

Pāramīs (2 of 10) Virtuous Behavior

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Today I will continue with the topic of the *pāramīs*. The second *pāramī* is *sīla*. Sometimes *sīla* is translated as “ethics” or “virtue,” which is often instructive, inspiring, and meaningful to live with. But *sīla* has a different meaning that I think is closer to the original, and is also relevant for developing the *pāramīs*.

The *pāramīs* are ten qualities of character that can be developed. The heart, mind, and character can be developed just like a muscle at a gym. Acting on an impulse of virtue develops our capacity for virtue, strength, and wisdom about how to live from these virtues and qualities.

In places like Burma or Thailand, if a meditator runs into difficulties in meditation that are pretty big obstacles, especially on retreat, it is not uncommon for a teacher to think that person needs to develop a particular *pāramī* – or maybe all of the ten perfections – to have them as a foundation for meditation practice. So the *pāramīs* are often seen as qualities that we develop in daily life. People will choose a *pāramī* because they feel they are short on it, and they would benefit from having more of it. They work on that *pāramī*, making it the theme for a week, a month, or a year in order to develop and become wise about that particular capacity.

The *pāramīs* are a useful guide for practicing in daily life, but more than just daily life. Practice is more than just showing up and being mindful, being aware, open, and clear about what is happening in the present moment. It is also about how we show up for it and how we respond to it. We can respond through present moment awareness with these *pāramīs*.

Yesterday the theme was generosity, and today the theme is *sīla*, a Pali word that often means ethics or virtue. The way it is used in the time of the Buddha, “virtuous conduct” is probably a better translation. *Sīla*, by itself, basically means conduct or behavior. In the context of Buddhist practice, it means conduct that is virtuous or ethical. But Buddhism doesn’t really use the words “virtue” or “ethical.” Those are Western words, so they might be complicating the discussion more than necessary.

In its essence, *sīla* is behavior that does not cause harm. In meditation, we are learning how to not cause harm to ourselves. The whole path of meditation can be described as deeper, fuller, and more complete ways that we are not causing harm. It is a process, and it is only with full enlightenment that a person comes to the stage where there are absolutely zero inclinations, tendencies, and activities of mind and heart toward causing self-harm: they are liberated from that.

Sometimes we talk about being liberated from suffering. The suffering we are liberated from is the suffering that our mind and heart are generating. There is also what we do in the world, and we want to live in a way that causes no harm to others – making no intentional or conscious efforts to cause harm to anyone. This conduct is *sīla*. Generosity and ethical conduct come early in the *pāramīs* because they are the ones that involve behavior, and we sometimes have much more choice about how we physically behave in the world than we do in our thoughts, feelings, and impulses, which arise more deeply.

Likewise, with the highest *pāramī*, equanimity, we might have less control simply deciding that we are going to be equanimous now. But even if you don’t feel like giving something to someone, it is possible to give. This is not quite generosity yet, but it is a physical behavior – you can give. The same way with conduct – we have some control over it; obviously, we can see what our conduct is, we can see what we do with our speech and hands. At least in principle, we sometimes have more agency over what we do with our body and our mouth in relation to whether we are causing harm or not.

One of the important aspects of *sīla* that is like a baseline – we really want to understand that we do not go below this line – is the practice of restraint: we do not do things that cause harm. For lay people, this means the five precepts. They are precepts of restraint. Some people complain that not doing something is a negative teaching, and that life should be more positive. Life should come from beautiful qualities. They do not want to

only be restricted from doing things. That is true, for sure. But we should remember that the baseline, the foundation, of *sīla* is where we start, and from there, we go further. Then we can develop the beautiful *pāramīs* of compassion, generosity, and the rest.

But the bottom line is not causing harm in these five areas: through killing or physically harming people, through stealing from people, through harming people through our sexuality, through false speech, and through taking intoxicating drink or drugs that harm us. The fifth precept is a little bit more variable in how we understand it. Here, it has a lot to do with self-harm. But it is said that all the other precepts are more likely to be violated or broken if a person is intoxicated. It is a way of taking care of others and being safe for them, making it less likely that we will say and do things that we later regret or that cause harm.

The bottom line is simply dedicating ourselves to not being a person who physically or verbally causes harm. That is the dedication of *sīla*. If you are already good at that – no question, you are very straightforwardly, clearly, absolutely someone who causes no harm for anyone, then you are said to be a person endowed with *sīla*, possessed of virtuous conduct. Then you don't have to listen too much to these teachings or think much more about *sīla*.

But in meditation practice, we are learning to notice the subtleties of what we do – the subtle movements of the mind, the ways that we cause stress, tension, contraction, subtle forms of hurt, pain, and distress. These are things that maybe we put up with and do not even notice in daily life. They just seem normal when we are distracted by what we're doing. In meditation, as we get quieter, we see more and more subtle ways in which we enact *dukkha* (stress). And we learn to let go of that – quiet the mind, and quiet those stressful activities.

But in daily life, the sensitivity to subtlety translates to awareness of the subtlest ways that we transmit or cause hurt – especially through our speech, for many of us, but also through our actions. We interrupt people, or someone else is trying to get into a line at the same time as you, and you go a little faster to cut them off. Is that really causing harm? Maybe it is not causing harm, but it is a very subtle form of disrespect. Or we insist that we should have our own way because we should be free to do whatever we want, not noticing that someone else becomes afraid or distressed, not seeing how uncomfortable they feel. It is a pity that we do not take the opportunity to not make them uncomfortable.

For example, people, who have good reason to be very concerned about the coronavirus because they have an immune deficiency, get frightened when they see someone who doesn't wear a mask. Do we just blow off their fear? Do we decide that our ability to do whatever we want and not wear a mask has priority? We can make that policy; we can have that kind of politics. But if we are really attentive inside, we can feel how that attitude probably causes some kind of self-contraction. Also, we are concerned about the subtle forms of harming, and how we may cause other people to be afraid, or contribute to that fear.

It is not that we have a moral obligation to not make people afraid. But as we practice more deeply, there is a greater sensitivity to the meaning of harm and not causing harm. More and more, it becomes a natural tendency to be careful, sensitive, and aware. We discover that there is actually greater ease in the world by not doing anything to assert ourselves in a way that causes harm to others. In fact, more often than not, if we assert ourselves in a way that is harmful or stressful for others, chances are we are also harming ourselves.

I don't want to make that a definitive statement, but I say it so that maybe, as you meditate and discover a more subtle, greater sensitivity to what is here, you will become more sensitive to how asserting yourself over someone else (whether it's your opinion or other things) is sometimes a kind of self-harm. It isn't always self-harm – if other people are harming us, asserting ourselves is not a form of self-harm. But deeper sensitivity to where the harm is, and where the harm is not, and learning how to be careful with that – this has to do with *sīla*. As a minimum, this means the five precepts. They are considered the heart of *sīla*.

In terms of the *pāramīs*, there is no obligation to cultivate them, but they are held up as qualities that are amazingly supportive for the process of liberation. In fact, not only are they supportive for liberation, they are also supportive for the process of compassion. If what we are interested in is a life dedicated to liberation for self and others, and to compassion for self and others, the *pāramīs* are both the support for that, and also an expression of that. The way in which support and expression are the same thing makes it seamless and beautiful to cultivate them.

If (and this is not “you should”) we delve into our fundamental life purpose, intention, or motivation for how we live our life, if it is liberation from suffering, liberation from harm, and compassion – caring for suffering, for the way people get harmed, and trying to ameliorate and end that – this is what the *pāramīs* are for. These are

beautiful motivations in Buddhist terms. This is maybe the most important purpose of human life – to live for these two things. So if this is our purpose, this is what the *pāramīs* support and this is what they allow us to express.

For the next 24 hours, until we talk about the next *pāramī*, I encourage you to consider *sīla* – virtuous conduct that does not cause harm for self and others. Maybe talk to friends about it, reflect on it, practice it the best you can. See what it is like to live with this in the forefront. Write it on a piece of paper and carry it with you to remind you, or put sticky notes someplace. Maybe read about it or listen to a Dharma talk about it.

The reason I encourage you to do that is not only because it is good for its own sake, but also because the *pāramīs* are a journey that unfolds and builds over time, one after the other. If you live with each one for 24 hours, maybe you will start feeling their momentum and growth, and the way they flow from one to the next. And by the time we get to equanimity, it will have much more meaning for you. There are currently over 500 people listening to this. If we knew that all of you were going to live a life of greater, more thorough non-harming, what a great thing to celebrate and appreciate. I thank you all very much.