

Sila (ethics): Stopping more Suffering

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

January 20, 2026 at the Insight Meditation Center, Redwood City, CA

Today, I'd like to continue the series of talks I've been giving on the Eightfold Path. At the beginning of the year, it feels appropriate to talk about these foundational teachings. In my first talk, I discussed how the Eightfold Path is a way to find freedom from the roots of suffering: greed, aversion, and delusion. The path helps to uproot those so there is more freedom, and it does that by offering three trainings: *sila*^[1] (ethics), *samadhi*^[2] (mental development), and *panna*^[3] (wisdom). These three trainings uproot greed, aversion, and delusion in different ways and at different levels of our behavior and our interior life.

In the next talk, I covered Right View and Right Intention. Interestingly, we always list the trainings in the order of *sila*, *samadhi*, *panna*—ethics, mental development, and wisdom—as they are taught in the *suttas*^[4]. However, when listed as the eight factors, the order starts with Right View and Right Intention, which are the wisdom factors. I covered those last week. This week, I'd like to explore the second training: *sila*.

Sometimes when we hear the word "ethics," we think, "Oh, boring. Do we really have to do this?" I'll admit I certainly felt that way once. But Gil and I taught a course at the university on ethics several times, and it was so rich and interesting. There was so much in there that made me think, "Wow, I had no idea."

Ethics training in the context of the Buddhist practice for the ending of suffering is about not adding suffering to our own lives or to the lives of others. It's about not causing harm. We don't do this because we are "supposed" to, but because it helps us find more ease, peace, and freedom. It is part of a larger path toward greater peace. It's not that something terrible will happen if you don't do it; rather, it's that your life will unfold better if you behave ethically.

I remember someone I knew who was going through a messy, acrimonious divorce. It was protracted, and she was feeling heartbroken. She told me that she went to a Dharma teacher and said, "This is happening, and it feels so awful." The teacher said to her, "Hold on to your *sila*, your ethics, as if your life depended on it." She said that was a huge game-changer. Instead of focusing only on how to get through it, she recognized that ethics can be a lifesaver. When you feel like you're drowning, it can be a life preserver that supports you as you experience difficulties.

The Factors of Sila

In the Eightfold Path, *sila* is composed of three factors: Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood. We could also call these "wise" speech, action, and livelihood.

Wise Speech

It starts with Wise Speech, perhaps because as humans, we do a lot of talking. These days, it might not even be with words; it's with our thumbs. Communication is constant, and it is so easy to inadvertently cause harm or allow a little bit of contempt to slip into our words. Even if we don't strictly mean to, you can feel it when you receive a message with a "zing" to it.

The Buddha gave five specific guidelines for ethical speech: is it timely, is it true, is it not harsh, is it beneficial, and is it kind?

Timeliness is so important. I've had practice discussions with people who say, "Well, I told him X, Y, and Z, and it was true!" But just because it's true doesn't mean it was the right time. The right time is not when you are filled with anger, or when the other person is feeling particularly sad. Knowing when to speak is a skill. When we consider timeliness, we start to notice how often we say things just to make ourselves feel better—to get it off our chests—rather than to communicate effectively or connect with others.

Regarding truth, there's a point made by Sam Harris in his book *Lying*. He suggests that it feels like a failure of friendship if you can't speak honestly with someone. If you feel you have to tell "white lies" to your friends because it's easier, you might be missing an opportunity for real connection. Perhaps instead of a white lie, you can find a way to communicate that is timely, true, beneficial, and not harsh.

Speech is powerful. There's a story of a Sufi master who said that words have the power to heal. A student challenged him, saying we need medicine or practice to heal, not just words. The Sufi master responded by insulting the student's practice and appearance until the student felt terrible. Then the master said, "You see the power of words right there. If a few words can make you feel this way, why do you think they don't have the power to heal?" Part of healing is connecting and allowing others to feel seen.

Wise Action

Wise Action is conventionally practiced through the Five Precepts^[5]. These are not commandments, but trainings:

1. **To refrain from killing.**

2. **To refrain from taking that which is not freely offered.** This is a slightly higher bar than just "not stealing." It means waiting until things are offered. If there is ambiguity, just don't take it.
3. **To refrain from sexual misconduct.** This means sexual activity only between consenting adults and honoring commitments. It's about taking care of the vulnerable and recognizing that sexual energy is powerful and can cause deep harm if not respected.
4. **To refrain from false speech.** (This is the "don't lie" component of Right Speech).
5. **To refrain from intoxicants that lead to heedlessness.** The idea is that when intoxicated, you aren't the best version of yourself. You are more likely to break the other precepts and lose your mindfulness.

When I started practicing seriously, I decided to see what it was like to stop drinking alcohol. Not long after making that commitment, I was invited to a wine-tasting event. I didn't think it would be fun if I wasn't drinking, but I was convinced to go. I brought some flavored sparkling water—back then it was just Perrier—and put it in the fridge. I had an enjoyable evening and met new people. At the end, a man came up and asked if I was the one who brought the sparkling water. When I said yes, he said, "Thank you so much. I've only been sober for a few weeks, and it made such a difference to see someone else here who wasn't drinking."

That made my heart soar. We don't always know the impact our ethical behavior has on the world. When you practice Right Speech and Right Action, people start to feel safe around you. You also start to trust yourself. There is something called "the bliss of blamelessness." It's the ease that arises when you know, as best you can, that you haven't done any harm. You don't have anything to hide or be ashamed of. Humans make mistakes, but *sila* means you have intentionally chosen a different way.

Wise Livelihood

The third factor is Wise Livelihood. Initially, I wondered if the path to freedom really included what job you have. But we spend decades of our lives at our jobs. We are training our minds and behaviors through our livelihood.

Livelihood isn't just how you earn income; it includes being a parent, a caretaker, or being retired. These are all places to practice wise speech and action. The people we spend time with at work influence us. I remember in middle school, I had a friend who convinced me to shoplift some eyeshadow. We got caught immediately—a tap on the shoulder from the store manager. My mom suggested I take a break from that friend. At the time, I didn't want to, but later I could see how much easier and better I felt when I wasn't around that influence.

The Buddha said very little about livelihood compared to the other factors. He mainly said to refrain from trafficking in living beings, meat, weapons, poisons, and intoxicants. Essentially: don't make it easy for others to cause harm.

We can expand this to ask: is there a way our livelihood can benefit others? There are so many helping professions—educating, repairing things, building things. When I was a biochemist doing cancer research, our CEO would send company-wide emails saying, "This month we helped X number of patients with this new drug." It felt important to me that I was helping to make drugs that saved lives or reversed blindness. That sense of connection and benefit is powerful.

Conclusion

Sila is the path to greater peace and freedom. It is a way to provide safety to ourselves and others. This creates a softening and opening of the heart, allowing us to meet the world without feeling we have to brace against it.

The Eightfold Path begins with wisdom (Right View, Right Intention), moves to ethics (Speech, Action, Livelihood), and the final training is *samadhi*—effort, mindfulness, and concentration—which I will discuss in the next talk.

I'll stop there and see if there are any comments or questions. Thank you.

Q&A and Reflections

Question: If we're at a protest for a noble cause, is it skillful to raise our voice, be passionate, and shout? Or is that not skillful?

Diana Clark: It depends on what we're shouting. Sometimes shouting is what's needed. I heard about a protest where people chained themselves to a building. They were very polite to the police, but their presence was an ordeal for the authorities to manage. There wasn't hostility or hatred, yet they made their protest known. That's very different from shouting "MF-ers" and things like that. You can protest without being filled with hatred.

Comment (Ann): I was thinking about how it's not just the person you help, but the person *that* person is helping. At a biotech firm I worked for, the head of the department once did a theatrical presentation with transparencies, showing all the labs and diseases our service department was responsible for supporting. It was a reminder that we are a lynchpin for a whole world out there.

Diana Clark: Thank you, Ann. That's a lovely point. It's not just the first level of impact.

Comment: I remember when I first found Buddhism in 2001. My self-esteem was at a nadir, and I was very depressed. I felt hopeless, but I thought, "There's one thing I can do." I gave up eating meat because I knew how harmful the industry was to animals. Doing that one thing—just doing less harm—tided me over for several months until I found the Dharma. It made a big difference.

Diana Clark: That's beautiful. Orienting toward "What can I do to make a difference?" or "How can I do less harm?" can be so powerful. Thank you for sharing that.

Today is Martin Luther King Jr. Day. I feel humbled to speak on a day dedicated to someone so tremendous. He showed us ways to be in the world that are not driven by hatred. As he said, "Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

Thank you all. I wish you a wonderful rest of the evening and safe travels home.

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1. **Sila:** A Pali word meaning ethical conduct, morality, or virtue. [↵](#)
 2. **Samadhi:** Often translated as "concentration" or "mental collectedness," it refers to the training of the mind through meditation and effort. [↵](#)
 3. **Panna:** The Pali word for "wisdom" or "insight," specifically into the nature of reality (impermanent, suffering, and not self). [↵](#)
 4. **Suttas:** The collected discourses or teachings attributed to the Buddha. [↵](#)
 5. **Five Precepts:** The basic code of ethics for lay Buddhist followers. [↵](#)

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