *Voices of Insight* (Boston: Shambhala)
 2000 Jack Kornfield, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry* (New York: Bantam)
 2000 Christopher Titmuss, *An Awakened Life* (Boston: Shambhala)
 2000 Larry Rosenberg, *Living in the Light of Death* (Boston: Shambhala)

⁷ See, for example, Feldman, *Woman Awake*; Feldman and Kornfield, *Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart*; Jack Kornfield, *A Path with Heart*; Titmuss, *The Proud and the Profane*; Feldman, *Quest of the Woman Warrior*; Salzberg, *A Heart as Wide as the World*.

⁸ Goldstein, *The Experience of Insight*, 7, 8, 79.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁰ Page 165. Also see Salzberg, *Lovingkindness*, 171.

¹¹ Goldstein and Kornfield, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom*, 165.

¹² Goldstein, *The Experience of Insight*, 81.

¹³ Kornfield, *Living Buddhist Masters*, 8; Kornfield, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom*, 7, and 7-10; Titmuss, *Light on Enlightenment*, 85.

¹⁴ Kornfield's initial quote in the paragraph from Goldstein and Kornfield, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom*, 165; Goldstein, *Insight Meditation*, 3; Titmuss, *Light on Enlightenment*, 23, 210; Salzberg quoted in Daniel Goleman (ed.), *Healing Emotions* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997), 18.

¹⁵ During retreats at IMS, the five precepts are worded as follows:

- Not to harm any sentient being; not to kill or intentionally hurt any person or creature, not even an insect.
- Not to take what is not freely given; not to steal or "borrow" without the consent of the giver; to accept what is offered and not try to change it or get more.
- To abstain from sexual activity.
- Not to harm by one's speech; not to lie, gossip or use harsh or hurtful language (in the context of the retreat, this also means to observe noble silence).
- To abstain from using alcohol, drugs and intoxicants.

Taken from IMS's web site, www.dharma.org/ims/imsinfo.htm [22 Sept. 2000].

¹⁶ Printed in Kornfield, *A Path with Heart*, 340-3.

¹⁷ "A sexual relationship is never appropriate between teachers and students. During retreats or formal teaching, any intimation of future student-teacher romantic or sexual relationship is inappropriate. If a genuine and committed relationship interest develops over time between an unmarried teacher and a former student, the student must clearly be under the guidance of another teacher.... A minimum time period of three months or longer from

the last formal teaching between them, and a clear understanding from both parties that the student-teacher relationship has ended must be coupled with a conscious commitment to enter into a relationship that brings no harm to either party.” From Kornfield, *A Path with Heart*, 341-2.

¹⁸ Those that do not mention the precepts are: Feldman, *Woman Awake, Quest of the Woman Warrior*, and *Principles of Meditation*; Titmuss, *Spirit of Change and An Awakened Life*; Feldman and Kornfield, *Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart*; Boorstein, *It’s Easier than You Think and That’s Funny, You Don’t Look Buddhist*; Fronsdal and Van House, *Voices from Spirit Rock*; Nisker, *Buddha’s Nature*; Smith, *Lessons from the Dying*; Kornfield, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*; and Rosenberg, *Living in the Light of Death*. However, while all these books are on spiritual themes, they are not all directly concerned with Insight Meditation or even Buddhism.

¹⁹ Boorstein, *Don’t Just Do Something, Sit There*, 133.

²⁰ Titmuss, *The Proud and the Profane*, 3-11; Harrison, *In the Lap of the Buddha*, 218-46; Salzberg, *Lovingkindness*, 171-90; Titmuss, *Light on Enlightenment*, 156-73; Salzberg, *Voices of Insight*, 216-30.

²¹ Nyānaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* (London: Rider, 1962); Venerable Sobhana Dhammasudhi (= Dhiravamsa), *Beneficial Factors for Meditation* (Surrey, U.K.: The Vipassana Foundation, n.d.); Venerable Sobhana Dhammasudhi, *The Real Way to Awakening* (London: The Buddhapadipa Temple, 1975); Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipattāna Vipassanā Meditation* (Santa Cruz, California: Unity Press, 1971); Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Practical Insight Meditation* (Santa Cruz, California: Unity Press, 1972); Nyānaponika Thera, *The Power of Mindfulness* (Santa Cruz, California: Unity Press, 1972); Dhiravamsa (= Venerable Sobhana Dhammasudhi), *The Middle Path of Life* (Nevada City, California: Blue Dolphin, 1974); Dhiravamsa (= Venerable Sobhana Dhammasudhi), *The Way of Non-Attachment* (London: Turnstone, 1975); and A. Sujata, *Beginning to See*, (Santa Cruz, California: Unity Press, 1975), although the Celestial Arts edition of this book does list the precepts on page 108 (Berkeley, California: Celestial Arts, 1987).

²² Venerable Sobhana Dhammasudhi (= Dhiravamsa), *Insight Meditation* (London: The Committee for the Advancement of Buddhism, 1965). An expanded edition was published in 1968.

²³ Other Insight Meditation books lacking mention of the precepts are:

1979 Stephen Levine, *A Gradual Awakening*, (New York: Anchor)

1982 Dhiravamsa, *The Dynamic Way of Meditation*, (London: Turnstone Press)

1990 Venerable U Silananda, *The Four Foundations of Mindfulness* (Boston: Wisdom)

1991 Venerable Gunaratana, *Mindfulness in Plain English* (Boston: Wisdom)

1992 Dr. Thynn Thynn, *Living Meditation, Living Insight* (privately published)

1996 Steve and Rosemary Weisman, *Meditation, Compassion and Wisdom* (York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser)

1998 S. N. Goenka, *Satipathāna Sutta Discourses* (Seattle: Vipassanā Research Publications)

1999 Paul R. Fleischman, *Karma and Chaos* (Seattle: Vipassanā Research Publications)

1999 Steve and Rosemary Weisman, *With Compassionate Understanding* (Saint Paul, Minnesota: Paragon Press)

²⁴ Quotes in this paragraph from Goldstein, *The Experience of Insight*, 77; Kornfield, in Goldstein and Kornfield, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom*, 7; and Salzberg, *A Heart as Wide as the World*, 23-4, 154.

²⁵ Titmuss, *Light on Enlightenment*, 83.

²⁶ Salzberg, *Lovingkindness*, 174, 176.

²⁷ Harrison, *In the Lap of the Buddha*, 220; Kornfield, in Goldstein and Kornfield, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom*, 10; Salzberg, *Lovingkindness*, 177; Rosenberg, *Breath by Breath*, 172; Kornfield, *A Path with Heart*, 298; and Jack Kornfield, “Domains of Consciousness,” *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* 6, no. 1 (Fall, 1996), 34.

²⁸ Goldstein, *Insight Meditation*, 23.

²⁹ For example, “People observing the precepts can perceive the following benefits.... After they die, they are sure to qualify for rebirth on the human plane at the very least,” from Ajahn Lee Dhammadharo, *The Craft of the Heart*, (private publication), 18. “If a person died in Sakka’s kingdom, they never used to be reborn in a woeful plane of existence because they had observed the Five Precepts.... So that we will have a higher birth in the next life, why not keep the Five Virtues?” from Taungpulu Sayādaw, *Blooming in the Desert*, (Berkeley: North Atlantic, 1996), 20. For discussions and examples of how Thai and Burmese Buddhists link the precepts with rebirth, see, respectively, Melford Spiro, *Buddhism and Society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 99, and Donald Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 15.

³⁰ Goldstein, *The Experience of Insight*, 77.

³¹ For sources of material in this paragraph, see Kornfield on giving up selfishness and desires in *Living Buddhist Masters*, 10, 296; Goldstein, in Goldstein and Kornfield, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom*, 96, 97; and Kornfield, *Living Buddhist Masters*, 10.

³² Kornfield, *A Path with Heart*, 297, 298.

³³ Gavin Harrison, *In the Lap of the Buddha*, 220-1 and 219, respectively.

³⁴ Salzberg, *Lovingkindness*, 172, 72, 72, and 173, respectively.

³⁵ Steven Tipton, *Getting Saved from the Sixties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 15-8. While Tipton's *expressive ethics* is not an exact fit for some of the ethical modes of the Insight Meditation movement, his study of counterculture spiritual ethics of the 1960s and 1970s provides a useful reference for further study of the movement.

³⁶ Steve Armstrong, "The Five Precepts: Supporting Our Relationships," in Salzberg (ed.), *Voices of Insight*, 216-30; Titmuss, *Light on Enlightenment*, 83-6.

³⁷ Salzberg, *Lovingkindness*, 172; Titmuss, *Light on Enlightenment*, 86; Salzberg, *A Heart as Wide as the World*, 155.

³⁸ While traditional Theravāda ethics also has a strong virtue orientation, it is interesting that its centrally important virtues of conscience and moral fear (*hiri* and *ottappa*) are virtually absent from the Insight Meditation movement's publications.

³⁹ Kornfield, *Living Buddhist Masters*, 11; Kornfield, in Goldstein and Kornfield, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom*, 57; Kornfield, *A Path with Heart*, 298.

⁴⁰ Harrison, *In the Lap of the Buddha*, 221; Rosenberg, *Breath by Breath*, 175.

⁴¹ Feldman, *Principles of Meditation*, 7.

⁴² Goldstein and Kornfield, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom*, 105, 136-7; Salzberg, *A Heart as Wide as the World*, 13.

⁴³ Sharon Salzberg, "Karma in Daily Life," *Inquiring Mind* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1989), 12.

⁴⁴ Goldstein and Kornfield, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom*, 96.

⁴⁵ Salzberg, *A Heart as Wide as the World*, 155.

⁴⁶ Kornfield, *Living Buddhist Masters*, 298.

⁴⁷ It is important to note that some Asian meditation teachers did not explicitly emphasize the precepts when teaching Westerners. The following is from a Summer 1989 *Inquiring Mind* article written anonymously by the Western Theravāda monastics at Amaravati Monastery in England:

When Ajahn Chah started teaching Westerners, Thai people often asked why he just taught meditation, without stressing the first two steps (e.g., generosity and virtuous conduct). He replied that Westerners would in due course find it impossible to make progress without cultivating generosity of heart and a good moral foundation. He was, however, content to let them find this out for themselves.

⁴⁸ Michael Carrithers, *The Forest Monks of Sri Lanka* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 14ff.

⁴⁹ Jack Kornfield, "Even the Best Meditators Have Old Wounds to Heal: Combining Meditation and Psychotherapy," in *Paths Beyond Ego*, edited by Roger Walsh (Los Angeles: Tarcher/Perigee Books, 1993), 67; and Goldstein, *The Experience of Insight*, 81.

⁵⁰ Joseph Goldstein, "Empty Phenomena Rolling On," *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* 3, no. 2 (Winter, 1993), 17.

Virtue ethics is a broad term for theories that emphasize the role of character and virtue in moral philosophy rather than either doing one's duty or acting in order to bring about good consequences. A virtue ethicist is likely to give you this kind of moral advice: "Act as a virtuous person would act in your situation." Since its revival in the twentieth century, virtue ethics has been developed in three main directions: Eudaimonism, agent-based theories, and the ethics of care. Eudaimonism bases virtues in human flourishing, where flourishing is equated with performing one's distinctive function well. In the case of humans, Aristotle argued that our distinctive function is reasoning, and so the life "worth living" is one which we reason well. Virtue Ethics (or Virtue Theory) is an approach to Ethics that emphasizes an individual's character as the key element of ethical thinking, rather than rules about the acts themselves (Deontology) or their consequences (Consequentialism). There are three main strands of Virtue Ethics: Eudaimonism is the classical formulation of Virtue Ethics. In the second half of the 20th Century, there was a minor revival of Virtue Ethics, principally due to the efforts of Elizabeth Anscombe (1919 - 2001), Philippa Foot (1920 - 2010), Alasdair MacIntyre (1929 -), Paul Ricoeur (1913 - 2005) and Stanley Hauerwas (1940