

**The Essential Meaning of Sila** 🌸  
*Excerpt from Wheel Publication 282:*  
*Going for Refuge, Taking the Precepts*  
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The Pali word for moral discipline, *sila*, has three levels of meaning: (1) inner virtue, i.e., endowment with such qualities as kindness, contentment, simplicity, truthfulness, patience, etc.; (2) virtuous actions of body and speech which express those inner virtues outwardly; and (3) rules of conduct governing actions of body and speech designed to bring them into accord with the ethical ideals. These three levels are closely intertwined and not always distinguishable in individual cases. But if we isolate them, *sila* as inner virtue can be called the aim of the training in moral discipline, *sila* as purified actions of body and speech the manifestation of that aim, and *sila* as rules of conduct the systematic means of actualizing the aim. Thus *sila* as inner virtue is established by bringing our bodily and verbal actions into accord with the ethical ideals, and this is done by following the rules of conduct intended to give these ideals concrete form.

The Buddhist texts explain that *sila* has the characteristic of harmonizing our actions of body and speech. *Sila* harmonizes our actions by bringing them into accord with our own true interests, with the well-being of others, and with universal laws. Actions contrary to *sila* lead to a state of self-division marked by guilt, anxiety, and remorse. But the observance of the principles of *sila* heals this division, bringing our inner faculties together into a balanced and centered state of unity. *Sila* also brings us into harmony with other men. While actions undertaken in disregard of ethical principles lead to relations scarred by competitiveness, exploitation, and aggression, actions intended to embody such principles promote concord between man and man — peace, cooperation, and mutual respect. The harmony achieved by maintaining *sila* does not stop at the social level, but leads our actions into harmony with a higher law — the law of *kamma*, of action and its fruit, which reigns invisibly behind the entire world of sentient existence.

The need to internalize ethical virtue as the foundation for the path translates itself into a set of precepts established as guidelines to good conduct. The most basic set of precepts found in the Buddha's teaching is the *pañcasila*, the five precepts, consisting of the following five training rules:

- (1) the training rule of abstaining from taking life;
- (2) the training rule of abstaining from taking what is not given;
- (3) the training rule of abstaining from sexual misconduct;
- (4) the training rule of abstaining from false speech; and
- (5) the training rule of abstaining from fermented and distilled intoxicants which are the basis for heedlessness.

These five precepts are the minimal ethical code binding on the Buddhist laity. They are administered regularly by the monks to the lay disciples at almost every service and ceremony, following immediately upon the giving of the three refuges. They are also undertaken afresh each day by earnest lay Buddhists as part of their daily recitation.

The precepts function as the core of the training in moral discipline. They are intended to produce, through methodical practice, that inner purity of will and motivation which comes to expression as virtuous bodily and verbal conduct. Hence the equivalent term for precept, *sikkhapada*, which means literally "factor of training," that is, a factor of the training in moral discipline. However, the formulation of ethical virtue in terms of rules of conduct meets with an objection reflecting an attitude that is becoming increasingly widespread. This objection, raised by the ethical generalist, calls into question the need to cast ethics into the form of specific rules. It is enough, it is said, simply to have good intentions and to let ourselves be guided by our intuition as to what is right and wrong. Submitting to rules of conduct is at best superfluous, but worse tends to lead to a straightjacket conception of morality, to a constricting and legalistic system of ethics.

The Buddhist reply is that while moral virtue admittedly cannot be equated flatly with any set of rules, or with outward conduct conforming to rules, the rules are still of value for aiding the development of inner virtue. Only the very exceptional few can alter the stuff of their lives by a mere act of will. The overwhelming majority of men have to proceed more slowly, with the help of a set of stepping stones to help them gradually cross the rough currents of greed, hatred, and delusion. If the process of self-transformation which is the heart of the Buddhist path begins with moral discipline, then the concrete manifestation of this discipline is in the lines of conduct represented by the five precepts, which call for our adherence as expedient means to self-transformation. The precepts are not commandments imposed from without, but principles of training each one takes upon himself through his own initiative and endeavors to follow with awareness and understanding. The formulas for the precepts do not read: "Thou shalt abstain from this and that." They read: "I undertake the training rule to abstain from the taking of life," etc. The emphasis here, as throughout the entire path, is on self-responsibility.

The precepts engender virtuous dispositions by a process involving the substitution of opposites. The actions prohibited by the precepts — killing, stealing, adultery, etc. — are all motivated by unwholesome mental factors called in Buddhist terminology the "defilements" (*kilesa*). By engaging in these actions knowingly and willingly we reinforce the grip of the defilements upon the mind to the point where they become our dominant traits. But when we take up the training by observing the precepts we then put a brake upon the current of unwholesome mental factors. There then takes place a process of "factor substitution" whereby the defilements are replaced by wholesome states which become increasingly more deeply ingrained as we go on with the training.

In this process of self-transformation the precepts draw their efficacy from another psychological principle, the law of development through repetition. Even though at first a practice arouses some resistance from within, if it is repeated over and over with understanding and determination, the qualities it calls into play pass imperceptibly into the makeup of the mind. We generally begin in the grip of negative attitudes, hemmed in by unskillful emotions. But if we see that these states lead to suffering and that to be free from suffering we must abandon them, then we will have sufficient motivation to take up the training designed to counter them. This training starts with the outer observance of *sila*, then proceeds to internalize self-restraint through meditation and wisdom. At the start to maintain the precepts may require special effort, but by degrees the virtuous qualities they embody will gather strength until our actions flow from them as naturally and smoothly as water from a spring.

The five precepts are formulated in accordance with the ethical algorithm of using oneself as the criterion for determining how to act in relation to others. In Pali the principle is expressed by the phrase *attanam upamam katva*, "consider oneself as similar to others and others as similar to oneself." The method of application involves a simple imaginative exchange of oneself and others. In order to decide whether or not to follow a particular line of action, we take ourselves as the standard and consider what would be pleasant and painful for ourselves. Then we reflect that others are basically similar to ourselves, and so, what is pleasant and painful to us is also pleasant and painful to them; thus just as we would not want others to cause pain for us, so we should not cause pain for others. As the Buddha explains:

In this matter the noble disciple reflects: 'Here am I, fond of my life, not wanting to die, fond of pleasure and averse from pain. Suppose someone should deprive me of my life, it would not be a thing pleasing or delightful to me. If I, in my turn, were to deprive of his life one fond of life, not wanting to die, one fond of pleasure and averse from pain, it would not be a thing pleasing or delightful to him. For that state which is not pleasant or delightful to me must be not pleasant or delightful to another: and a state undear and unpleasing to me, how could I inflict that upon another?' As a result of such reflection he himself abstains from taking the life of creatures and he encourages others so to abstain, and speaks in praise of so abstaining.

Samyuttanikaya, 55, No. 7

This deductive method the Buddha uses to derive the first four precepts. The fifth precept, abstaining from intoxicants, appears to deal only with my relation to myself, with what I put into my own body. However,

because the violation of this precept can lead to the violation of all the other precepts and to much further harm for others, its social implications are deeper than is evident at first sight and bring it into range of this same method of derivation.

Buddhist ethics, as formulated in the five precepts, is sometimes charged with being entirely negative. It is criticized on the ground that it is a morality solely of avoidance lacking any ideals of positive action. Against this criticism several lines of reply can be given. First of all it has to be pointed out that the five precepts, or even the longer codes of precepts promulgated by the Buddha, do not exhaust the full range of Buddhist ethics. The precepts are only the most rudimentary code of moral training, but the Buddha also proposes other ethical codes inculcating definite positive virtues. The Mangala Sutta, for example, commends reverence, humility, contentment, gratitude, patience, generosity, etc. Other discourses prescribe numerous family, social, and political duties establishing the well being of society. And behind all these duties lie the four attitudes called the "immeasurables" — loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity.

But turning to the five precepts themselves, some words have to be said in defense of their negative formulation. Each moral principle included in the precepts contains two aspects — a negative aspect, which is a rule of abstinence, and a positive aspect, which is a virtue to be cultivated. These aspects are called, respectively, *varitta* (avoidance) and *caritta* (positive performance). Thus the first precept is formulated as abstaining from the destruction of life, which in itself is a *varitta*, a principle of abstinence. But corresponding to this, we also find in the descriptions of the practice of this precept a *caritta*, a positive quality to be developed, namely compassion. Thus in the suttas we read: "The disciple, abstaining from the taking of life, dwells without stick or sword, conscientious, full of sympathy, desirous of the welfare of all living beings." So corresponding to the negative side of abstaining from the destruction of life, there is the positive side of developing compassion and sympathy for all beings. Similarly, abstinence from stealing is paired with honesty and contentment, abstinence from sexual misconduct is paired with marital fidelity in the case of lay people and celibacy in the case of monks, abstinence from falsehood is paired with speaking the truth, and abstinence from intoxicants is paired with heedfulness.

Nevertheless, despite this recognition of a duality of aspect, the question still comes up: if there are two sides to each moral principle, why is the precept worded only as an abstinence? Why don't we also undertake training rules to develop positive virtues such as compassion, honesty, and so forth?

The answer to this is twofold. First, in order to develop the positive virtues we have to begin by abstaining from the negative qualities opposed to them. The growth of the positive virtues will only be stunted or deformed as long as the defilements are allowed to reign unchecked. We cannot cultivate compassion while at the same time indulging in killing, or cultivate honesty while stealing and cheating. At the start we have to abandon the unwholesome through the aspect of avoidance. Only when we have secured a foundation in avoiding the unwholesome can we expect to succeed in cultivating the factors of positive performance. The process of purifying virtue can be compared to growing a flower garden on a plot of uncultivated land. We don't begin by planting the seeds in expectation of a bountiful yield. We have to start with the duller work of weeding out the garden and preparing the beds. Only after we have uprooted the weeds and nourished the soil can we plant the seeds in the confidence that the flowers will grow healthily.

Another reason why the precepts are worded in terms of abstinence is that the development of positive virtues cannot be prescribed by rules. Rules of training can govern what we have to avoid and perform in our outer actions but only ideals of aspiration, not rules, can govern what develops within ourselves. Thus we cannot take up a training rule to always be loving towards others. To impose such a rule is to place ourselves in a double bind since inner attitudes are just simply not so docile that they can be determined by command. Love and compassion are the fruits of the work we do on ourselves inwardly, not of assenting to a precept. What we can do is to undertake a precept to abstain from destroying life and from injuring other beings. Then we can make a resolution, preferably without much fanfare, to develop loving-kindness, and apply ourselves to the mental training designed to nourish its growth.

One more word should be added concerning the formulation of the precepts. Despite their negative wording, even in that form the precepts are productive of tremendous positive benefits for others as well as for oneself. The Buddha says that one who abstains from the destruction of life gives immeasurable safety and security to countless living beings. How the simple observance of a single precept leads to such a result is not immediately obvious but calls for some thought. Now by myself I can never give immeasurable safety and security to other beings by any program of positive action. Even if I were to go on protest against all the slaughterhouses in the world, or to march against war continuously without stopping, by such action I could never stop the slaughter of animals or ensure that war would come to an end. But when I adopt for myself the precept to abstain from the destruction of life, then by reason of the precept I do not intentionally destroy the life of any living being. Thus any other being can feel safe and secure in my presence; all beings are ensured that they will never meet harm from me. Of course even then I can never ensure that other living beings will be absolutely immune from harm and suffering, but this is beyond anyone's power. All that lies within my power and the sphere of my responsibility are the attitudes and actions that emanate from myself towards others. And as long as these are circumscribed by the training rule to abstain from taking life, no living being need feel threatened in my presence, or fear that harm and suffering will come from me.

The same principle applies to the other precepts. When I undertake the precept to abstain from taking what is not given, no one has reason to fear that I will steal what belongs to him; the belongings of all other beings are safe from me. When I undertake the precept to abstain from sexual misconduct, no one has reason to fear that I will try to transgress against his wife. When I undertake the precept to abstain from falsehood, then anyone who speaks with me can be confident that they will hear the truth; my word can be regarded as trustworthy and reliable even in matters of critical importance. And because I undertake the precept of abstaining from intoxicants, then one can be assured that the crimes and transgression that result from intoxication will never be committed by myself. In this way, by observing the five precepts I give immeasurable safety and security to countless beings simply through these five silent but powerful determinations established in the mind.