The Ethical Trainings as Skillful Means

Winnie Nazarko · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2012) · 1:07:14

So we started our investigation of sila this morning with a question in the hall, and it just so happened that the topic of the talk tonight will allow us to extend our investigation into this area of practice.

Let's start with the meaning of the term, the translation of the word sila. I came up with three different, slightly different iterations of what this meant, but they all seem pretty close together to me. It can be considered to be moral discipline, ethical training, or moral restraint.

In thinking about these Buddhist topics, I always like to think first about where it fits into the scheme as a whole, where it fits into the Buddha's own system of explanation. This is part of the Eightfold Path, and it is in particular step three, sama vaca, wise speech; sama kammanta, wise action, which is step four; and step five, which is sama ajiva, wise livelihood. It's also found in the five precepts, which of course we took today.

The precepts and these three steps on the Eightfold Path largely overlap with each other. The Eightfold Path doesn't explicitly address restraint from the use of intoxicants like the precepts do, and the Eightfold Path directly addresses wise livelihood, which the five precepts don't. But you can consider them to be largely co-extensive. The Buddha also references sila when he's talking about the gradual training, and he talks about the gradual training as starting with the taking of the precepts. So that's where it is on the map.

And then the question comes up: how do you understand this ethical conduct in sila? What's it all about? It's in the path. Yes, there are the precepts. And I think the key to it all is to realize that it's all about skillful means.

This phrase "skillful means" is very often used in talking about the Buddha Dharma, and it might be good to give a definition about what that actually is. You could say a general meaning is actions, choices, and views which are conducive to movement towards freedom and liberation. It's a functional way of looking at it—actions, choices, and views which are conducive to movement towards freedom and liberation. It's a definition that focuses on what works, and is pragmatic and not in and of itself moralistic. You can come to understand that the Buddhist path really isn't one of condemnation, but it's practical. So the inquiry is always: what's actually going on here? And given that, and given what the goal is, what's the best way to proceed in furtherance of the goal?

It's important to keep the pragmatism of this whole area in view, especially because of some of the conditioning that we as Westerners bring to this topic. When we as Westerners talk about ethical behavior, very often we bring to the conversation our own cultural overlay. There's a monotheistic view

in particular that many of us have been taught, which involves reference to an all-powerful God who has informed us what he wants us to do, and we should do this, or it is sin. And if we sin, we are a sinner, and that means that we're a bad person. And if we're bad enough, we will be punished perhaps eternally for our transgressions. If we're obedient with God's will for us, we'll be rewarded perhaps forever.

Now, I know that's kind of a cartoon version of monotheism. Obviously, there are other ways to hold this way of looking. But I think very often for us, especially if we've been raised in these particular cultures where religion has been strict and literal, we do bring this lens to this topic. In its fundamentalist form, this can be described as instructions from above, absolute rules which are very specific, extensive, and often ritualistic, an emphasis on obedience or punishment, and a post-death assignment to eternal residence in heaven or hell.

But we've got a bit of an issue here with Buddhism because Buddhism doesn't rely on a deity. So then the question is: how does morality fit into this whole scheme? How does sila fit into this explanation of why sila should be practiced?

I think you need to look at the Buddha's primary insights, and you will come to understand how sila fits into this. If we looked at the life of the Buddha, we would say it describes his discovery of the pervasive nature of suffering, and then his own personal and heroic quest to find liberation from that suffering. Once he reached his own liberation and his own understanding, he had a real challenge: how am I going to put this into words? How am I going to explain this so that people can understand and put into practice what they need to do in order to attain freedom for themselves?

So he formulated his teaching basically in the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, this being the framework describing the problem of suffering and how to find freedom from it. The Eightfold Path and the Four Noble Truths are a description of how things are, and given that, how to use the way reality works to become free.

There's a key point here: the conditioned nature of things. It's very critical to understand the significance of dependent origination as a key Buddhist insight. Everything happens in causal patterns. In the Samyutta Nikaya, the Buddha says, "When there is this, there is that."

With the arising of this, that arises. With the cessation of this, that ceases."

He directs us to look at the interrelationship of all things.

On the night of his awakening, the Buddha saw clearly the causes of suffering and how suffering arose in a conditioned way from ignorance, craving, and a wrong view of self. Once he understood how it came to be, he saw how it could be released, undone, deconstructed. He describes this process in the Eightfold Path.

The Eightfold Path explicates how to use the reality of causation to our advantage. Buddhist ethical views

are part of the path of liberation—they're not just about being a good person. They constitute a path factor. They have to do with whether the mind is actually able to open in understanding.

Looking more closely at the Eightfold Path and the role of the sīla steps within it, we find two steps that come first. There is wise view, which encompasses the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path itself. Then there is wise intention. We really need to examine wise intention in order to arrive at a clear understanding of what the next three steps—the sīla steps—are really about.

Wise intention focuses on resolve or aspiration. It is the intention to exert our will in order to move toward an end of suffering. When we speak of wise intention, we are saying we want to move forward toward liberation and will use our energy accordingly. This is where we want to go. This is the direction I need to turn the energies of body and mind.

Intrinsic to this is the commitment to conduct ourselves in ways conducive to spiritual progress—in ways that loosen the bonds of ignorance, greed, and hatred, and that cultivate their opposites: non-delusion (better known as wisdom), generosity, renunciation, loving-kindness, and compassion (otherwise described as harmlessness).

The second section of the Eightfold Path is where we get into the heart of the sīla steps. Wise speech, wise action, and right livelihood provide a framework to avoid unskillful thoughts and actions that would obstruct progress on the path.

Again, the key idea is that reality is conditioned. It is lawful. The present moment is caused by conditions arising from the past and manifesting now. What we do now becomes causation for what will manifest in the future. Therefore, it is in our interest to make choices and create conditions that support our aspirations toward freedom.

We can front-load conditions supportive of our own awakening by exercising basic moral restraint. Sīla should be considered skillful means to support the arising of conditions conducive to liberation and to support the cessation of conditions that are not.

On this topic of sīla and what makes it skillful, there are some particular things worth saying. I have spoken of it as skillful means, as moving in the right direction, as functional. So how exactly does it work?

If you have the experience of mindfulness that is strong, pure, and continuous, there is an absence of greed, hatred, and delusion in the mind. That is one way to define mindfulness: when mindfulness is like that, those other things are not present. However, this is often not the state of the average worldling—perhaps you can confirm this just from watching your own mind.

With strong, pure, and continuous mindfulness, thinking in terms of sīla would probably be far less necessary because right conduct would be automatic. If the mind is clear, absent aversion and grasping, sīla is going to be very strong as well. But it is usually not like that—at least not for very long.

So what is sīla doing? It helps keep the car from running off the road. It functions like those rumble strips along the highway. When your tire starts to drift onto the shoulder or crosses the center line, you hear that bump-bump-bump, and it wakes you up before things go too far.

The sīla precepts perform this function. When the mind is clouded, they serve as important reminders. Sometimes they are the only thing we can remember when the kilesa states are churning intensely. "Oh yes, I guess I shouldn't do that. Oh yes—sīla, the precepts. I remember now."

Another meaningful aspect of sīla is that it is foundational to the entire path and necessary for the success of the other trainings.

A monk once asked the Buddha to give it to him short—give it to him short and sweet. "What do I really need to do?" And the Buddha said, "First establish yourself in the starting point of wholesome states, that is, in purified moral discipline and right view." So he's saying: understand context, the first step of the Eightfold Path, observe sila. Then when your moral discipline is purified and your view straight, you should practice the four foundations of mindfulness. Sila first is being suggested. Then practice meditation.

So sila gets you started on the path of development, and then further purification of mind takes place when you move into the meditative practices themselves. And this makes all kinds of sense when you think about it. Can you imagine—the time of the Buddha was a very warlike time, just as our own is—somebody coming for teachings, and the first thing you have to say to them is, "Tie up the stolen horse and leave your bloody sword outside." Their sitting is probably not going to go too well.

This also goes to the point of the practice of sila being a protector of the mind stream, because it prevents actions that lead to remorse and guilt and regret. And when the mind is free of those states, it's a lot easier for it to clear and settle. It becomes more workable, more pliant. There are fewer storms sweeping through, fewer memories of things that might have been done in the past, less judgment arising.

Another way that sila is skillful is that it's a protector for the self and for others. If you think about this, a community—no matter what kind of community it is, whether it's a sangha, a family, a workplace—an environment where sila is strong and practiced is a safe place to be. Actions aren't intentionally harmful, and the seeds of future turmoil are not sown. It's easier to have clarity and trust and peace emerge in that kind of environment because there's a baseline of decency.

I had a very interesting thing happen when I was working as the project director at the Forest Refuge, involved with the construction up the hill. I would work with the architects and the contractors, then go to these construction meetings with carpenters and all the different trades. This conversation started with the architect: "What kind of locks do you want on the rooms?" And I said, "Well, we don't really need locks on the rooms." Then we would have a conversation about locks on the rooms and why we didn't need them. When we got a contractor and he was looking through the architectural drawings and specs, he'd

say, "I noticed you haven't specified what kind of locks you want on the doors in the rooms." I'd say, "Well, we don't need locks on the doors. We don't need locks on the rooms." We'd have that chat. Then when the subcontractors were there hanging the doors, they'd go to the project manager on site and say, "Eddie, where are the locks for the doors?" And we'd say, "We don't have locks for the doors." "Well, when are you going to get the locks for the doors?" "We don't need locks for the doors."

When you think about that, it's a very profound statement—that there can be places in the world where you don't need locks on the doors, and how different that is from most places.

Perhaps a final skillful aspect of sila is this: Bhikkhu Bodhi says, "At the karmic level, the observance of sila ensures harmony with the cosmic law of karma, hence favorable results in the course of future movement through the round of repeated birth and death." Or as the Buddha says, part of the streams of merit, streams of the wholesome, nourishment of happiness that are heavenly, ripening in happiness, conducive to happiness, that lead to whatever is wished for, loved, and agreeable to one's welfare and happiness. He's pointing to a karmic result from the observance of sila—that it has long-ranging future implications when this is practiced. And of course, for some of us Westerners, that seems implausible. That's okay. Don't need to believe. But you may see—you may even have some of this ripening right now, to be here on this retreat.

So let's talk a little bit about the three cornerstones of sila, the three steps. I'm just going to touch these briefly because there's a great deal of detail possible with each one, and I think there's going to be a separate talk on right speech or wise speech. Each of these could easily be a separate talk in and of itself, but I'll give it to you briefly.

Right speech—interestingly enough, this comes first in the grouping. This is also reiterated in the precepts: abstaining from lying, divisive speech, abusive speech, idle chatter. It's interesting because these are phrased as "don't do this, don't do this, refrain from." But you could positively phrase it too. You could say: speak using words that are true, friendly and benevolent, pleasant and gentle, meaningful and useful.

The next factor is wise action or right action, which addresses how to live in daily life. Negatively phrased, it means abstaining from taking life, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech, and taking intoxicants which lead to heedlessness. If you were to positively phrase that, you could say something like: knowing how deeply our lives entwine, I undertake the training to protect life, to take only what is freely given to me, to protect relationships and avoid sexual misconduct, to speak truthfully and kindly, and to protect the clarity of my mind through avoiding intoxicants. The Thich Nhat Hanh community works with these in a positive way—at least I've seen their affirmative statements of these trainings.

The last of these three factors is wise livelihood, which incorporates the idea of harmlessness towards other beings. It states you should not work or earn a living by doing things which cause harm to others. There's a direct echo here, and in all three of these factors, back to wise intention and what was talked about with that.

If you phrase it negatively, it's refraining from trading in arms and lethal weapons, intoxicants, poisons, killing animals, cheating, trafficking in human beings like slave trading and prostitution, and dishonest means of gaining wealth like scheming, persuading, hinting, and belittling. That seems to eliminate large portions of the economy.

If you were going to positively phrase it, you would say: work and earn a living in ways that express loving-kindness, compassion, respect, and support for living beings.

Just as an aside here, I wish to clarify that the Buddha didn't have a problem with wealth in and of itself. In fact, he would talk about righteous wealth righteously gained. So being successful, making money, is not a problem—unless it's done in a way that is damaging and harmful to others in the ways that have been talked about, or if you use your wealth in ways that are damaging and harmful to others or to yourself.

Now let's have a little side conversation here. We had a question this morning about law, legality, and sila. When we ended the sitting and went back into the staff dining room, we had a little flurry of conversation among ourselves about this whole topic. I decided this is worth talking about some more, because we've got our cultural overlay of religion as part of what we bring to this, but the other cultural overlay we bring is what is legal—what the law says about things.

I was thinking about this this afternoon, so I started by asking myself some questions on this topic. The first one was: do laws reflect or embody sila? And sometimes yes, sometimes no. Sometimes laws are just very pragmatic things, like no right turn at this light, or you must file your income tax by April 15th—clearly not high sila content, more like regulation for society and how it needs to work as a complex cooperative endeavor. Sometimes laws definitely don't embody sila. Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't but are just pragmatic, and sometimes they actually violate sila—the concepts represented in the teachings on sila.

Let me step back for a minute and talk about the fact that human beings have a natural moral sense. We seem to be born with it. I saw something really interesting: a study done using infants who were very young, I want to say around six months, pre-verbal. They would set up a little stage behind which somebody was operating two little sock puppets. They had this little ball, and the sock puppets would pass it back and forth between each other. The researchers would watch the reaction of the babies watching this. When they changed the experiment so that one of the sock puppets was essentially hogging the ball—would get it, keep it, and wouldn't give it to the other one—they measured the nonverbal reactions of the babies to the puppets and which ones they reached for. The babies didn't like the nasty ones. So there's some kind of very early moral sense that we have as humans that is operant.

Interestingly enough, there's some indication that certain bonding hormones we humans have as part of our physical setup have something to do with us feeling care, concern, and interest for others. But this is a tricky part of being human, apparently, because it seems to suggest that the same thing which causes us to

bond with, care for, and be concerned about certain people—maybe members of our immediate family, our own children, intimate partners, or people like us, people we have a lot in common with—that very same thing that causes us to form a caring "we" also has an edge to it. And when you're out, you're out.

This is part of our dilemma as human beings: how difficult it is to generalize these intentions of harmlessness towards everyone.

So in thinking about this issue of law and sila and natural morality, I asked myself: can the natural moral sense of right and wrong get bound up in delusion? And the answer is clearly yes. You could say fundamentalism is a form of delusion which often uses the language of morality. Moralistic language can be used in the service of power and control, overriding the well-being of others.

Some simple examples: in the United States, within my lifetime—and I'm not that old—the southern part of the country had laws, this was part of the law, that segregated public spaces by race. If you violated that law, you could and would be arrested and taken to jail for violating part of the criminal code. In some parts of the world, even now, there are laws forbidding the education of females or restricting their ability to be out in public without being covered. So yes, things can get bound up in delusion.

Then the next question arises: can it sometimes be an expression of the values of sīla, of moral restraint, to break a law? Yes. When you look at how segregation was undone in the South, it was largely through people breaking the law in a very deliberate, public, nonviolent fashion in order to highlight the injustice of what was being done. Another example would be demonstrations against the regime in Burma when they were illegal. It was illegal, but it was moral. It was in accord with sīla. It was right speech to say: there is corruption, there is oppression, there is cruelty and dishonesty here.

Now, some laws reflect a legitimate expression of morality and are completely congruent with sīla. Laws against child abuse would be an example. The law says you can't do this; sīla says that's unskillful action. One thing to point out here is that meeting the legal standard very often is kind of a low bar for behavior, isn't it? Yes, it's illegal to abuse your child, but I think most parents who have a level of development would like to do a lot better than just not abusing their kid.

There are other things that might be legal but might not necessarily line up with sīla. It's legal to drink alcohol, for instance, but restraint from intoxicants which cause heedlessness is one of the precepts. I'm going to sidestep the whole question of whether that means you can never have a glass of wine with your turkey. Oh, you're not going to have turkey—okay, so we won't need to worry about that. You can give that question to whoever's doing the question and answer session tomorrow morning.

There's another piece of this: the language of sīla can also be corrupted and misused. You can see this sometimes in our own communities, in the form of what I would call a "sīla smackdown"—when the language of sīla is used to get someone to stop doing something that bothers you. An example of this has occurred in some communities where there has been sexual misconduct on the part of a teacher, and

that's become publicly known, often raised by people who have been victimized. Some members of the community, or the community as a whole, has responded by saying, "Wrong speech, wrong speech, wrong speech. It's divisive, it's harsh, there's no compassion." But no—it's true. It's useful, really useful. It's really necessary. That's an example of how, when delusion is mixed in with the understanding of these things, it can go sideways. Even the language of morality can go sideways if the mind isn't clear.

But even with all this complication, the key thing to remember is the place of sīla in the path to liberation. We can, by our choice of actions, set in motion conditions which are conducive to our growth and awakening. By undertaking this training in sīla, we move toward a mind that's happy, open, free from remorse and anxiety, and easily concentrated.

To practice sīla well, we have to move beyond moralism and that kind of rule-bound automaticity. We need to use mindfulness, clear perception, clear comprehension, and a commitment to the growth of our own wisdom, compassion, and loving-kindness. There are many dilemmas, many gray areas. I've described the basic principles and some particular sub-parts of each of them, but the application of these principles in daily life requires intelligent engagement, not a teacher telling you what you should do in a specific case. This is more of an exploration than something formulaic. This process of applying these principles in daily life supports the development of our own grounded understanding as we deepen our ability to see causation and choose in a way that supports our deepest aspiration.

The Buddha himself often contemplated his complete harmlessness. Imagine having a mind so refined that one of the things that gave you the greatest joy was the thought that no being anywhere, in all the worlds, all the universes, had anything at all to fear from you. The practice of these precepts is spoken of as pristine, traditional, ancient gifts which give immeasurable beings freedom from fear, hostility, and oppression—and which in turn give to the practitioner the same gifts of freedom from fear, hostility, and oppression. In a way, it's an act of generosity, an act of dāna, to train in sīla and to observe it.

I want to tell a particular story here about sīla.

And this comes from a documentary I watched recently that was put out by public television in the United States, called *The Man Who Saved the World*. The documentary was about something that happened fifty years ago between the Soviet Union and the United States. It involved a struggle over the presence of missiles that the Soviet Union had moved to Cuba—better known as ninety miles away from the shores of the United States.

To tell you a little bit about this, you'd have to know that at the time, the United States and the Soviet Union each had nuclear capacity to destroy each other twenty times over. Those of you who are older may remember what was going on during this period. The younger ones of you may have never heard about this or may just have some vague knowledge of it. But basically what happened was that it came down to one person on a submarine who had the decision about whether or not to let a nuclear-tipped missile be launched.

To understand this, you'd have to set the stage by grasping what it was like in the United States—and I think this is true in Western Europe too, to some extent. After the Second World War, the Western world and the Soviet Union became very polarized. East Germany was completely sealed off, under communist domination. All the Eastern European countries were under Soviet rule, very oppressive. Rebellions were put down by force. It was an era in the Soviet Union of gulags and concentration camps, work camps, people disappearing—everything very tightly controlled by the government—with the United States very much polarized against the Soviet Union, which had itself developed a nuclear weapon. The United States, of course, developed it first and used it twice in the Second World War. So we were enemies.

Growing up in this era, you would have to understand that. We practiced hiding under our desks at school in case the alarm sounded that indicated the warheads and bombs were coming. This was a routine drill in school. There's a movie out about it, a kind of funny movie about this period called *Duck and Cover*. You would practice going under your desk and wrap yourself up. So it was very realistic to think that this could happen at any time.

At the time this event was going on in Cuba, I was living on a military base in upstate New York, not too far from the Canadian border. On this Air Force base, there were B-52s with nuclear weapons, B-47s with nuclear weapons. And then built into the side of the Adirondack Mountains, there were Atlas missile silos drilled down into the mountain to be protected from direct strike. These also had nuclear warheads. There were bases here, and bases around the world.

At a certain point, close to the time of this episode, the United States put missiles into Turkey and Italy. The ones in Turkey could reach Moscow. The Soviets felt that was a great provocation. And when Cuba fell to the Communists, the Soviet Union took the opportunity to secretly move missiles into Cuba and set up a missile base there. They snuck them in, but the United States found out about it.

Once they found out, there was this reaction: What are they doing? They're bringing them really close. They're getting ready to do it. It's way too close. They could launch something that could hit us in half an hour. They could take out Washington. They could take out New York. They could take out all the major cities. They could get us before we could protect ourselves in any way.

The whole thing at this period in the world was held together by what was called the balance of terror, or mutually assured destruction. This is how the world was, not so long ago. The idea was: if you do that to us, you know that we can do that to you, so nobody would be nutty enough to do it if we both know we each could do it. This is what passed for stability in the world at the time.

So when the United States found out these missiles were in Cuba, they said, "We can't have this. This cannot be allowed." And thus began the process of trying to make the Soviets remove them from Cuba.

And first the Soviets denied they had them there, and there was a lot of this going back and forth at the UN, being non-responsive and all the rest of it.

I can remember what it was like living on the base when this was happening, as this crisis ratcheted up. First you'd have to understand that when we went to church on the base, there were pews that were reserved for men in flight suits who were on alert. This was true all the time. And at any moment during the service, a special light would suddenly start flashing, and these men would get up and run out of the building, get in their special truck, and drive to the flight line. They would climb into the cockpits of planes loaded with nuclear weapons, start the engines, and get ready to take off—and then it would turn out to be a drill. But they wouldn't know that at the time. This was routine life in the village.

As the crisis deepened, it got very quiet among the adults. The dinnertime conversations grew hushed as the level of preparedness ratcheted up day by day—the United States confronting the Soviet Union, the Soviet Union stonewalling. The Soviets were still sending more ships toward Cuba carrying more missiles.

President Kennedy was the president at the time, and he set up a national television address to tell everybody what was going on: there are missiles here, more missiles are coming, they're really close, and we can't allow this to happen. It's too dangerous. They would have the possibility to take us out—it would upset this balance of power, this deterrent. We have to block it. Then he said we're going to put a quarantine around Cuba. We're going to keep them from moving any missiles in. Any ships approaching Cuba, our Navy is going to stop them, board them, and inspect their cargo. If they have this kind of thing, they're not getting in.

For days, the public watched as the ships from the Soviet Union continued their path toward Cuba. The United States was ringing the island with Navy ships. Nobody was blinking.

My father started being gone longer during the day. Then it got to a point where he wasn't home at night. When I was in school—grade school—the other kids started to disappear. Some families were taking them out of school and sending them away, someplace they thought might be safer in case there was a nuclear strike on the base. The base was a huge target because it had nuclear weapons, and the epicenter of the base was five hundred yards from my house. So we knew what was going on.

The president actually moved the alert status during this period up to the closest level before launching nuclear war. There were planes in the air with bombs already moving toward Soviet targets. They would go so far and then come back or refuel—hovering, hovering. They were in the air so they couldn't all be destroyed by strikes.

And the national mood? It was fear. It was terror. Are we going to have a war? Are we going to have a nuclear war? Is this going to be it? And it really seemed that it could be.

In the early stages of this—which gets back to the point of the story—the Soviet Union launched four submarines from the Arctic, giving the commanders orders that they could launch nuclear torpedoes at their discretion if they felt it was necessary. There hadn't been nuclear torpedoes before, at least not for the Soviets. The way you would launch these torpedoes was that you needed two people, each of whom

had half a key. This is also the way nuclear missile silos worked for us. I know because one day after church, we went there for a tour. It's not something everybody does after church, but we did.

So these four subs were coming to reinforce the militarization of Cuba, and they had these orders: you can do this if you need to. At some point, the United States fleet, which had started patrolling the area very heavily, became aware that these subs were heading to Cuba.

The subs are coming. They have the torpedoes. They have no communication with Moscow—cut off from their home base. They are, however, picking up broadcasts from Miami.

The talk about war, the talk about quarantine, the talk about how nuclear weapons might be imminently launched—they're hearing all this from the U.S. side. They're hearing nothing from home.

And these ships, these older diesel vessels, were very poor containers for a long voyage. So they started to experience problems. For instance, heat in the vessel. They got to the point where the coolest place in the submarine was 110 degrees Fahrenheit. They would rotate guys in there for a brief period of time because it was cool—they would go in there, get cooled down to 110 degrees. One glass of water a day. They had no water. They were running out of food. Their batteries were running low. They had to remain submerged because otherwise they would be spotted. No communications from home.

So at a certain point, the U.S. Navy finds them. They spot the subs underneath, and they see them coming towards Cuba. The subs don't know that by this point the U.S. government and the Soviet government are talking. Some sane ones are talking to each other, realizing this is really bad. And they don't know that the order has been given not to sink the subs, but instead to force them to surface. Moscow knows this, but the subs don't know this. These guys on the sub don't know this. And the Americans don't know that the subs don't know it. So there's an information vacuum and void.

So the Americans locate the subs, and they start to try to make them surface. They start pounding them with sonar waves, hitting the sub, hitting the sub, hitting the sub. You think our construction noise is bad—it's like being in a metal tube with somebody using a really big sledgehammer on the side. So they start doing that. There's no response from the sub, even though they know they're going to have to surface at some point. And then the Americans start dropping depth charges, these drum-like things that sink and then explode. They weren't using the depth charges to try to sink it, but they were trying to force them to come up.

So at this point, they're down there. They're running out of options. They feel besieged. They feel like if they come up, they're going to get destroyed. And the commander of one of the subs says, "Load the special weapon." And they take the nuclear torpedo and put it in the tube to fire. And he takes his half of the key and puts it in there. And he says to his subordinate, "Put your key in." And on the documentary, at least how they portrayed it, the subordinate was like, "Put the key in?" But he did. He follows orders, puts the key in. And they prepare to launch.

And there's a pause in the action. Because the commander of the entire fleet of these submarines—he has the authority to override the commander of the vessel. And this individual who commanded the fleet was someone who had been on a nuclear submarine involved in a nuclear accident. In that accident, a number of the men on his crew had been exposed to such high levels of radiation that they had died. And he had been very moved by this, very affected by seeing them pass away in this manner. His wife describes him—and this is so Russian, the way she talks about him—she says he was kind-hearted and calm. A real human. A real human.

And he says to the commander of the sub, "I do not give my permission." And the commander pushed back. And he said, "I am in charge of the fleet. I do not give my consent."

And it all turned right there. Right at that moment, on this one person, *sīla*, and his refusal to allow the launch. If this had been launched, the torpedo had the power of the bomb used in Hiroshima.

It would have destroyed the entire surrounding American fleet, and it would have been game on. None of you would be here. None of us would be.

So the commander of the fleet said, contact the Americans. They opened up communication with the American fleet, which told them, please surface. They were allowed to surface, replenish their air, restore their batteries, and they turned around and went back to the Soviet Union. Both sides stood down. The crisis broke.

When they went back home to the Soviet Union, they were told it would have been better for them if they had drowned rather than to surface. The man who had made this moral choice to preserve the world was not treated with respect and regard. But this was an extraordinary act of collection of mind, clarity of perception, moral restraint. And we all owe a great deal to him.

His name was Vasili Arkhipov. He wound up dying of a cancer caused by radiation exposure from the accident on the boat I described earlier.

This story points to our interrelationship and the tremendous effect one person can have when they choose to do or not to do. We practice sila in small things, in immediate things. But you can see that especially in our modern world, with the incredible multiplier effect we have with technology and the power we now possess, how important this very basic grounding in goodwill and moral restraint truly is.

So with that in mind: may you undertake the training to develop the many gifts of sila—the power of moral restraint, the directing of the mind towards a commitment to harmlessness, and towards cultivation of the well-being of all beings.

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