Mindful Living: Sīla as Part of Our Practice

Sky Dawson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2010) · 57:27

For those of you who don't know me yet, my name is Skye, and I'm the one from Australia, as you can probably tell from my accent.

This evening I'd like to talk about mindful living—about sīla as part of our practice.

Perhaps by now you may be feeling more settled into being here on this retreat, and you might be noticing that this is offering a wonderful opportunity to develop a sense of seclusion, a letting go of a lot of the busyness of your lives, to come actually here into your body and start to explore what's going on in your mind as well.

This retreat really offers us a lot of support to start to see clearly what's been happening in our lives and the sort of things that we might want to explore in making changes. We can really begin to examine these things because we're not so caught in all the distractions of our generally busy lives.

I don't know what happens here, but I imagine it's the same as in Australia, where so many people are so busy, so full of activities, full of work and families, so many commitments. It's very difficult to find any time at all to just sit down and look at what's happening. I'm sure some of you have felt that, and then suddenly you come here and it offers this wonderful opportunity to be quiet, to be free from so many of those distractions, and to start to see what's happening—to start to see what's actually happening in your life without all this busyness, to start to see what your habits are, how you go onto automatic pilot and live as best you can from day to day without really considering any of this.

This is such a great opportunity to allow the truth to unfold very naturally in a setting where we can actually sit and just be with ourselves and get to know ourselves directly. Now that can have some positives, but it can also bring up difficulties when we start to see that perhaps how we've been living is not exactly what we wanted, not exactly what we'd like to be doing. What we can do here is get a really different perspective on what's actually happening, what's really important in our lives. It gives us a great opportunity to explore this openly and perhaps honestly.

I find in my own life I'm often so busy, and when I go on retreats, I've been thinking that certain things are important and certain things are not, or that other things are huge problems in my life. When I actually go and sit on a retreat and enter a much quieter space, things get completely turned around. The things I thought were major problems perhaps are not so significant, and other things I thought were important perhaps are not. I find a different perspective. I start to see where I'm caught, and I start to see issues that are painful and need to be looked at, as well as other things about my life that are working really well.

That's helpful.

So what does the retreat offer? Perhaps it offers a powerful way to explore the things we do and the way we think. We can start to find how to develop healthy mental patterns such as patience, kindness, and wisdom, and also develop positive skills so we can become more deeply connected with our life, with our way of living.

This is a path of practice, and what we're doing is exploring and perhaps looking at the possibility of making changes. We might want to change some unskillful habits that we have, and we might want to strengthen more skillful habits and see how we can do that. This is about developing right understanding, really connecting with this first aspect of the Noble Eightfold Path. As right view and right understanding grow stronger, so does our commitment to live a life of awareness and clarity, and we can choose our actions with care.

Recently I was thinking more about this practice of sīla, and I read an article with some quotes by Guy Armstrong. Tonight I'm going to share a few things he mentioned that support my practice and my talk. He said, "From the time of the Buddha, the path has been understood as a threefold training in ethical conduct, meditation, and wisdom. This is sīla, samādhi, and paññā, leading to an unconditioned inner freedom. At a time when every corner of the globe seems to be unraveling, it is auspicious that we explore the meaning and practice of the least glamorous and possibly most necessary of the three trainings: sīla."

That's what I think is so important to talk about tonight. It has particular relevance for me because for many years, in my first training, my first practice, my first retreats, it was really only about meditation. It was only about sitting on the cushion, actually. There was no walking meditation—it was sitting hour after hour after hour. It was very difficult, and as Sally mentioned, quite a challenge for the body and mind to stay sitting for long periods of time.

But I started to think it didn't seem very good. It seemed to be out of balance. What I found over several years was that I was having a completely different experience when sitting on retreat for long periods of time compared to when I would go home. There seemed to be a huge gap between the two, and I couldn't seem to bring them together. It was like I felt like a different person. I felt really calm, deeply concentrated on retreat, but there wasn't a way of bridging into my life as a whole. I kept wanting to go back on retreat and feeling that there was a disconnect, and I couldn't work out how to resolve this.

Later on I moved into other practices where walking meditation was incorporated into sitting meditation. Just as Joseph was explaining with the instructions for walking meditation, this is a profound practice. It opened up a whole different way of moving from sitting to eating or moving from sitting to my room. It meant that I could start to see a connection between my sitting practice and perhaps my engagement with family or my work.

I found that what I wanted to explore more was a way of living. How does this practice reflect in my life?

And this is where I connected deeply with sīla.

This discovery of Sila felt so important to me—it was definitely the key.

The Dhammapada, that book of such succinct teachings, offers a wonderful phrase for this. It says: "If one is friendly by habit and skillful in conduct, one will have much delight and bring an end to suffering."

Now that's pretty interesting. It's so simple and so clear. If one is friendly by habit and skillful in conduct, one will have much delight and bring an end to suffering.

So have you found this in your own practice? That's the question. Have you had this sense of delight? Have you seen that the practice may bring an end to suffering? That's what we're here for, isn't it? It's really to explore suffering, the causes, the end, and the path—the Four Noble Truths. And this deeply brings us to connection with Sila.

In this path of practice, we're learning new skills. And for every skill in all of our life, we need a lot of practice, we need deep concentration, and we need constant repetition—whether it's learning to play a piano or, for me, doing something extremely difficult like learning to use a new cell phone. These things take a lot of practice and repetition. And of course we need to really pay attention; we need to have good concentration. Just think about all those things you may need to do in your life that are new and how you actually learn these skills.

Recently I read an article about leadership. The author had given a lecture to young potential leaders in the US, and he was encouraging them to include solitude in their leadership. These two things may not seem to go together very well, but he was saying that one of the most important things for a great leader is to have time of solitude—to develop introspection, concentration, and some really deep consideration about things.

He was also talking about thinking, about what thinking actually is. And I'm sure over the next weeks, you'll start to really explore thinking. But this is what he wrote:

"My first thought is never my best thought. My first thought is always someone else's. It's always what I've already heard about the subject, always the conventional wisdom. It's only by concentrating, sticking to the question, being patient, letting all the parts of my mind come into play, that I arrive at an original idea. By giving my brain a chance to make associations, draw conclusions, take me by surprise. And often even that idea doesn't turn out to be very good. I need time to make mistakes and recognize them, to make false starts and correct them, to outlast my impulses and to defeat my desire to declare the job done and move on to the next thing."

Perhaps that's the sort of thing we're practicing here. We're practicing really looking, concentrating, being patient, and exploring all parts of our lives—taking time to make mistakes and then recognizing and correcting them, making false starts and really exploring in this environment.

The teachings from the Dhammapada put it in more traditional terms: "Watchful in speech and well restrained in mind, doing nothing unskillful with your body, purify these three courses of action, fulfill the path taught by the sages."

This path is the Noble Eightfold Path, of which Sila is the foundation.

So when we use this word Sila, what does it mean? How do you think about this word? How do you actually come in contact with this? How do you live in this way?

For me, it's about living with care. It's often translated as morality or ethical conduct, but when I think of living with care, I also find the word integrity very powerful. Living with integrity—it really speaks to something for me. It's really connecting with how we live our lives, whether we live them mindfully or mindlessly, whether we're connected or disconnected. This is what it's about.

It's really about waking up to what's happening, waking up to everything that we do. It's about being fully engaged in meeting each moment of life with care. It's about deeply connecting with each situation, with each relationship that we're in.

And it's about learning not to cause harm to ourselves as well as all beings, as best we can.

So really, when we talk about living with care, it's about expressing and connecting with and exploring our actions of body and mind, our reactions and responses. It refers to body, mind, and speech, and it also includes all of our life, including our work, our livelihood.

This path, as Guy said, is threefold. Sila refers to right action, to speech, and to livelihood. It's interesting when we use this word "right." I've noticed that some teachers use "skillful" instead of right, or use "wise speech," "wise action," or "skillful speech," "skillful action." But when we use this word "right," it's really strange when you think about it being opposed to wrong. That's really not what it's about. It's really about a skillful way of acting, a skillful way of being, a wise way that leads to happiness, leads to peace, leads to freedom from suffering, leads to compassion.

Guy says that sila is often expressed in codes such as precepts, vows, and the monastic rules, and it can quickly become complicated. Our aim is to combine outer impeccability with inner relaxation, but that outcome is not always easy.

These two words are very powerful: impeccability and relaxation. Here in our practice, we're always trying to find a balance, aren't we? And it takes days, it takes a lot of sensitivity to find that balance.

But also, thinking of that word impeccability, what does it mean for you? Just think about it for a moment. Does it create a sense of respect? Think about somebody that you may know who you would describe as living impeccably. Is there someone you know? Or is there someone you know of that would represent that for you?

When I explore that word, what immediately comes to mind are some of my travels through Asia over many years. Sometimes I reflect on people who I've seen living a life of sila, really deeply connecting with this path of practice in whatever way they can.

One of the images that first comes to mind is from a couple of years ago when I was in Sri Lanka. I'd returned there after over twenty-five years, having been there when I was very young, and it had made an enormous impression. I went back not long after the tsunami, and so a lot of areas had been quite devastated. But I saw an enormous amount of commitment among people to support each other, to rebuild their lives, to actually share, to rebuild their communities.

One place I went was a wonderful temple in Kandy, in the center of the island in the mountains. It's an incredibly beautiful temple, and it was a full moon day. There were thousands of people there, all dressed in white. For these special moon days, people come to the temple and they take the eight precepts. They practice and take time to reflect and to support each other, to support the monks that are there. They really, for that day, bring all of the practice into being. It's a very special experience. For me, it was like they were creating a deep sense of ethical conduct for that day that was very powerful.

The other place I've seen sila lived very deeply and clearly is in my travels to Burma. I was very hesitant to go there. I didn't want to really acknowledge the political situation that seemed so opposed to the teachings of the Buddha. But when I went, I saw that against great adversity, these people were living in such a profoundly wonderful way. It was totally inspiring. They were offering such generosity and care. They were so gentle to each other and to their children and to me.

When they would ask what I was there for, and I would say that I was there to do a retreat, to practice meditation for three weeks, they would just have such joy. It was like they were expressing such mudita, such happiness that I was able to do that. They probably would never have the opportunity to actually go for a week, let alone three weeks, let alone three months as we're doing here. But what they could do instead was live their practice, and live it with such gentleness, such simplicity, and such care.

There are so many stories about my time there that really opened me to the most powerful aspects of sila—very, very deeply—really looking at how we can live this life in this way.

So it brings some questions to mind when we think about sila. It really is: how do we want to live our lives?

What do I need to do to change my life, perhaps, to reflect intentions of non-harming, of care and kindness? How can we live in line with our values? And what is helpful in our life right now, and what is harmful? What can we support and hold and encourage, and what can we let go of? What's important right now?

This is what's important to hold in this practice. This is what I'd like to support and develop more in this evening's talk—how to bring it into living with you on this retreat at this time. I loved hearing you the

other day when you all shared your aspirations, what was important for you in coming on this retreat, because it was almost like you were articulating some of this in what you're actually wanting to bring here now.

So keep looking at this, asking: Is my life clear at this point? Or is it confused? Or is it a little bit of both? Where are we coming from at this moment?

When we start to explore this—when we're living in this community or we're living outside in our own communities, in our work situations, perhaps here as well, in our relationships with this community that we've got here, as well as in our world around us—we start to see that things aren't quite as simple as we would imagine. Things get a little murky, don't they? It's not as easy as just saying, "I'll never do this." Sometimes we need to really reflect on what's happening in this situation. What's the most skillful thing to do right now? How can I do this without causing harm? It only arises in the situation. And sometimes it is clear. Sometimes it's very confusing. Sometimes it's just a little murky.

When I connect with that, I often have this image of the Buddha, and a very powerful description that comes to mind is the Buddha seated on a lotus flower. Now, the lotus is a real symbol of purity, and the funny thing was that I hadn't actually seen one. I'd always seen this representation. I'd always read about the most beautiful aspects of the lotus and how it blossoms in the murky, muddy waters and thrives in that environment. And it's always been quite symbolic for me, a lovely thing to reflect on.

When I was doing my teacher training here at IMS, we went once to spend time at Bhavana Society with Bhante Gunaratana. When we arrived, one of the first things he showed us was this very murky water and this beautiful lotus bud that had just come up the day we arrived. And he said to watch this. For me, it was actually quite beautiful because I hadn't seen one before, really. And by the time we finished, the last day we were there, it burst into flower. It was such a lovely thing. It was almost like this beautiful blossoming. And I saw why people use this as such a symbol—coming out of murkiness into this power of blossoming and beauty.

So sometimes our lives do get a little murky. Sometimes we need to practice to really have and develop a sense of clarity. And what we can do is explore what's happening with us here and now. We can start to notice and explore our relationships as we're living here. We think, "Oh, this is such an insular practice, everything's quite peaceful," but we actually find that we're constantly engaging in many different relationships—be it in the line to go for lunch, be it sharing showers, be it wherever around this environment. It can become quite close in, and this is something that you can really bring to your practice.

How do we respond when we feel a little closed in, when we feel the situation becomes a little difficult? How can we live with others here in harmony? Or do we find sometimes we feel there's a sense of disharmony and disconnection, of disagreement? Or do we feel in agreement with what we're being taught, what others are saying? How are we responding to these situations? Can we explore them with honesty and trust rather than judgment and distrust? How can we do that?

To settle into this community and to live in harmony, we need this underpinning of sila. As Joseph mentioned the other night, when we take the precepts, for example, it creates a level of safety, and this can help us to feel confidence and trust in those around us that we're being supported. Now, we explored this the other night very deeply. Sila is about actions in body and mind, moment to moment, living—as we said—with integrity, engaging in living.

And when we took the precepts, this is what we were doing. They're often referred to, I've noticed, as gifts. We're offering the gift of freedom. They're called the five gifts because they're providing a level of safety. So you took them the other night.

And just to recap, they're about refraining from killing, from stealing, from sexual misconduct, false speech, and using intoxicants that cloud the mind. We use the words *refraining, refraining from*. And so it's not about forcing, and it's not about obeying rules, but it's really finding a way to work with these.

I've found that reflecting on these precepts daily really helps guide my practice, guide my living. But sometimes, in certain situations, I find it very helpful to look at them more as aspirations—really deeply connecting with an inner knowing, a way that reflects how I truly wish to live, out of compassion and consideration and kindness.

So in certain situations, perhaps it isn't so important for me just to think about refraining from killing or refraining from stealing. It may be more helpful to look at ways of living with these that are much more relevant to my immediate life, my environment. I needed to find a way to bring them alive that had meaning for me in situations I've been in over the last couple of years.

A couple of years ago, I spent a year living with my husband as he was going through the end stages of a very difficult cancer. And then after that, I've been living with my mother, who is going through a very, very old age process. She's extraordinarily old, and she says she's gone way beyond her use-by date—that anything over ninety is it. She's still living, and she's really struggling with all of this.

A couple of months ago, her heart started to fail. She had enormous complications and ended up in hospital. They thought she wasn't going to make it. This happened twice, and she was in hospital for several weeks. Afterwards, she could not remember anything about it other than that it was a really difficult situation to be in. She just blanked it out. But she kept asking me what happened.

This is the sort of thing I needed to work with over and over again. How was I to honor the fact that I would speak openly with her, honestly with her, tell the truth? But how could I do that without causing harm, without causing her more distress—offering her compassion and honesty at the same time? These are situations we find ourselves in. I found this constantly with my husband, living through all of this as well. It needs a way of working with these precepts that works for us.

So I would deeply recommend finding your own way around this, working with words that suit you at times. At other times, these precepts as they are, in that sense of refraining, are so simple and so pure—all

we need. But when I was working in these difficult situations over the last few years, words that helped me more than *refraining from* were *training in*. I was actually training in these things.

Words that were helpful for me, and perhaps would be helpful for you at times: *I will take up the training in supporting life.* This is about cultivating kindness. This was so important in my life of caring for others—cultivating kindness for myself as well.

The next one: *I will take up the training of taking only what is freely offered and giving of all that I can.* Many of you may have been carers in some way, and this is so important, isn't it? Just taking what is freely offered, but also giving freely of all that I can. This is about developing generosity.

Taking up the training of engaging in intimacy respectfully and with an open heart. Constantly exploring with the people we love, and also with others who come into our lives, how we can engage in intimacy with respect and with an open heart. This is really, for me, developing compassion.

Taking up the training in speaking with others with openness and possibility. This was very helpful for me with my mother—speaking with openness and possibility, cultivating as best we can truthfulness in the moment, in each situation as it arises.

And finally, the one I think is most important: *taking up the training in cultivating a clear mind.* The key for me is mindfulness—cultivating mindfulness. This is so important. This practice of sīla goes so deeply alongside this cultivation of a clear mind through mindfulness.

So we've talked about the five precepts, and this is a very important time to also move and consider the last three. We're considering the eight precepts in practice. We've all taken the five, and tomorrow morning there will be the opportunity to consider whether you'd like to take the three additional precepts: refraining from eating after midday, refraining from dancing, singing, music, entertainment, and adornments, and finally, refraining from using high and luxurious beds and chairs.

Not such a problem here—we are living quite comfortably, in fact. When I think of my trips to places like Burma, where I was sleeping on these incredibly tough mattresses...

And when I made up my mind that it was probably better to sleep on the wooden bed rather than those strange mattresses.

But really, it's actually looking at simplicity, at just moving a little further into bringing a sense of simplicity into daily life and deepening that renunciation that Guy talked of the other night. Is this important? It certainly can be. It can be a little bit deeper, just adding a little bit more into our practice. And sometimes it's really a powerful shift. At other times it isn't something that you need to do in your practice. The five precepts may be enough to work with right now.

On my early retreats, I didn't know about the five precepts. I thought everyone took eight, and there wasn't really an option. So for many years, eight precepts was it. And it was interesting for me to then,

later on in my training, experience five precepts. I decided I liked five better, actually. So I used to come to every retreat, and I'd watch myself go, "Ah, do I really want to take eight or shall I take five?" And I'd sort of watch the mind justify why I thought it was a good idea—whether it just takes away the added stress I have to go through when I'm on eight precepts around food, whether my diet is better if I eat three meals a day, whether I can actually maintain this practice with eight precepts. What works better for me?

And again, it's actually only something you can make a decision about in the moment. This is when you can choose by reflecting deeply on what it feels like for you now, connecting in with that wisdom and connecting also with your intention around that, with openness and honesty about what works best.

Sometimes it may be that meal times become such a distraction. They can become quite stressful. They can also become quite an entertainment, actually, going into the dining room. And sometimes food can create a comfort that's really important, or it can actually support our practice in many ways. Reducing one meal can cause more difficulty, or it can support our practice in deepening further by just dropping all of that necessity to deal with one extra meal through the day.

Also, by looking at refraining from things that are really perhaps distractions in our life, again it's about simplicity. Sometimes just having to make a decision about what we're going to wear every day can be a distraction and can take quite a lot of time—whether we can match our clothes, whether we've got clean clothes, what clothes we can wear, whether we wear earrings, whether we do our hair in a certain way. All of these things can take up a lot of time. Sometimes just by simplifying this a little can be really powerful.

An example of this, again, was when I've gone to Burma to do three-week retreats with Carol and other teachers. I found there's something very special about that. What it is, is that we're actually invited and offered the opportunity to come with very few clothes at all. We were told that all we need to bring is a couple of cool white shirts. My husband was the same—he would take white shirts. I would take white shirts that were very simple, very cool. And when we arrived there, we were offered our brown sarongs and a brown sash to wear. I call them sarongs; I'm not quite sure what they're called—lungis or something in Burma. For me, they're sarongs.

It's really beautiful that we're offered these to wear. Often they don't fit very well and we all have to try them on. We're all different sizes and we have to learn how to tie them. The most important thing is to find a way to secure them, so when you go in to see the Sayadaw and you bow down and sit back, the whole thing doesn't fall to pieces, which is really likely to happen. So you have to find a way of tucking them into a cord or having lots of safety pins just to feel secure.

But other than that, it becomes very simple. It's really so refreshing to not be comparing what others are wearing, to not think, "Oh, I wish I had one of those jackets. I wish I had those pants. They look so comfortable." Just knowing that we're all wearing the same—we're all just wearing the same white tops, brown bottoms. Nothing looks different. And the relief is enormous. It takes away so much of the decision

making. We're not comparing ourselves. We're not feeling different. We're not getting caught up in appearances at all in that way.

It's so opening. It was also such a powerful thing to really be able to embody and offer respect for the traditions of that culture, to wear the clothes that were more in line with that culture.

Sayadaw also offered something that I thought was very important at this time. He deeply encouraged us to maintain a conscious commitment to a neat appearance, to take care in how we looked, ensuring that we wore the clothing well, ensuring that we wore it in the right way so the sash was in the correct position. It was about taking care. It was about expressing respect for ourselves and others through our appearance. And what he was encouraging in us was again, I felt, that word impeccable. It was about impeccable conduct and respect for the Burmese culture. It was a very powerful lesson, and it was very simple.

So when we reflect on these precepts, it's very personal. How you hold them is your way of holding them. How you really connect with them is very deep. Explore for yourself how you do this. Also notice if we judge others, if their holding of these precepts lapses in some way. But the key thing here is: what are you learning about suffering and happiness? What are you learning about the end of suffering? How are you holding this in this practice?

Sīla helps us to inquire deeply, pausing first to bring awareness to each situation as we meet it, until insight and understanding starts to emerge. Sometimes we don't notice this at all, for hours perhaps. Sometimes it can be very immediate. Sometimes we need to reflect to understand what's happening, always coming back to what was my intention in that moment.

As I mentioned before, mindfulness is very important. We need a clear mind for the practice of meditation so we can see clearly, so we can meet each moment clearly. We need repetition. The more often we practice these precepts, this way of living, the stronger they develop. And this reinforces our intention again and again. Out of this grows right understanding of causes and results, of kamma and the Four Noble Truths, and out of this, confidence and wisdom grow.

The Buddha offered clear guidelines with all of our actions in life. He said, when contemplating an action, pause and ask yourself, based on my knowledge and wisdom: Will this action be harmful to anyone, including myself? If it's going to cause harm, then don't do it. Is this action helpful or beneficial to anyone, including myself? And if it is, then do it. This requires close attention and care, and reflection is needed to see results. This is very deeply about mindfulness.

So let's connect a little more with mindfulness at this time. It's such an important aspect of ethical living. It guides us in how we act in our daily lives and helps us to restrain from acting foolishly.

Now, mindfulness comes from the Pali word sati, and sati is such a powerful expression of recollection and not forgetting, about remembering. It's this factor that really enables memory to function well. It's

about remembering to be present, remembering what is easily forgotten. It's about remembering to connect in every way that we can so we're not careless, we're not distracted. And something I love—it's about not having fuzziness and confusion. I used to be very fuzzy and confused, and I found that this level of mindfulness helps me be much more clear, constantly present with awareness of the various things that I connect with in my life. I'm learning more and more to respond appropriately.

As Sally mentioned, by being here, by developing this mindfulness, developing this way of living, it's a gentle process. It's a lifelong process. And as you're here for this period of time, we're going slowly. We're finding that we're taking care gently. It's more a marathon, as she said, than a sprint. This has allowed me to settle back much more, to really open gently, to train gently in everything we do, because we're building such a strong foundation. This foundation is important to be deeply established, finding the truth in each moment. Out of this comes wisdom.

This is the third aspect of the Noble Eightfold Path that we refer to as paññā. So we've talked about sīla, talked about samādhi, and out of this grows much more wisdom. We've talked deeply now about actions, skillful actions, right actions in connection with sīla, but I haven't yet talked about speech.

And I would like to just mention this to finish, as another aspect of sīla, because the Buddha was so clear about the importance of speech and all verbal interactions in every way. This was really important to him.

From my perspective now, it seems that speech is also starting to include things like text messages, cell phones, Twitter, and so on. It's a way of communicating that can cause enormous harm, as well as cultivating very skillful and harmonious relationships. It is so powerful. It's about the training of speaking with openness and possibility, as I mentioned earlier.

I think speech gets overlooked a little when we come on retreat because we actually think we're in silence. But I'd like to suggest that we're encouraging an environment of silence here, and regardless of that, there are certain situations that may arise where we actually do communicate in some way or another. What comes to mind first is when we're doing yogi jobs, perhaps, and there is some interaction between different yogis or with the staff. There may be other times as well when you need to relate to the staff. And there are also times, like you've been discovering today, when you may come to talk to the teachers, to do interviews or to share what's happening for you.

These are times when speech comes up, and it can be quite difficult when you've really deeply connected with silence. Sometimes it can bring up a feeling of stress. Sometimes you can come to have an interaction with one of the staff members or a teacher and feel, "Oh my goodness, I wish I'd never said that. I wish I'd just stopped and said nothing." And so we need to be aware of how to use those words gently.

The Buddha offered ways that we might be able to hold in our time here that are really helpful and essential in our lives and practice. He offered four qualities to reflect on about speech. He said develop speech that is truthful, uplifting—so it's not malicious or unkind—gentle, not harsh, and moderate, not

useless or meaningless. So it's about being gentle, truthful, uplifting if possible, and moderate. These are lovely ways of connecting, lovely ways of thinking about how we use communication, how we use speech.

Here are some ideas I would like to suggest. Watch how we speak to ourselves. You've probably already been aware—some of you have mentioned to me—that you're finding you're negotiating with yourself about whether you'll get up in the morning and come to the early morning sit. You're having conversations about whether you'll stay up for the last sit of the night. You're actually communicating with yourself and having discussions. And sometimes this can turn into very harsh language. Sometimes we can be very critical of ourselves and what we're doing.

So I'd like to suggest: watch how you talk to yourself. Offer a level of patience and kindness. See whether you can observe the tone of voice you use in your thoughts about yourself. Is it harsh? Is it gentle? How do you handle this? Are you open or are you closed? Patient or impatient? Explore how these thoughts, these dialogues you have, these comments that you make to yourself cause suffering. Also, explore how honest you are about yourself, to yourself—just as I mentioned about how I negotiate with myself about whether I'll take the five precepts or the eight precepts.

The next area is speaking with teachers. This can suddenly be difficult. You've been quiet for a day or so and then you come in to see us, and suddenly it feels hard to say anything at all. Perhaps you're at a loss for words, or it almost feels impossible to speak. It's so important to just say what feels right, to really be there with gentleness and honesty as best you can, to report what you're experiencing, to share what's important for you at this time. We're not there to judge you. We just want to develop trust and confidence in yourself in this situation.

What I've noticed often is that I edit what I talk about in practice. I don't always report what's actually happening. Sometimes I want to make a good impression, so I tell what's best in my practice. And this can often lead to missing something that perhaps I need to hear more about.

An example of this was on one retreat I attended, an eight precepts retreat, many years ago. I had been fine, and then suddenly on this retreat, I was starving. I was so hungry I could not get enough food. I would be first in line for lunch, I would eat as much as I possibly could, and then I'd feel quite overwhelmingly full and have to take a nap. But for the rest of my day and night until breakfast the next morning, all I could think about was food. I was consumed by hunger.

I never reported it to the teacher. I couldn't believe it. I would share with him what I was doing in my sitting practice, but I never mentioned this whole craving for food. It took days and days, and somewhere along the line I learned to turn and look at this, to see what was going on, to see this wanting food, this desire, this craving.

And I started to explore craving, and my whole understanding shifted about something. But what was interesting to me was that I never told the teacher anything about this. And I should have, I think. In

retrospect, in reflection, it was quite important.

The final thing I'd like to mention is this: notice when you have a need or desire to say something to someone else. Pause, as we mentioned before. Pay attention. Bring mindfulness to that desire to say something to somebody else. You may think it's helpful for them to know that, but come back to: Why do I need to say this right now? And then connect with and consider: Is it necessary? What is my intention here?

Really pay attention to that just-about-to-say-something moment, and pause, and hold it. Do I really need to say this? It may pass, or you may say it. Just watch what happens and then reflect on the results. Somehow, what we're doing with all of this is developing a profound ability to listen deeply to what's needed in each moment—the power of speech.

So from exploring sīla, I think what we're starting to deeply explore as well is the truths of our life, the nature of how we live, the nature of restraint.

And I'd like to offer some beautiful words to finish, which are very powerful and I think really represent this importance of sīla:

The thought manifests as the word.
The word manifests as the deed.
The deed develops into habit, and the habit into character.
So watch the thought and its way with care,
and let it spring from love, born out of concern for all beings.
As the shadow follows the body, as we think, so we become.

So I hope these words have helped, perhaps, to see sīla in a different way, and to perhaps really bring it into a living practice as part of our time here.

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