

2013-03-10 Reflections On Sila

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SPEAKERS

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So, one of the approaches to Buddhist spirituality Buddhist practice is to spend some time in reflection, meaning taking up certain topics to reflect on and consider their role and place in your own life and the life of our society. And one of the really key topics for reflection is called in a Buddhist language sila, and sila is sometimes translated into English as ethics. I kind of prefer the English word virtue for it. I think that some occasionally people associated with morality, but the problem with the word morality is that I think some people here in the West interpret morality through the lens of obligation And the duty, that somehow there's external standards that come that are given to you. And that you have to live by those standards as if you know, by some external authority that tells you this is how you should live your life. Whereas virtue feels more like to me like it comes from the inside. It has to do with the quality of character that a person has. And when a person has virtue means it's some kind of inner quality of goodness, that comes through. And so they act on that virtue as opposed to acting on obligation. That's interesting that the ancient tradition of Buddhism, and the commentaries about these things, most strongly associates the word sila, with the word harmony, Harmony or cooperation. So that to live in harmony, one lives with sila lives with virtue is with harmony, oneself lives with harmony with the world around us. And it also, it's interesting that as far as I can tell, the Buddha very seldom told people to be ethical, but rather when he talked about ethics, it was more as an expectation that if a person was a mature person, a good person, this is how they would behave. So there was a strong tendency in the ancient tradition to use ethics more as descriptions of what people would be like, rather than prescriptions of thou shalt do this way. And so, one of the most frequent teachings on sila for lay people down through the centuries in Buddhism is something called the five in English. It's called the Five Precepts, I'm not sure if precept is the best translation of the Pali word. Because the most common thing it's trying to translate is a term that literally means something like factors of training or steps in the training. So there's a little different feeling between precepts and, and aspects of training. This is how you would train yourself. And, and there are five of these, and they are not to harm. The literal meaning is not to strike out that people are at any anything any living being usually described as not to kill. But I think I believe it has a broader mean meaning, so not to harm not to take what's not given not to steal, not to engage in sexual misconduct not to harm through our sexuality, not to lie And not to take alcoholic drinks that cause you to be heedless. intoxicated, I suppose, but heedless. And here in the modern world, usually it's that's expanded out not just to mean alcoholic drinks, but also to mean drugs, any kind of substance that we take that causes heedlessness causes us to act in ways that later we regret. And so those are the five that are held by the tradition. But in the time of the Buddha, those five, were never given prescriptively this is what you should do. But those five are listed there, but primarily that listed descriptively that this describes someone who's spiritually mature.

And so there's a different feeling, I think, if you hear it that way, because then the question is not so much how you should be ethical, but how you might become more mature. And then in that mature and

these are guidelines then or supports or picture, the image of what spiritual maturity might look like that it would be somewhat natural to live by the precepts somewhat natural to express your life by not killing, not stealing, not harming through your sexuality, not lying and not intoxicating yourself. So, it has a different feeling, I think it has it doesn't have the same feeling of weight, that there's this kind of heavy moral weight around being following the precepts that sometimes in the West people interpret you know, in or you know, you have now you had, you're going to be a Buddhist you have to kind of shape yourself into these precepts in order to be a good person otherwise, dire things will happen. Rather, the idea often in Buddhism is that these are aspirations that we hope to live by. Because it expresses our own innate goodness. One of the surprises for me in engaging in Buddhist practice was how some feeling of innate goodness or ethical integrity arose for me out of meditation practice. I was not particularly concerned with being ethical growing up. It was not really in my radar. I just happen not to be particularly unethical. So it wasn't like I was, you know, I did things that really I feel regret about. But most, but maybe it was last lack of imagination. But the but then that wasn't really on my radar that you know, you should think about ethics or sila. It wasn't really you know, just a concern of mine. But then through meditation practice, there was a developed a feeling of subtleness and peacefulness and openness, vulnerability, integrity, wholeness, a settled wholeness, that was so it's such a big impression on me. Because from that settled wholeness came a natural inclination, to want to be ethical to want to be compassionate, to want to be caring, to want to be generous, to as particularly to want to be someone who doesn't cause any harm in the world. And then my relationship to this sila to these precepts became different, or as I started having a relationship to them, because rather than thinking of them as again, commandments that I should do this way, they became reference points. When I was in touch with this innate settled goodness or wholeness that I could feel, and if I feel if I feel that I'm going to violate or slide away from these five precepts, generally it's indication that I've lost touch with this settled wholeness that I can experience. And then the question is not Should I or shouldn't I be ethical? It's more The question is, should I should, should I or shouldn't I be in touch with my settled wholeness? And if I'm unsettled, if I'm connected to my homeless, then this is how I would live my life rather than so it kind of comes from the inside, as opposed to from the outside. Oh, no, I have to kind of do these things. Otherwise, you know, I'll look like a bad person and people won't like me or like things will strike or something. So the idea of that come From the inside, and the. And in fact, as I said earlier, the Buddha didn't actually prescribe the five precepts, that you should do these things. But he did prescribe other ethical guidelines for ourselves. And, and the first three are in this list of 10, called the 10. skillful actions. Again, here also skill called skillful actions, as opposed to, you know, commandments or precepts or obligation things.

So the first three are, it's skillful, to act in ways that doesn't cause harm. It's skillful to act in ways that you don't take what's not good and you don't steal. It's skillful to act in ways that doesn't cause harm through your sexuality. And then it goes into for other lists for the items which it has to do with speech. It's skillful, Not to lie. It's skillful not to speak in harsh ways. It's skillful not to speak in ways that are divisive and skillful, not to be slanderous. And then it goes into this is what's particularly interesting. The last three are these 10. They're all inner qualities, inner rather than behavior in the world have to do with ways we are. It's skillful, not to be coveted. This is not to be driven by greed. It's skillful, not to have ill will, and it's skillful, not to be diluted or ignorant about the path of freedom. So, these inner inner capacities inner qualities we developed. Another area way in which you see that the sila thing it comes very close to this inner kind of way, inner kind of how we are, is the close connection that tradition has between sila and Wisdom and beautiful teaching that just like you wash your hands, one hand washes the other you need both hands, usually. So that wisdom and sila go hand in hand, that wisdom helps with the development of sila, and sila helps development of wisdom and the so as we become more understanding and wise about this life, then it becomes more natural to be ethical. As we become more ethical. It's interesting then, that it becomes more natural to be wise. And the reason for this is that

wisdom in the tradition is usually defined as the wisdom about what causes what causes and what frees us from harm. The Buddhist tradition puts a tremendous emphasis on this issue of harm Hurt, suffering. I like the word harm because harm is something that's done. And the fundamental kind of reference points in Buddhism, for our behavior for our life to our path of freedom is based on this distinction between avoiding What? Avoiding what causes harm, and doing that which is beneficial and causes happiness and well being. And so, as we become more ethical, we have a reference point for better understanding how what causes harm. One of the interesting to understand things is that you understand that being unethical. Generally, whoever you might harm someone else in your unethical behavior, but you also harm yourself. And as we have this settled wholeness, so this greater integrity or well being, from our practice, it becomes more More, more and more palpable more and more a physical experience, to see and understand how if you lie or kill or steal or caught, you know, do the variety of these unethical things, that you're also harming yourself. And it just doesn't feel good to do that. It also becomes clear that how you harm other people, because the more settled We are the settled wholeness, the more sensitive we are more empathy we have for others, and so we become naturally more caring. So, these five precepts are used partly to help with this reflection, partly as a mirror partly as a guideline, not so strictly. Thou shalt behave this way, but rather as supports and guides for helping us consider Am I in touch with my settled wholeness, am I losing touch with it? What is my relationship to map to myself? My life. what's what's motive mode? what's motivating me? Now, when I'm about to cross this line, I'm about to harm or to kill or strike out what's going on here, stop and take a deeper look. When you're about to take what's not given. What are you doing here? What's really going on? What's operating? Is it greed, it's operating? Is it fear that's operating? Is it wisdom is it generosity is operating, to stop and look. So each of these five precepts become mirrors that we use to reflect upon ourselves to see ourselves more deeply?

And to kind of clarify what's really going on for us. So are we operating out of greed, out of hate out of delusion, in any given time, and the description of these precepts or these guidelines, the ancient tradition also tends to define them also in positive terms. You It's not only a matter of not killing, but it's also the possibility of living in the world with compassion. It's not only a matter of not stealing, it's also a matter of living in the world with generosity. It's not only a matter of not harming through our sexuality, but it's also a matter of respect of contentment, of care for each other. It's not only a matter of not lying, it's also a matter of matter of speaking words that are beneficial and helpful. And the traditions talks about words that are conducive for harmony, bringing Concord bringing people together. It's not only a matter of avoiding intoxication, but it's also a matter of cultivating clarity. Clear seeing for what is going on. So these are you kind of the area of reflection and reflection here means to Then time thinking about it, thinking about your relationship to each of the precepts to the sila to ethics. Are you ethical? Do you feel ethical? What's the role of ethics in your life? Are you interested in being ethical? What's the sources of ethics for you? Is their inner reference point for being ethical? Like for me, the sense of settled wholeness was a reference point. That was very important. So is there a reference point for you, in this regard? I think there's kind of reflection Done, done carefully and well and consistently produces wisdom, greater self understanding, and most important of all, I think it creates a motivation to be a better person. And I think that is a really great thing to better person meaning someone who is better for the world. You become better so those are my words of that prompt some reflection. And then I thought that I would have you guys actually do it in small groups. And but this is what I thought would be the question I thought maybe you can break into groups of three and four and, and discuss with your little group. or describe in your little group, someone that you've met through your lifetime. Who's inspired you for their integrity, for their ethical purity? That was really meaningful for you somehow, maybe someone who's growing up who, who inspired you or taught you something about the beautiful values of ethics or someone as an adult that you've met that really touched you, wow, that makes a difference. And that's really impressive, that a person can be that way. As there has there been any person in your

life that inspired you around there because of their ethics or ethical integrity. And what are the qualities of that person? What was it inspired you about that person? That's the topic for discussion for reflection. How does that sound? Yeah. And if you don't have any one and listen to the other people, yeah.

Yeah. Great. Okay, so so yeah, so some people have trouble. A lot of people are talking at once in here, it gets kind of like a noisy, that you could spread out a little bit, including you can go into the conference room there in small groups and go in there in the library. And we'll take about 10 minutes for this. And then we'll come back and big group again and debrief on that. So the nice thing is find groups of three and four and have your discussion. So perhaps a few of you a couple of minutes, we could just hear in brief words, what that was like to be part of that reflection. I wasn't part of any of the groups, so for me didn't benefit from any of it. So anything anyone want to share?

Um, what struck me was that oftentimes, the qualities I admire and someone else are like and I envy that, you know, I look at it, it's like, oh, I should be like that, or I'm less than that, or I got that I could convert that into inspiration and admiration and aspiration instead of you know, so I'm less than and they're better. I come comparing. Great, thank you. It's wonderful to hear that grow.

I'm not sure if I'm going to express this well enough but I think as as a result of your talk, and then of the three of us talking, I had this upwelling of kind of, I don't know what to call it, it was just such a beautiful thing because we're so surrounded by violence by horrible news by bad people, bad actions, that just hearing these stories that just filled me with with the realization that I there's some wonderful things here that are safe and beautiful and, and not for glory, not for front page news, just coming from within beautiful people and I just thank you so much for today.

Great, thank you. It would be nice if more of this was in the front. Page

our discussion sort of meandered until it got to the thought about what is it like to be an ethical person in an unethical environment? And, and what, what do you do? How do you? How do you thrive in that? Or how do you continue in that? And

great, even Buddha and the monks went off into the forest somewhere to get away from all the princes and whatnot. What is the what is the best approach? Not going into the forest? And I'm not sure he went into the forest. Exactly. He lived off and for most of his life, right on the interface between the forest and the cities and the princes and the kings, so you know, what's kind of on the edge And perhaps people who are really ethical, a little bit outside of some of the popular currents of culture. But it's a great question you have of how do we live ethically in an ethical world? Because chances are, it's mostly what we have to do anyway. That's what's called on, you know, and there aren't that many societies that stay ethical for very long.

So I had the related but opposite

question.

I was brought up more or less out in an extreme way, but actively to be unethical,

quite actively.

And I spent most of my life thinking that was the way to be. And it's a relatively recent phenomenon. be surrounded by this idea of ethics and ethical behavior and

that is a virtue.

It's just an interesting

view. Great. I appreciate hearing that. It says now that's been a new thing kind of for you to be around virtue and the value of it. What have you learned?

Sure.

Me become more ethical. I have become more ethical. Actually. I guess what I've learned is that being ethical comes quite naturally.

If, if he just used to does now or just a coincidence that does know

because you're older, there's always question not always but often the question comes up.

Maybe I should maybe I should do this differently. Hmm. So what's the question that often arises? So what's changed for you is now now your question, what you're doing and wonder if there's different ways than the usual ways in the past? Well,

yes, and that's a very revealing

question.

I think fantastic. Wonderful. Thank you for that. It's gonna be one more.

We in our group, we talked a little bit about negative influences, and how There can be people in our lives in addition to the people with integrity, there are people in our lives that have to be very maybe set up maybe driven by greed or subtly diluted but very

effective and very.

So I kind of, I experience ethics as being like the opposite of what you say living outside, being an outsider. I mean, I see what your point is, but when the way I experienced it is like, ethical transgressions, kind of, let me be a rebel or let that's kind of like a way of expressing, like power, you know, a sort of a power dynamic or fighting a power dynamic. So like being like being unethical as a way of being like not such an underdog or not totally powerless.

Yeah, that makes sense. That's one of the reasons why people rebel. So, to assert themselves or to, to react against something is already an ethical and ethical society and people rebelled against it and in variety of unethical ways. The question is, is it really wise to do that? Or is there a wiser way of asserting oneself a wiser way of finding oneself in contrast to a society or group of people that are oppressing you or causing problems. So I said, we would do one more, so maybe we should stop. And that was great. Thank you for participating in that. And I hope that this gave you some topics for

reflection. And maybe during the course of the week, you could reflect on on sila, this ethics virtue issue in your life. And I think it's really great to have people to talk to about these topics. So if there's some friends or someone in your family or someone to their total strangers that you can go up to and wherever it's safe and continue these reflections with someone else, that's a great thing to do. And so now we have our second Sunday of the month a tea. So those of you who like to stay please stay and introduce yourself some more to people and, and enjoy the tea and cookies and that one ever wonderful week. Thank you