Right Action

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 46:58

The end of the second full day. Right, right. That's usually what the second full day is like. No problem. You won't even remember this in December. If you're still here, please wait through it.

Tonight what I want to talk about is a huge topic, but I want to address it a little bit: sila, which is translated variously—none of which I'm crazy about—as morality or ethical conduct, the part of our path that comes under the heading of right action.

As most of you know, when the Buddha spoke of the path that leads us to liberation, he spoke of it as an eightfold path, having eight parts. And really we can't practice the meditation in isolation. I mean, we can if we want to, but it doesn't work very well. The Buddha was very pragmatic when he laid out this path of eight parts. The first two steps deal with wisdom, with understanding. The second three steps deal with our speech and action in the world, specifically right speech, right action, and right livelihood. And then the last three steps deal more formally with meditation: mindfulness, concentration, and energy. None of these are isolated—it's not just isolated to meditation—but that's more specifically it. It's a very comprehensive and integrated path.

What I've found in myself over the years, especially in the early part of my practice, is that I would tend to put more emphasis on the meditation and the understanding aspects of the path and give cursory attention to sila, to right action. I would totally agree that I want to live a life of non-harming, but when I say cursory attention, I mean somehow not taking this part of sila, this part of the path, as just as valuable and deep and profound a practice as the formal meditation practice itself.

My opinion is that in the West, the way this practice of vipassana has come down to us, it's been taken out of the context of the culture in which it's been propagated and held in Southeast Asia all these 2,500 years. There the meditation occurs in the midst of a culture—for example, I spent some time in Thailand—that really values all segments of the Eightfold Path, including a very strong reverence and respect for the power of working with sila, with actions.

In the monasteries, in most monasteries that are anywhere near people, and they almost all are, the lay people would come at least once a week to hear teachings and to take the five precepts, to renew in themselves their commitment to working with speech and action. Sometimes the people could stay on overnight to do some meditation, or longer for weeks or months. In many cases the meditation isn't taught in these isolated retreats. People come to the monasteries, they can meditate, they go to their lives. It's all of a piece. And when they come to the monastery or they go back home, it's in and out of a culture that can hold the whole picture—a culture that respects not only the meditation but also the sila part of their

everyday life. It's much more integrated, and so the emphasis on our actions is much stronger.

Here I often feel we've taken the retreat form because it's a good way to practice in this way and get the information across and really investigate. But it's so separated from our culture. In many cases when we go back out of a meditation retreat, even the basic respect for non-harming behavior is often lacking. There's not a sense of support. I've been reflecting on this a lot lately and feeling that this is one of the things that has helped me take so long to come to respect deeply, as I do now, the power of practicing attention to my speech and actions as a really beautiful path and a path of liberation.

The Buddha said in the last discourse before he died—actually it's a whole story of several months before he died—he said, "Concentration, when imbued with sila, with ethical behavior, brings great fruit and profit. Wisdom, when imbued with concentration, brings great fruit and profit. The mind which is imbued with wisdom can become completely free from the corruptions or the confusions of sense desire, becoming, false views, and ignorance." And he went around saying this over and over and over.

So concentration brings fruit when it's imbued with sila. On a very simple level, we can see this quite clearly. Concentration, one description of it, is a steadiness, a calmness, a unification of mind. Sila really means harmony—harmony of our inner attitude and our actions, and so harmony with others and with the world. Concentration, this integration of mind, is not really possible without harmony. And you'll have plenty of time to see that here, or in life outside of here.

You do some unskillful action—tell a fib, or yell at somebody, or take something that isn't yours—and then go sit. It's really hard to feel in harmony. The mind spins. I feel it physically in my body. It can be filled with remorse or guilt or fear that somebody will find out. It's not harmonious. The mind is not calm. You can see from this the obvious cause and effect relationship in such a simple example.

The Buddha's teaching of our work with sila is just this pragmatic. It's based on understanding—this is incredibly simplistic the way I'm saying this—but it's based on this understanding of cause and effect: that if we act in a certain way, certain effects are going to come. Essentially, this is the teaching of kamma, or karma. I'll go into that in a minute.

So this teaching of working with an understanding and harmony of behavior, with developing harmlessness as a way of being, is not based on a coerced adherence to some set of rules. It's not something that is to be forced on us from the outside. It's very interesting to me that sila, these three parts of the path concerning our speech and action, are not the first parts of the path. The first two steps of the Eightfold Path begin with right understanding, leading to right thought or intention or attitude, depending on the translation. So it is this understanding, this attitude of mind, that then leads us into our actions, not the reverse.

The precepts are not given as compulsory commandments, because that's not the way we work with them to develop understanding and freedom of mind. It's not about blind obedience. That's not where

understanding arises. It arises through our open, non-judgmental acknowledgement and investigation of what's present.

So according to this Eightfold Path, the beginning of our journey of liberation is the beginning of insight—that we have some opening, some insight that changes our mistaken understanding of the way things are, that opens us up in some new way to the nature of reality. Some of these laws that Fred spoke of last night: of impermanence, of the unsatisfactoriness of this changing world, of the sense that there is no separate, solid self.

As we first begin to awaken, as our understanding first begins to bloom, sila then begins to come into our way of acting and being as the natural expression of our understanding. Our actions are the natural expression of our attitudes of mind, of how we understand who we are and our relationship to the world.

Again, a simple example—I'm trying to keep these really simple. Say one begins to get a sense of this experience of cause and effect in one's life. Actually, when we start to see that acting in a certain way brings a certain result, it's also a beginning of understanding of anatta, of no separate self, because you start to see that everything is arising dependent on the condition that precedes it, rather than some autonomous separate individual who can just do whatever they want and nothing will happen.

So one begins to have an understanding that if I act in a certain way, it brings certain effects. That can then lead to the thought, "Oh, when I lie, people don't trust me." And not liking that feeling, one then has a willingness to change one's behavior. Without that original understanding that how I act somehow has an effect on how people relate to me, there would be no willingness to even investigate what's making people relate to me in this way. What understanding am I coming from that's feeding my behavior?

For myself, in my own practice, I experience working with this area of action more and more deeply as a practice of the heart. Not so much anymore an imposed idea of "Well, it's bad to talk about other people. I shouldn't do it because people won't like me or it'll spoil my image" or whatever. Those kinds of shoulds imposed from outside, that outward conformity—it does have a certain effect in cleaning up our act. I mean, if that's the only way I can relate to the precepts, I'd rather do it that way than go around hurting people. But really, it's induced more from fear and shame—fear that I'd be found out somehow, or blamed. And that's not an experience of harmony. It lacks the inner understanding and commitment that really gives our work with our speech and actions the compelling power and understanding that can help us become free.

So more and more I experience my relationship to my actions, and I really feel it in my heart. It's like a movement of my heart. When I do something that's really out of harmony—I don't know, I tell a little fib or I speak in a very cutting way to someone—I don't anymore usually have to even wait to get the reaction back from that person to know that I did something that's out of harmony or harmful. I feel it immediately. Like a tension, a heaviness, a clenching up. It's really quite symbiotic.

And it feeds the sense of harmony more and more, our understanding of the fact that we're all completely interdependent. In my doing something that is ostensibly harming someone else, I almost immediately experience a sense of disharmony, some level of suffering in myself. Sila is really grounded in this understanding of our oneness with all beings. It's the way Sayadaw U Pandita phrases it, which I find quite lovely: acting out of the understanding of oneness with all beings.

So when this is the basis, we can't help but begin to sense inwardly when our actions are having an effect of causing disharmony outwardly. It gets so you can't—I can't anyway—so easily separate whether I'm harming another person or harming myself. What's happening is an overall sense of suffering and disharmony. The sense of separation becomes stronger when I do something that's really out of sync.

So sila is based on and grows out of our understanding of a sense of oneness with all others. But then as we continue to investigate our actions, when we fall out of this sense of oneness, when we do something that's unskillful, that continuing to investigate again deepens and deepens our understanding of our sense of interconnectedness. It's really quite a lovely practice.

Another literal translation of sila is actually "practice." And I think that's really important to remember. It's a practice. It's not about expecting we should be these perfect beings, not harming ourselves or anyone else. It means we're continuing to grow always in harmony between our inner attitude and our outer actions. We're never perfect. Or anyway, so far I haven't met the person who is. There's always more to explore. And I don't find this discouraging. I find it inspiring and fascinating. It gives me the impetus to really investigate.

The Buddha said several times something I really like in working with this: that by protecting others through our actions of non-harming, we protect ourselves from the results of unskillful actions, from remorse, whatever. He also said that through protecting ourselves by not doing actions that will bring us unskillful fruits, we're protecting others. So it gets to a point where how can you tell the difference between self and other? There really isn't any.

This idea that we're protecting ourselves through non-harming action actually leads into the crux of understanding this practice of sila. Because it's not a practice of blame or of judgment, but it's an expression of the understanding, as I said, that certain types of action will inevitably, at some point, bring certain types of fruit or results. Very pragmatic, very simple.

This is the beginning understanding of karma, or kamma. The word kamma simply means action. Action and fruit. Cause and effect. And often it's quite observable and pretty pragmatic. If someone is a really violent, abusive person, that's the kind of reaction that they'll tend to get from people in life. They'll experience situations of anger and being used and abused quite often. Someone who is very generous and loving often will meet that same type of response in the people that they come in contact with.

Of course that's a simple and straightforward example. As we all know, it's nowhere near that simple and

straightforward. And that's because while what we experience as results arises from how we act, the level that's really important for us to understand is that how we act flows from our understanding.

Sila or karma, both of these—they're a morality of intention, of volition in the mind. It's the intention that carries the importance, that carries the weight, that bears the fruit. All thought, speech, and action of we common folk who are not completely enlightened—all thought, speech, and action—each has a volitional force, an intention in the mind that brings about that thought, speech, and action. This can be very subtle, and a great deal of the time we might not be aware of it.

So the weakest intention would manifest as thought. For example, "Oh, I'd like an ice cream cone."

When the intention's a little stronger, it manifests as speech—you say that to somebody, or maybe out loud to yourself. And when the intention's at its strongest, you hop in the car and go down and get an ice cream cone. It's action. Just very straightforward.

So again, an action is seen or considered skillful or unskillful. It's not exactly bad and good. Skillful just means that's the kind of fruits it will bring. Unskillful will bring unskillful fruits based not so much on the action itself, but on the intention of mind that's driving that action.

An action is considered skillful when the intention in the mind is associated with mental states of non-greed—generosity, caring, renunciation. Skillful when it's associated with non-hatred—friendliness, metta, compassion, acceptance, the whole list. Skillful when the action is coming from a volition that's associated with non-delusion, non-confusion, not a sense of a strong ego or separate self—equanimity, insight.

And of course, the converse. An action is seen as unskillful when it's arising out of intentions in the mind of greed, of wanting, of anger, fear, hatred, of complete confusion, ignorance, delusion, a clouded mind.

So that desire for ice cream, if it's coming out of a really strong craving, it would be an unskillful action because it's driven by the volition of strong greed in the mind. But what's interesting is that the same action can be quite skillful when the intention driving it is different. If you're going to get ice cream because you want to bring it to another person as an act of generosity, the motivating force in that case is generosity. The same action becomes quite skillful.

So you see how it's very subtle—incredibly subtle, actually. The Buddha said there are four things that will drive people mad to think about them, and one of them is the workings of karma. So I don't want to go into it too much right now. I always fall back on that when I start to try and look at karma and figure it out. Oh, it doesn't make any sense—then I remember what he said.

The same action can be skillful or not, depending on what motivates it. There's a favorite story in the suttas of a blind monk who was doing walking meditation and was killing ants while he walked. The other monks all ran to the Buddha and said, "How can this guy be so enlightened? He's breaking the first

precept. He's killing all these ants."

And the Buddha said, "He has absolutely no intention to kill those ants. He doesn't know it's happening. His intention is quite pure in doing his walking meditation. It's not an unskillful action."

This is where mindfulness becomes our best friend—being able to turn the mindfulness onto the sense of what's the motivation, what's driving this action. And to see that without judgment. We're not trying to blame ourselves and say what rotten people we are, but simply to see without judgment: what's the intention that's driving this speech, this action? What's the understanding that's coming from? And in this seeing, wisdom begins to arise.

I'd like to share some reflections—some mine and some other people's—on working with the five precepts themselves. Hopefully this will give some sense of what I've been experiencing, which is the increasing depth and subtlety and breadth that comes to be seen in working with each of these precepts. There are so many areas that each precept includes, until really each one covers all areas of our life, connected with everyone else's life. And I've been finding it wonderful.

First, working with the five precepts is a practice that has been in Buddhism really almost since very soon after the Buddha was enlightened. It's said that the first person he gave the five precepts to was a man whose son had just ordained. The son was the sixth person that the Buddha ordained after his enlightenment. The Buddha was enlightened and went and found his five former ascetic friends, taught them, and they ordained. Then this young man was the sixth person—a very rich young man. His father came to the Buddha, and he didn't really want to ordain, but he said, "Well, what can I do that will help me to live more like my son?" And the Buddha's answer was the five precepts.

I really see them as guidelines, as directions in which we incline the mind. For example, taking the first precept of not killing or not harming other beings—Thich Nhat Hanh, who is a wonderful Zen master, poet, and peace activist, in talking about this particular precept says it's a very difficult precept. And what is essential is not that we expect to begin by being perfect in not killing or not harming, but that we go in that direction, that we incline our mind in the direction of total non-harming.

He also suggests that we take mindfulness as the first precept. And I like this a lot, because he says, think of mindfulness as the fundamental precept. When you're mindful, you're responsible. And then the precepts are not needed to dictate our behavior. And it's really true. If I'm really paying attention, I'm not so likely to say something harsh or cutting. I definitely won't steal because you just can't do it when you're really paying attention.

So we use the precepts as guidelines, as signposts for the many times when we're not so mindful.

Not killing. It really is an incredibly complex and difficult thing—not to kill any living being, and expanding it further, to non-harming of any living being. Can anyone do it perfectly? Over the years what I've found happening is that it's been sinking deeper into my being as a way of being rather than as a way

of acting.

This is from Robert Aitken: "The practice of peace and harmony is peace and harmony, not some technique designed to induce them." Like Thich Nhat Hanh says—being peace, not figuring out what we have to do to get peaceful.

Yet with all our really clear, unconfused intentions, not killing is a very complex issue. What about working in the garden? Never mind not using insecticides, but just killing the worms when you spade the earth. What do you do when a place is overrun with cockroaches? We've been debating that here for years, and seriously—it's a very difficult situation. How do you find the answer?

You know that story of the Zen Center—I'm not sure where it was, I think it was in Minnesota—that was getting overrun with cockroaches. And the students went to the master and said, "Nobody's coming to sit because cockroaches are crawling all over them. What should we do? It's against the precept to kill, but otherwise no one's going to come." And he said, "I'm not going to tell you."

But you see, that's throwing us back on the real power and value of working with our relationship to non-killing, to non-harming, in our own being. Just having someone else tell us what to do begs the whole question.

It's complicated. What about when a place is completely overrun with fleas and unlivable? That happened once to the house across the street when I was manager here. I walked in and walked out literally thirty seconds later covered with fleas all over my legs. What do you do when you're renting it to people and they need to live there? There are no easy answers. Only questions, and each of us finding our own really honest relationship to that.

And then I can feel, okay, not killing motivated by anger or aversion—that's pretty clear. And then I've started to see the levels where killing can happen in me from indifference, or laziness, or just not paying attention. For me, the classic example is when I step in a bathtub or a shower somewhere and I don't have my glasses on. Standing up, I can't tell what's on the bottom. Is it just a little speck of dirt or is it a little spider? And if I don't feel like squatting all the way down and looking, I could quite easily be killing things out of indifference. The effect isn't so immediately observable, but actually now I've reached the point where if I don't look down, I don't know whether I harmed anything—but I feel terrible. And it's getting really interesting.

And then it can expand further. How does what we take into our experience—into our mind through the sense doors—how does that affect our mind and heart? How does that affect others? Does it affect our actions?

For example, the incredible amount of violence in the culture in this country. And it is more in this country—I've just been in England, and I feel so different there, aside from London, than how I feel here. There's so much more violence here. Is it fed by the amount of violence in TV and movies? Many times I've

read in newspapers of crimes, of murders that seem to be acted out from some show that was on TV a week or two ago—the exact similar motif. It's scary.

So I have to wonder, am I part of that? Am I participating in that? If I pay money to go see a movie that has that kind of violence in it, in a way I'm supporting putting that out into the culture.

If I even just flick it on on the TV, am I supporting it even by indifference? I don't know. These are just questions that come up in my mind.

Thich Nhat Hanh takes it further. He says, in his view, that because alcohol requires so much grain to produce it, when we drink alcohol we're using something that has taken grain that could have been used to feed starving people—because so much of the world's grain goes into making alcohol, which seems unnecessary. So then he questions: by drinking alcohol, am I unintentionally contributing to starvation in the world? You see, it's a very complex question. And that's without even going into the fact that every time we drive in a car, we squash bugs. Every time we boil water, we kill microbes. Things that, in a way, we really can't avoid as part of being human.

But I think you get the idea, and I could just go on and on. There's an incredible potential for deeper investigation. And as I investigate in this area more and more, it's not a sense of, "Oh, I'm so horrible—I'm walking and I'm killing unseen beings." It's much more that we become more and more finely attuned to our essential oneness in this world, oneness with all other beings. It's actually quite lovely. And as we bring our attention to this precept, this sense of oneness just gets stronger and stronger, and also more and more levels of subtlety emerge.

The second precept is taking the precept not to take what is not given. So this is already expanded quite a bit beyond simply not stealing—it encompasses much more. And again, most of us will say, "Well, not stealing is pretty straightforward and not so difficult. We don't do blatant stealing." But then, you know, what about when you go in the bathroom and someone left their shampoo and it's just the kind you've always wanted to try? They'll never care or notice. And probably they wouldn't care. But again, it's checking back: what's the intention that this action is coming from? Is it coming from an intention of "I really want to try this shampoo, I like the way it..."—so there's greed.

And again, expanding to find it not just in the passive mode of not taking what's not given, but more actively cultivating a sense of open-hearted generosity of being. On another level, I relate to this precept as having a sense of inner contentment—not being in that mode of needing, wanting something else. There's this Zen phrase: "The self and the world are just as they are." So can that be enough? The sense of inner contentment with just what is.

In looking at not taking what is not given, not getting into the mind that's needy—this is Robert Aitken's way of looking at it—it's much more than just not stealing objects. When we're in this state of inner poverty, in a gaining mentality, that's really where stealing or taking what's not given comes from. We're

also, he says, in a way stealing from ourselves. We're stealing time, but much more we're stealing from ourselves peace—the possibility of being able to be with what is, with appreciation, with clear seeing. There's no chance to be at peace in the moment when we're in this space of needing, gaining, inner poverty.

This is from the Tao Te Ching: "If you realize that you have enough, you are truly rich. Be content with what you have, rejoice in the way things are. When you realize there is nothing lacking, the whole world belongs to you."

It's really true. And as this understanding becomes stronger and stronger in our heart, when we're content, when we know nothing is lacking, the whole world belongs to us. From this understanding, who could possibly steal? There's nothing to want. It's really quite beautiful.

And then I wonder sometimes: is creating needs part of our economic system? Is that what advertising does on a rampant scale? Is that stealing from people? And do I participate in it? I was looking at the New York Times Magazine the other day—I mean, how many new perfumes do we need in this world?

And there were several pages announcing this new perfume and that new perfume, all these seductive-looking women. Do we need any of this? It's certainly moving us away from a sense of inner contentment. Is it in a way stealing?

And of course, as we all know, the growing wants, the way that we live in the first world, in the industrialized countries—the corporations take so much in resources and timber from countries that are really very poor. It's hard for me not to think of this as stealing in a way. And I'm definitely participating in it in the way that I relate to using resources, in the way that I relate to just hopping in the car and driving an hour on a whim, and keeping the heat turned really up, or just not remembering to turn it down when I leave the house because there's always enough for us.

This again is almost indifference, just choosing not to pay attention to the effects that my actions are having in a wider sphere. And so I wonder, is it stealing?

This is from Mahatma Gandhi: "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'll find that we can get rid of quite a number of wants. One who follows the observance of non-stealing will bring about a progressive reduction of one's own wants. Much of the distressing poverty in this world has arisen out of the breaches of the principle of non-stealing."

So again, those are just thoughts that come to me in looking at this. And I really feel with this precept, as with all the others—which I'll just name briefly—that in working with all of them, I have a feeling I'll never get to the end of it in my lifetime. There's so much to learn about our interconnection, about the subtleties of my own intention and motivation and how I act, and the possibility of really moving into much greater freedom in the mind through my willingness to give this area attention. My willingness to

investigate not out of self-judgment, not by blaming myself for being rotten because I broke a precept again, but simply out of a wanting to learn.

So it's the same for the other three precepts: not misusing our sexuality to bring harm to ourselves or another; not lying or using harsh or abusive speech; not taking intoxicants or drugs that cloud our mind. Basically, they throw us into a state of delusion. And as Sayadaw U Pandita says, then it's really easy to break all the other four and bring everyone else along with you. It's really true.

I find it inspiring when I notice I've done something out of harmony, breaking one of the precepts, to use that as a signal to check back into my motivation rather than thinking what a horrible person I am. I investigate what understanding I was acting out of that led to this action. When I'm aware of it and just feel awful, rather than saying, "Oh no, you're so bad, I'll never lie again, I promise, I'm really going to be good"—that doesn't really help. No understanding comes out of that, just a sense of self-blame and restriction and trying to adhere to some goal. It doesn't really lead on to liberation.

But if I take that awareness—oh, I lied—and ask, what was going on there? What was the understanding that arose out of? I look back and see, well, I wanted to look good. And wanting to look good came out of a feeling of fear that I wouldn't, or that I'd be seen for what I really was, that I did something I didn't want this person to know. And fear is a form of aversion. And going back further, that fear was arising out of some image that I'm identified with of who Carol is or who Carol should be. In bringing attention to that identification with that image, in that moment it can really dissolve. And in that moment there's a sense of freedom, a sense of just being with what is. No blame.

This is the possibility of freedom that can come to us from working with the precepts on deeper and deeper and more powerful levels. It really is part of our practice of liberation.

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