Morality (Sīla)

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:00:10

So it looks like you all survived the first day.

I know something about when we went last night from the orientation period to the period of the intensive retreat. Some staff people were telling me they could just feel the whole energy of the place change in quite a wonderful way. And I'm actually quite jealous of all of you beginning in this amazing endeavor. Whether you've never done it before or you've done it six times before, it doesn't matter, because it's new and exciting and insightful. I really think it's the most wonderful thing one could do with three months of one's life. And it's a pleasure to be here.

Last night, when we opened the retreat, Steve and Sharon offered the refuges and the precepts. We did that not just because it's tradition and a nice thing to do. Regarding the precepts, as Steve said, it's much more than tradition or something to pay a little bit of attention to in order to get on with the real practice. Working with morality—which is a translation we can come up with for sīla, the Pali word—is really a very integral, very important part of the path, part of our practice.

In the Buddha's teachings, there are three major areas of training: sīla, or morality; samādhi, often translated as concentration; and paññā, or wisdom. And in the Eightfold Path, three of those steps are concerned with sīla. So it's not something to be seen as inferior or not as interesting or lesser. For one thing, it's the actual foundation on which our practice is built. And for another thing, I find working with morality, working with sīla, to be a very fascinating, incredibly insightful, and increasingly subtle form of practice.

Often in the beginnings of my own practice—and maybe for a lot of us here in the West—we have tended to want to skip over the morality part of things, the sīla part. Give it more cursory attention and get on to the really interesting stuff: working with concentration, working with wisdom.

One of our Asian teachers has often used an analogy: it's as if we get in a rowboat and really work hard, row really hard to get somewhere, but we forget to untie it from the dock. Working with meditation without giving due attention to our actions, the ground from which we move, is like doing that. It's the ground from which samādhi and wisdom can grow.

In the discourse that's considered his last discourse, called the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta—it's actually a series of discourses that he made as he was going around on his farewell tour—in about eleven out of the fourteen places that he spoke, the Buddha gave a little brief synopsis saying: such and such is morality, such and such is concentration, such and such is wisdom. And he really emphasized that concentration,

when it is imbued with morality, brings great fruit and profit. And wisdom, when it's imbued with concentration, brings great fruit and profit. The mind imbued with wisdom becomes completely free from the corruptions of mind—of sense desire, becoming, false views, and ignorance. So let us not miss the significance of the fact that the ground, the root, of this is morality. No part of the path can exist in isolation. It's a very holistic, integrated path.

I want to share some thoughts and reflections about the practice of morality, the practice of sīla, mostly from my own experience. Because I think in itself, it's not a practice we do just to get concentrated—well, if I follow the precepts then when I sit my mind will be calm, I can get concentrated. It's a very powerful and vital and fascinating practice in itself.

My experience of it has been that it's a real practice of the heart. It's moved from perhaps a sense of acquiescence to an outer authority—a sense of the rules that we're told to follow, that makes sense rationally, but is an outer acquiescence—to what becomes an inner expression of greater harmony. Harmony both with the external environment, with other people, and also a sense of harmony in our own being.

As we continue to work with harmonizing our actions outwardly, it leads to a much deeper understanding in our own heart of the interrelatedness of all of us—of me with the world. It comes to be a really deep, inward, personal experience when we begin to move from being out of harmony.

For example, in the beginning one might know: okay, one of the precepts is not to speak harshly to other people. And one tries not to do it out of memory, out of remembering this isn't a good thing to do, conforming to a sense of outer authority. Over time, what's begun to happen for me is that if I'm not paying attention and I speak harshly or thoughtlessly in a way that's difficult or unpleasant, the pain that it causes the other person doesn't exist in isolation. I almost immediately feel, almost cellularly, a sense of something being off—that I've moved out of harmony. That sense of interrelatedness grows stronger because how can one isolate the pain? I spoke harshly. It hurt that person. But it also hurt me. There's not really a separation anymore.

And that sense of inner, visceral understanding comes to get stronger and stronger, so that the power and subtlety of our experience of harmony, of interrelatedness, also strengthens as we work with the precepts. We just naturally find ourselves becoming more harmonized with each other, with the environment, with ourselves.

The Buddhist concept of sila, morality, is not a sense of working with sin or working with judgment. It's not that there's a set of actions labeled as bad—if you do them you're wrong, if you don't do them you're right, and if you do them you should really judge yourself as being a bad person. This is what I love about Buddhism. It's much more straightforward than that and really nonjudgmental, but clearly observable. It's a morality of intention.

What's really important in working with our actions, working with our speech, is the intention, the volition that motivates our actions, that informs our actions. Actions are considered, in Buddhist psychology, either skillful or unskillful—which is a little less judgmental sounding than good or bad, good or evil. The skillfulness or unskillfulness depends purely on the motivation, the mental states that accompany the intention that leads to the action. This is the area where I find it so subtle and so fascinating.

All thought, speech, and action comes from a volitional force. It's moved by a volitional force. And as the volitional force gets stronger, we move from thought to speech to deed. For example, the last time I was on retreat, for some reason the idea of wanting a pair of pink shoes came up and decided to hang around for several days. That's one level of volition—there was some wanting, some greed informing that thought when it would arise. The next strongest level would be coming out of retreat, going home, and telling my mother I wanted a pink pair of shoes. That's a stronger movement of volition, still motivated by greed. And then the third and strongest is when I get in the car and drive half an hour to some store to look around specifically for a pink pair of shoes.

Again, it's not a question of it being bad or wrong to want shoes, but simply to notice: what is the intention? What are the mental factors in the mind that are leading to this series of actions? In this case, the mental factor would be one of greed.

Now, it's also possible to perform the same series of actions without it being an unskillful action at all. If, for example, it's simply clear that your shoes are run down and you need to get a pair of shoes to walk, and it's done very simply, very straightforwardly as the obvious thing to do without a lot of wanting or greed in it, then that's fine. That's just an action of taking care of your needs.

This is what's so interesting about working with morality in this sense. The same action could be a very skillful, wholesome action, or it could be motivated by very unskillful, unwholesome qualities of mind. From the outside, someone else wouldn't necessarily be able to tell the difference. And that's where it becomes such an interesting and powerful practice for us—to begin paying attention to what we're doing in this way, to what's motivating our actions.

Another example of this: there is a sutta where a monk who was supposedly an arhat—which means completely enlightened and therefore incapable of acting out of hatred or avarice—was blind. Doing walking meditation back and forth in the forest, he was stepping on ants and killing them. Some monks were quite puzzled, upset about it, and went to the Buddha saying, "He's supposed to be an arhat and he's killing all these ants. It doesn't jive."

The Buddha said, "Yes, but his intention is completely pure. He has no way of knowing that there are ants there, and there's nothing in his intention that has anything to do with anger or hatred or wanting to kill." Whereas when we're walking, sometimes there's no way to avoid stepping on ants, or we simply can't see them. But there's also a time when one could be walking and there's a line of ants, and you could choose to

go around it or just choose to go through it out of frustration or whatever. That's a completely different act. It's an act that has concomitance in the mind—the intention is motivated by some form of aversion. And so the same act can have quite different moral implications.

Another way of looking at it is when there's not actually any intent of aversion, but we might find ourselves conforming to rules of behavior—even the precepts, for example. Perhaps one takes them on here because it's what's expected, because it's what one is said to do, and the motive of taking them on could be out of a sense of wanting to be accepted. It could be out of a sense of deceit—that we do something, any kind of action, in order to fit in with society or to gain respect, when our actual feelings are that it's foolish, or we're actually looking down on that kind of behavior. There are all kinds of ways one can act where the outward behavior doesn't jive with the inner motivation. And so then the intention isn't skillful even though the acts might seem to be so.

But the good news about this is that we're very trainable. Human beings in this realm are very trainable. We're not just stuck with these confusing intentions in our mind that we can't always see. So even if we begin practicing sila, if we begin working with the precepts purely from an intention of wanting to belong, and there's not an inner sense of working with harmony or of wanting to train our minds, and we're using them totally as an outer reference—

I really feel like that's okay, because even at that level of bringing some sense of control, of non-harming to our actions, we begin to develop a great sense of power and control over our body and speech just by deliberately refraining from certain harmful actions and speech. And this sense of power leads to a calmness, a quietness of the mind and heart.

Think, for example, of the difference between when you've just had a big blowout with somebody—you've completely lost it and vented your frustration up and down—and then you come to sit. The mind is whirling with remorse, or if not remorse, with all the things you wish you'd said that you didn't think of at the time. Either way, you're whirling in anger. Having a cool and steady mind isn't very possible at that time.

When we've been working with the precepts, even just as an outer reference point, and we come to sit, that level of remorse and whirling mind simply isn't going to be as present, especially over time. That's actually one of the real values of a retreat situation, the way we have it set up here. Just by default, there are many things you can't do or say that you might have more temptation to do or say at another time. And so it's very helpful for developing calmness and steadiness of mind.

As we develop more calmness, as we continue to act in a way that shows great respect, a great sense of oneness with others—which is really what acting in accord with the precepts is, acting from a sense of our oneness with all beings—we actually begin to have enough quietness of mind to see and experience for ourselves that this is actually true. We experience more the effects of our actions. We experience more that sense of oneness with others, and the clarity and serenity that develops in us as we're not acting so

much from rampant anger or greed or delusion.

Even starting out with a motivation that one might not think is so skillful will still lead to a development of the heart and a sense of power and purity. Then it becomes much easier to continue developing right action, because it begins to spring from our inner reference point, from our own experience. Little bells begin to go off when we're doing something out of harmony. And this in turn strengthens a sense of loving-kindness and compassion for others, and it's a powerful ground for the arising of wisdom.

So from dead conforming to an outer authority, it can become a very active participation in learning to live in inner and outer harmony. Very powerful.

What I want to do now is share some of my own thoughts and reflections, and those of others, on working specifically with some of these areas of morality, using the basic five precepts as a reference point. I find it so subtle that as the years go on, it's not nearly as straightforward as it sounded at first. But it's become fascinating, a very rich field of investigation.

In working with not killing, both here on retreat and in our daily life, I've had many experiences over the years of seeing that this isn't nearly as cut and dry as it sounds. Generally, most of us here figure that we're not into killing—human beings, we're not even talking about that, or larger animals. Even with insects, we can agree in principle that killing is not a good idea. We wouldn't want to do it.

But it's much more than just restraining from an aggressive act, a kind of passive sense of action. It expands from not killing to the whole field of non-harming, of including all beings in an active sense, an active understanding of moving from a place of non-harming, which is actively wishing other beings well. It comes around to the cultivation of loving-kindness.

As Robert Aitken says, "The practice of peace and harmony is peace and harmony, not some technique designed to induce them." So the way we work with it is simply in being in a situation: How can I relate to this being, to this situation, to myself, in a way that comes from peace and harmony, that will contribute to peace and harmony?

Even at the level of not killing, this can get much more complicated than it would seem. What about when one is working in gardens and bugs have decimated the garden? There are many inner decisions one has to make about how to work with that. Or cockroaches—we've had over the years varying degrees of infestations here, and hours and hours of discussions in board meetings about what to do. There's no sense of a right or wrong answer. I'm not trying to say what I think is right or wrong, because ultimately there's no one out there who can say, "This is the right thing to do." It's much more of a vital practice when we're connected inwardly with the external situation, the whole situation, seeing what motivates our decisions, what motivates our desires, how we want to act in that situation.

There's the story of a Zen center in Minneapolis, I think it was, that was becoming infested with cockroaches. The students went to the Roshi and said, "The cockroaches are so bad they're crawling all

over people when they come into the Zendo to sit. People are stopping coming because it's too disgusting. What should we do? If we don't do something to kill the cockroaches, people will stop coming. But on the other hand, we don't want to kill."

And he said, "I'm not going to tell you what to do. You wouldn't be learning that way."

The real power of sila comes when we're acting from our own connection and understanding.

Similar here, once when I was manager at the center, we owned the house across the street but at the time we were renting it to a couple who had gone away for a while. They had cats, which I guess they'd given away or something. And the place became completely infested with fleas—to where I walked over to check it out, was there really no more than thirty seconds, walked out, and my legs were just covered with fleas. Clearly unlivable. And clearly we had the responsibility to make the house livable.

What do you do? What I did was call the exterminators. And I don't know if that was right or not. I just know that I had to really examine my motivation. There was certainly a sense of aversion to the fleas. There was also a sense of these people can't live here with it like that—so there was some compassion for the people living there. A lot of mix of motivations, and the need to make some kind of decision.

The other thing I find so interesting and helpful about this form of morality, the way it's passed down to us in Buddhism and the way I relate to it, is that each action becomes a field of learning. It's not as if, "Oh, I've broken the precept and that's it for my life, now I'm damned." Rather, if I'm willing to bring real care and attention to investigating the situation—my motivations and intentions, the results of my actions both outwardly and inwardly—then the whole thing becomes an opportunity. Is there a lot of remorse? Did I act too hastily? Do other possibilities suggest themselves later? We can use it as fodder for growth, for the development of compassion and insight and wisdom, rather than, "Well, that situation's done, I broke the precept, okay, forget it, on to the next." It's not separate like that.

And so there's also no necessity for self-blame, or for blaming someone else. Blame just doesn't have anything to do with it. It's much more about investigation, working with a sense of connectedness of the heart. What I've found is there's often no outside answer. No one else in that situation could have told me what was the right thing to do. It was clear that whatever anyone said was just their opinion. And then there was my opinion, and I was the one who had to act.

Some other questions come to my mind in working with this area of non-harming in our lives. Again, these are just questions—I'm not pretending to have any answers.

What are the implications in our minds, in our lives, of the violence in our culture? Of the violence in the movies that we watch? In the things that we choose to put into our minds, or the minds of our children? Is that an aspect of non-harming? Is it harmful to support the making of movies like that? I don't know. These are just questions that arise.

On the other hand, can we ignore that this is the kind of thing that goes on in the world—the degree of violence, the degree of drugs and crime—and just watch movies about Bambi so we don't have to put it in? Even Bambi has some harsh sequences in it. I don't know. These are things that I wrestle with.

What are the implications of living in a culture such as ours, that's so rich, that is using so much of the world's resources? I consider myself a part of that culture—I'm using so much of the world's resources. And is that at the expense of some of the countries where there's starvation and people are dying? Is that an area where I need to look at working with non-harming? And how far do we take it? Who can say where one draws the lines?

But I've found for myself, as the sense of non-harming becomes more and more imbued in me, so to speak—and certainly I have a long way to go—the implications of my actions seem to ripple out more and more in my awareness. I'm just aware of implications that I never would have even considered some years ago.

And how about killing through indifference? An example I've often used for myself: if I get in a bathtub or take a shower, if I don't have my glasses on and there's a little black dot on the floor, I can't tell if it's a piece of fuzz or if it's an ant or a roach or whatever. And if I just don't feel like bending down—

then it's 50-50. It could be a bug, especially in some of the bathrooms around here. And there are times that I've turned the water on and seen this squiggle and seen that out of a basic laziness and indifference I've allowed something to be killed. And then I wonder, well, does my indifference to certain aspects of the environment help to kill the planet that we're living on? These are questions—I'm not saying this is true—but they're questions that come up in my mind.

So those are some of the things that come up for me around working with non-harm and the precept of not killing. And you can see that to really give attention to our actions in this way, it's much more than a blind kind of dead practice. We become very alive. In whatever we're doing, we're actually bringing mindfulness to our intentions, to our actions, in anything that we're doing. And our life becomes much more vital, much more connected, much more alive.

The second precept is working with not stealing. Again, as with all of them, it's much more than the passive act of not taking something that belongs to someone else. That's a good place to start, but it's much more than that. Again, it's intention. It's moving from an understanding of the oneness of all of us, beginning with understanding that that person likes that article, so I won't take it because I wouldn't like it if someone took what belonged to me.

But it's also cultivating a sense of inner contentment, of really seeing that the self and the world are just as they are in this moment. And in this moment, that's enough. This is a very powerful, very peaceful and connected way to live—much more than just a passive abstention from unskillful action.

And so it becomes not just about stealing objects. When we're working with this understanding of inner

contentment, we see how much a sense of gaining, a gaining idea, permeates our experience. Stealing comes from a sense of inner poverty, of "I need something else in this moment to make things okay"—a sense of gaining, a sense of wanting. And in the moment that we're moving from that sense of gaining, we're actually stealing from ourselves the possibility of experiencing contentment in that moment. Stealing from ourselves the possibility of being able to appreciate what's here in this moment. Being able to even see the truth in this moment and appreciate that, because the mind is so busy moving out trying to gain something else.

I'll read this from the Tao Te Ching that expresses this very beautifully to me:

Fill your bowl to the brim and it will spill.
Keep sharpening your knife and it will blunt.
Chase after money and security and your heart will never unclench.
Care about people's approval and you will be their prisoner.
Do your work, then step back.
The only path to serenity.

This expresses very beautifully what the precept of not stealing, not gaining, is about.

So then again the possible ramifications of working in this way begin to come up into the mind. In our culture—we have a great culture for talking about these kinds of things, but I don't mean to imply that it's only in our culture—it seems though, how does advertising work? The whole point of it is to get our greed activated. If we happen to be feeling content, to do whatever possible to pull us out of that sense of contentment and make us want something else. Just read a magazine, look at the ads, go for a walk in a mall. And if you're just going to CVS to buy a toothbrush, on the way you pass racks and racks of clothes and shoes and records, all displayed so that you can hardly walk by without just being drawn in.

I've taken friends from India who hadn't been to this country before to a mall. And it's fascinating, also painful, to watch. Because to me it was like they were just manifesting what my mind does all the time. But we've been trained at least to restrain it a little because we're so bombarded. But it's like just a kid let loose in a candy store—oh my God, look at all this stuff! And hours and hours in stores.

Literally, one friend of mine spent five hours in a store like Kmart or something. Five hours just going around, looking at things. And it's stuff we're so glutted with that we could pass by now. But if we were taken into some really fancy store, we might do the same thing. It's just enacting the way our minds work. And so much of our culture is built on this. Is it stealing? Is it taking what is not given? Is it conducive to non-harming?

If our growing perception of our needs or our wants leads big corporations—that we support through buying from them—to take land and resources from other poorer countries and not really pay back what it's worth in a meaningful way... I don't know. And how far does one go in working in this way?

This is what Gandhi said about not stealing: "We are not always aware of our real needs, and most of us improperly multiply our wants and thus unconsciously make thieves of ourselves. If we devote some thought to the subject, we shall find that we can get rid of quite a number of our wants. One who follows the observance of non-stealing will bring about a progressive reduction of their own wants. Much of the distressing poverty in this world has arisen out of the breaches of the principle of non-stealing."

Again, it's certainly not my intention to make us guilty or wrong, or to suggest we should all throw up what we're doing, turn off the heat, and just wear a lot more clothes until it's sub-freezing. I'm not saying that. I'm simply bringing up areas for our own internal investigation—how much of what I want is actually necessary.

And again, it's not about coming down as an outer authority with a club and saying, "Right, you don't need this, you don't need this," and then just sitting there a mass of craving because you're not letting yourself have something. That's not it. That's not where wisdom is going to come from. It's much more about examining that movement of craving, that movement of wanting, and seeing how that movement itself is what takes us away from the experience of inner contentment, from the experience of peace and the ability to see clearly.

So in working with our outer actions through abiding by the precepts, we might actually begin to find—if we do it with awareness, paying attention to the results and our own inner experience—that we do begin to cultivate a much deeper sense of inner contentment and harmony. And that gives us the clarity, the space, the peace to actually begin to see and appreciate the truth of the moment. It's only when we're able to appreciate and even be with the truth of the moment that any kind of liberating insight can arise. As long as we're busy trying to get something else, that's impossible.

Just a little about the other three precepts, for the sake of time. The third one, not misusing sex—of course here for the course of a retreat one is celibate. I just want to say that this is not out of a sense of rejecting sexual energy or looking on it with aversion. But in working with sexual energy outside of a retreat, it comes back again to intention. What is the intention of our acts? Are we moving out of a sense of non-harming, of caring and connection? Are we respecting and honoring our own commitments and other people's commitments? Are we using our sexual energy for a sense of personal power, or to feed a loneliness, or just for fun?

This is not to say this is right and this is wrong, but to use the area of relationship—the area of sexuality—as a very powerful, very important area of learning and understanding. And again, coming back to the motivation, to the intentions in our action.

Here, when we're just sitting, not acting in that way at all, we have the opportunity to simply see what arises in the mind and appreciate the power of that energy. It can be very powerful. As our mindfulness develops and strengthens, we might begin to see aspects of our intention, our desire, that maybe we wouldn't see if we had the opportunity to act. Because it's such a strong energy that—God knows—it's

really easy to get involved without seeing everything we're doing clearly. In fact, I don't know too many people who've ever gotten involved with someone else who did see everything about their intentions clearly. It would amaze me if someone told me they had. But here we just get to sit and look at it. A lot can be learned about our motivations and intentions in this area—again, not as a judgment, not as "I'm such a bad person," but just to see the power of the mental factors that drive us, both skillful and unskillful ones.

And again, in working with the precepts, the baseline is not bringing harm to anyone. Often I feel that in working in the area of sexuality, we sometimes forget that in not bringing harm to anyone involved, that also includes ourselves—we're one of the people involved.

The fourth precept, right speech, has several factors to it, several areas. Very, very interesting. And I find in some ways one of the most difficult areas to work with, because we talk so much. I personally find it so hard to be aware of the intention of my speech before it's out of my mouth. I often don't know what I'm going to say until it's out of my mouth. So I find a lot of the practice of right speech is in the actual investigation—sometimes prior to what I say, or during what I say, or after what I say. But again, not as a way to make yourself wrong or bad.

If we can begin to look at these areas as interesting, as investigations, rather than as another way to prove what a rotten person we are, then it becomes much more workable. When we're working with wrong speech and we say, "Oh no, I blew it again," and that becomes another way to beat ourselves up, it's very hard to continue to investigate with any kind of clarity.

The first part and perhaps the most powerful aspect of right speech is of course not lying. Just recently I was part of a retreat that we did in the city—a non-residential nine-day retreat where people would come and sit all weekend but go home at night. Then during the week they would work all day and come to the center to sit every night from six-thirty to ten. As a daily life practice, while people were working during the week, we were all working on the area of right speech.

And we took a different part of it to look at in our day each day, and then we would discuss it when we came together in the evening. Really interesting discussions.

And this one of not lying—I think all of us were a little cocky. "I don't lie. I mean, I don't go around lying to people. I know that." I think we all, no one said it, but I just have a feeling we all thought that. And when we came together to talk about it that first evening, it was amazing. It was so interesting because on some level, in some way, I don't think there was one of us there who hadn't lied. And many levels of subtlety to lying were brought out in the discussion.

First, a couple of people knew that they had lied very consciously because they felt it was required in their job. They were salespeople for a computer firm, and they felt that their job required them to color what they were trying to sell so people would buy it. And they really felt that they were telling outright lies, and that was just the way that the job went. Really interesting, and a lot of nods around the room. "Yeah, that's

what it's like. That's what the job is like." That, I have to say, surprised me because I've been living in this environment for so long. But I imagine that's not so unusual.

Other people brought out how they felt they lied through their actions—that they were sitting at work pretending to be really busy so no one would bother them, and actually they weren't doing a thing.

This one I strongly related to. I myself had been in a situation where I knew something about a friend that I was not allowed to tell—he didn't want anyone else to know it. And another friend asked me a point-blank question that specifically spoke to what I knew. It required a yes or no answer. And to say, "Well, I know but I can't disclose it" would have also given the answer. So I told an outright lie. And what was interesting was I didn't really quite get it at that moment that I was telling a lie. I didn't really quite get it until we were talking about it that night. Really, it was quite humbling.

And then, of course, all the gradations of colorations of truth—whether in the way we describe a conversation that we had with someone else to a third party. How strong is the temptation to just slightly exaggerate what one said? Just subtly shift it so that you come off sounding much more wise and balanced than one really was. Or if your tendency is to put yourself down, you come off sounding like more of a jerk than you really were. Just these subtle gradations. Or a slight exaggeration of something for effect, to make a better story.

And what's the motivation behind these subtle colorations of the truth? It seems really minor and passes by unnoticed quite often. When I start really paying attention to it, sometimes it's appalling actually how easily these subtle colorations can slip out of my mouth. But it's really interesting to just stop—for me to just stop and examine, well, what was the point of that? And often I can see there was some need to protect an image I hold of myself, or wanting to project a certain image onto somebody else of what I want them to think I am. Sometimes it's got nothing to do with me and it just makes a better story. And in telling a better story, it might be at the expense of some other person who's in the story.

Or even if it doesn't involve a person at all, when I watch the tendency to just subtly color or exaggerate, I find that the effect it has on my mind is of slightly less respect for the power of truth. It's like in that moment somehow I'm not quite willing to be fully present with the truth just as it is in this moment. And that willingness to be present with the truth is in some ways the base root of the practice. I mean, the practice is about seeing the truth, accepting it just as it is in this moment, however it is. And I can see how the tendency of my mind to want to just change it a little bit so it's a little more comfortable or a little more interesting—I can see that tendency of mine working in my meditation practice. When one gets really still and is noting, there's a subtle "I don't really want to note that one, I'd much rather note this one." Which things does the mind choose to pay attention to? And why? And really important, looking at the why.

Other areas of speech—harsh speech. Again, a very tricky area, because it's not to deny that anger arises.

But again, it's the motivation. Moving from a sense of oneness. How do we speak to other people? Is our intention one of making ourselves right? Making someone else wrong? What's the effect when we talk in a harsh way, a sarcastic way? I tend to use sarcasm a lot, and when I really look, the intention might be to get a cheap laugh at the expense of somebody else. It's subtle, but it's there.

The same applies to other aspects of speech: divisive speech, fault-finding, gossip. Obviously we would agree we don't want to put people down. We're not here to find fault with people—that's obviously some unskillful motivation. But even gossip, which can be rampant... it's so frequent that I find myself in conversations that are about other people. And often not putting other people down, not with any intention of saying we're right and they're wrong. But it's entertainment. It starts from genuine interest, and I'm working in the area now of watching when the genuine interest moves into an area of entertainment. If I pay attention inwardly, the whole feeling of my relationship to the conversation shifts at that moment. And it doesn't feel wholesome. It's just a feeling of kind of tightness, of dullness, a slight unpleasantness. It doesn't feel wholesome.

If I continue in that vein, when I come out of the conversation, I'm feeling much heavier, much less clear. And every once in a while I can not only notice this but actually stop having the conversation—which is really nice to know that that's possible.

I've also noticed several times in conversations with close friends where it somehow drifted into subtly saying slight negative things about someone. They were true but not really necessary. And I noticed it and just came in and said something positive that was also true. I was amazed because I found that what that did was just end the conversation absolutely. Oh right, it was over. It was kind of strange—really seeing how that negative energy was kind of feeding on itself in a way that was of no benefit to anyone, especially to me and the person in the conversation.

Again, the sense of oneness, the sense of non-harming. There's no way to put down other people and not have that affect oneself. The person that one's harming the most, the one bringing the most pain and the most confusion to, is really oneself.

This is a contemporary way of talking about the precept of right speech. I want to share these Tiep Hien precepts, which came from a group of social workers in Vietnam who were working with Thich Nhat Hanh during the Vietnam War. They formed a kind of lay order—not monks, but a lay order of engaged Buddhism. These precepts are based on the Buddhist precepts, but they also include other aspects of working with the mind, of working with morality in an engaged way. I'm not going to read them all, just these two that have to do with right speech. I really appreciate them because they offer a contemporary way of grappling with these aspects in the world.

Number eight: Do not utter words that can create discord and cause the community to break. All efforts should be made to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small they may be.

Number nine: Do not say untruthful things for the sake of personal interest or to impress people. Do not utter words that cause division and hatred. Do not spread news that you do not know to be certain. Do not criticize and condemn things that you are unsure of. Always speak truthfully and constructively. Have the courage to speak out about situations of injustice, even when it may threaten your own safety.

So it's what is true and what is useful.

The fifth precept I won't really go into, but obviously in taking intoxicants that cloud the mind, it becomes very difficult to pay attention to these subtleties of our intention and motivation in the other areas of morality. It's just so much easier to do things that are unskillful, that are harmful to ourselves and others, when our mind is clouded.

We just become heedless.

As we continue to perform wholesome deeds, our actions begin to flow more and more from our own inner understanding. They come less from a motive of personal gain—"if I do this, then I'll have a better rebirth, then I'll get enlightened, then people will like me," whatever it might be. They come less and less from any personal motive, and more and more from a sense of loving-kindness, compassion, and connectedness between all beings. And then the actual purpose does become leading to freedom, to emancipation.

The practice of sila in this way becomes a very powerful purification of our mind and body. It prepares the groundwork for the deeper purifications that come through the practice of concentration and the development of wisdom.

What we call defilements are actually these powerful mental forces of greed and anger, confusion, envy. The really strong forces—the ones that lead us to what are called the defilements of transgression, to perform truly harmful acts like killing someone—these are overcome through our work with morality, with sila. We can become purified to the extent that we won't do these anymore.

But as you sit here, you'll see that these mental forces can come up in another way. The forces of greed, the forces of anger—they'll come up over and over and over as you sit here, in what is called the obsessive defilements. And that's where the power of concentration comes in, because the power of concentration overcomes these obsessive defilements. And that allows us to begin to see what's happening in this moment. And that can lead to the arising of wisdom, which can uproot these forces altogether.

So this practice of sila will lay the groundwork for the practice of our meditation, and hopefully for our further purification, growth, and understanding.

Let's sit for a couple of minutes.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.