Sīla Part 1: Virtue Ethics

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 1:03:50

Tonight and the day after tomorrow night, we're going to talk about sīla. Here we translate it as ethics. Sīla, or ethics, is foundational to the Buddha's way of practice.

The Buddha talks about the Eightfold Path as the basic template, and in the later tradition this is divided up and classified as the three trainings of sīla-samādhi-paññā: ethics, meditation, wisdom. Ethics, sīla, serves as the foundation of the path and therefore the beginning, but also the culmination of the path—or rather, the expression of the path. How does the path express itself in our lives? It's through ethics.

We're going to talk about the Buddha's approach to understanding ethics. Tonight we're going to talk about virtue ethics, and tomorrow we look at consequentialist ethics.

We start with the term sīla, often translated as morality, but sīla is a broad term and covers a whole area which includes character, habit, way of life, human nature, virtue, conduct, and ethics. Here we simply translate it as ethics. If we ask what we mean by ethics, what ethics is all about—essentially, ethics is about how we live. That's its focus.

We could say that every human being is faced with a fundamental ethical problem or a fundamental ethical question, and the question is: How should I live? Each of us has come up with an answer to that question, and we can see the answer in the way we are, in fact, living.

This is how the Buddha expressed this universal question. He says: What is wholesome? What is unwholesome? What is praiseworthy? What is blameable? What ought I to do? What ought I not to do? What, having done it, will bring me harm and suffering over the long term? And what will bring me welfare and happiness over the long term?

For the Buddha, the universal question "How shall we live?" gets morphed or modified into "How can we live well and happily over the long term?" This is his central question.

The kinds of answers that he came up with could be classified into two broad approaches: virtue ethics and consequentialist ethics. Virtue ethics is focused on the personal qualities that define our identity, the kind of person we become. Consequentialist ethics is focused on the consequences of our actions—in other words, karma-vipāka, action and its ripening. Tonight we're focusing on virtue ethics.

Virtue ethics is basically all about the development of character. It's focused on who we are now and who we have the potential to become. For the Buddha, character and conduct are intimately interconnected because for him, we become what we do. We are shaped by our choices and our actions. Our actions

reflect who we really are, as distinct from who we think we are or who we want others to think we are.

What's central here to virtue ethics is that it's about character. It's not about rules, and it's not about obedience to rules. These have absolutely nothing to do with it. What is central to virtue ethics is training or education, because character is something that can be cultivated, formed by training. We form our character through the choices that we make over time.

If we're engaged on the path, we have some vision of who we want to be, and we recognize when we see ourselves falling short of this ideal. Because we don't quite measure up to it, we need some way of shaping ourselves so that eventually we embody this ideal, or at least to some degree. This shaping ourselves, this system of training, is of course the Eightfold Path.

When we practice virtue ethics, we train ourselves to become a particular kind of person—a person in the broader sense who lives well and happily. We do this by learning to embody virtue, particular virtues.

That brings us to the question of what we mean by virtue, which is not a particularly fashionable word these days. Originally, virtue simply meant an excellence. It is a virtue in a knife, for example, that it has a sharp edge. If I have a knife which is very sharp, I call this a good knife.

And if I have a knife which is very blunt, I call it a bad knife. So sharpness is the virtue that we look for in a knife. And in the same way, one can be a good plumber or a good shop assistant, or conversely, a bad plumber or a bad shop assistant. These labels are basically an assessment of the degree to which a person excels at what they do.

This is virtue in the general sense, but of course it's not virtue in the moral sense. A moral virtue is an excellence that forms character, and this makes it different from other kinds of virtues. For example, I can be a good plumber but a bad person. Alternatively, I might be a very good person and a hopeless plumber.

Like virtue in the general sense of excellence, moral virtue can be cultivated through education or training. I might not be born a good plumber, but with the appropriate training, I could become one. Equally, I might not be born a good person, but with the appropriate training, I might become one. So virtue ethics contains a sense of potential—a sense of the as yet unrealized potential of the human being, the capacity to get better, to improve, to become a good person.

The Buddha believes that if we want to live flourishing lives, there are certain virtues we should cultivate. If you go on meditation retreats, one virtue you've doubtlessly heard of is cāga, although you may be more familiar with the English word generosity. For the Buddha, this is a foundational virtue, so foundational that he doesn't actually see it as being specifically Buddhist. It's universal for him.

In order to cultivate a virtue, we have to have some kind of practice, some kind of training. The practice of generosity is dāna, which literally means giving, or that which is given—a gift. The Buddha believes the cultivation of virtue is really important because it changes the way that we live. His assumption about

human nature is that a generous person will flourish and will help those around her flourish, while a stingy person will wither and will make the lives of those around him wither. There's always a social element to the virtues for the Buddha, which we'll get to pretty soon.

For the Buddha, the basic training template is the Eightfold Path, which is based on the cultivation of eight interrelated virtues: right view, right aspiration, right action, right speech, right livelihood, right energy, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The later tradition divides the path into three specific trainings or curriculum: sīla, samādhi, and paññā—ethics, meditation, and wisdom. The idea is that we embark on these trainings in order to cultivate these eight virtues so that they turn us into a person who will live well and happily.

The central question for the Buddha, as we quoted from the Lakkhaṇa Sutta in the Dīgha Nikāya, is: what will bring me harm and suffering over the long term, and what will bring me welfare and happiness over the long term? This is at the heart of the Buddha's sense of the ethical quest. The purpose of sīla, the cultivation of the virtues, is to enable human flourishing—to enable us to live happy and satisfying lives. Notice he says "over the long term." He's not interested in immediate gains, but in what builds up over a period of time.

When the Buddha teaches ethics to his lay students, the basic framework he uses are the five ways of training, the sikkhāpada. You get the expression pañca sīla, the fivefold ethics, and these are made up of five sikkhāpada, ways of training. Again, training is at the centre. This is one reason why I don't use the translation "precept." I don't like the term "the five precepts," which is another expression we've inherited from the Victorians, because a precept is a rule—basically, it's a fancy word for rule. The five rules. And a rule can be obeyed or it can be disobeyed. But a way of training cannot be obeyed, and it cannot be disobeyed.

Let's say I take up a meditation practice. Can I obey a meditation practice? Can I disobey a meditation practice? No. I can either do it or not do it. I can either be fully committed to it or not fully committed to it.

But I cannot obey it, and I cannot disobey it. Obedience simply does not apply.

So the five ways of training are precisely that—ways of training aimed at cultivating virtues. They are not rules to be obeyed or disobeyed. What characterizes the virtues listed in these five trainings is that they are virtues which foster social harmony. The focus is on the community more than the individual.

To put it in summary form: If we do not harm each other, then instead we help each other. If we do not take from and exploit each other, then instead we give to and support each other. If we do not get so caught up in sensory stimulation and excitement that we turn away from our social world and disappear into a private realm of narcissistic pleasure—if we are honest and truthful with each other—if we do not poison our relationships because we're pursuing personal obsessions with getting high—then we develop a community in which we can practice Dharma and flourish as human beings.

The five ways of training are basically a methodology for creating a community living in harmony. And if it's living in harmony, then the people within it can flourish.

So sila, ethics, for the Buddha is designed to promote social harmony, but also to develop psychological harmony. Here we move from the community to the individual. This brings us to the relationship between sila and samadhi in the path, where the foundation of samadhi—meditation—is sila, ethics.

Now, why does the Buddha insist on the centrality of this relationship? If you go to a Mahasi meditation centre in Burma, you're told that you must follow the five precepts and then you can succeed in your meditation. And if you don't, you won't. I have to say that when I went there, I was completely puzzled by this because the precepts were presented as rules. For the life of me, I could not understand why breaking these rules would cause my meditation to fail while obeying them would make it succeed. I won't tell anybody else, but I did conduct scientific experiments. And I was satisfied that, no, you can break them and still succeed in the meditation. So I just couldn't get it. There was never any real explanation about why this relationship exists.

But the Buddha was coming at it from a different angle because he doesn't see what we call the precepts as rules. It's got nothing to do with obedience.

So let's look at this relationship. We start with samadhi. Samadhi is sometimes used in a broad sense to mean meditation practice in general, and sometimes in a narrow sense to indicate that particular quality of the heart characterized by stillness and integration. I think we've already commented on samadhi before, but it comes from the root *da*, to put or to place. The prefix *ā* means "toward," and the prefix *sam* means "together." Samadhi: to bring together, to collect, to unify, to integrate, to unite. Samadhi collects and integrates the citta, the heart-mind.

So the opposite of samadhi is division. How do we know we do not have samadhi? Have you figured this out by now? How do you know when you don't have samadhi? Well, what we say is, "I'm distracted. Therefore, I do not have samadhi." But what is distraction exactly? It's a state in which the citta is divided, not integrated.

Part of me wants to meditate, but another part of me wants to be watching TV, and another part of me wants to be preparing for the next challenge at work, and another part of me wants to be having lunch. And maybe all of these at once. The heart-mind is divided, not unified. And when the heart-mind is divided, it is at war with itself. We're in a state of civil war or civil conflict of some sort. The part of me that wants to meditate is fighting with the part of me that wants to be having lunch. This conflict creates a state of restlessness, desire, and aversion, which will not allow the citta to fully settle.

So if I'm not distracted, this means my heart-mind is not divided—it's unified. I am not at war with myself because all of me wants to be where I already am and wants to be doing what I'm already doing. And this state is peaceful.

And within it, the heart-mind is collected, integrated, unified, peaceful, and powerful. That is samādhi. And sīla—ethics—is the foundation of samādhi because the role of sīla is to cultivate the harmony necessary for samādhi.

Just as one example: in the Eightfold Path, sīla covers speech, action, and livelihood. So the question for the practitioner becomes: Do my speech, my actions, and my job serve to cultivate the conditions that help me develop samādhi? Or not? Or more simply: Does my way of life lead toward harmony, or does it lead away from harmony?

Because fundamentally, sīla is harmony. An action is in accordance with sīla when it results in harmony—not when it follows certain rules. And this harmony is both social and psychological.

So we start with the social. Again, the five ways of training—they're all about social harmony. They are disciplines which, if we practice them, result in a civilized, peaceful society. If we cultivate these ways of training, we cultivate a society where people can feel safe and at ease with others.

In one discourse—the Kūṭadanta Sutta, Dīgha Nikāya 5—the Buddha talks about his social ideal as part of a story. One expression he uses is that in an ideal society, people live at ease "in open houses." This expression really struck me when I first encountered it, because it reminded me of where I was raised.

I grew up in the Sydney suburb of Cammeray, on the lower North Shore. The suburban houses there were basically aspiring working class and lower middle class—brick houses with yards, the whole shebang. The front door was rather elaborate, with wood and glass paneling, and it had a lock. When the kiddies reached a certain age, we were given our very own copy of the front door key so we could come and go as we pleased. It was a mark of relative independence.

It was years before it occurred to me—there I was, clutching my key—but the back door had no lock. It was never locked. It didn't have a lock to lock. You could always wander in and out the back door. Only the front door had a lock, because that's where you faced the street, the social whatever. But if you wanted to get in, you just went around to the back door, which is what the neighbours did.

These days, in the same suburb, the houses have all been sold and bought by upper middle class people. They've all been renovated. And they've all had walls put up. Our house didn't even have—it had no fence. Some people had low fences you could step over. But now, all the houses on that street have high walls. The house we used to live in has a door with a carefully locked, very elaborate lock, then there's the driveway with another lock, and I'm pretty sure every door and window is locked. In other words, life there is a lot more insecure than it was back then. Things have changed—which would suggest, from the Buddha's point of view, that the five ways of training are not as established in that community as they were in those days.

So the five ways of training are about creating a certain kind of community. And the social aspect of sīla also comes out in the way the Buddha speaks about the benefits of the practice. In one way, he says that if

we live without sīla, we are uncomfortable with people whom we respect and whose respect we wish to have. This is the relationship he focuses on.

He teaches, for example, that saddhā—the orientation of the heart toward the Dharma—begins with association with good people, or association with authentic people. The term in Pāli is sappurisa. Purisa means "person." Sat is usually translated as "good," and certainly that's included in the meaning, but sat actually comes from the root meaning "to be." So a sappurisa is a person who is—in other words, an authentic person, a genuine person. And if we want to practice Dharma, these are the people we need to spend time with.

But if we lack sila, if our ethics is shaky, we do not feel at ease with these people. What if they find out what I'm really up to? That could be alarming. There is a part of me that must be hidden from them, and this threatens harmony.

When I cultivate sila, ethics, I find I can be more at ease within my community. But what's really important for the Buddha is that I feel at ease within a community composed of people whom I respect and look up to, people who I want to respect me. Coming back to the training in virtue: if I practice sila, I feel in harmony with precisely those people who are most likely to bring out the best in me, the ones who are most likely to help me along the path. This is social harmony, which for the Buddha is an important benefit of practicing sila.

Then there is the psychological harmony, and here we return to the relationship between sila and samadhi. The psychological result of practicing or not practicing sila emerges in one discourse, the Kimatthiya Sutta, which can be translated as "For What Purpose?" This is from the Anguttara Nikaya. The Buddha speaks about the purpose and the benefit of sila. Basically, the question he addresses is: Why practice sila? What's in it for me? What's the benefit?

We won't go through the whole discourse. We're just going to focus on one particular relationship. The Buddha says that a major result of living with sila is what he calls avippatisara, which can be translated as non-regret. And this avippatisara generates pamoja, joy. Non-regret generates joy. This relationship we need to explore.

The word that gets translated as non-regret is avippatisara, which is a negative term—starting with the "a," that always gives you the clue—and then you get vippatisara. Vippatisara is constructed from the Sanskrit root smr, "remember," from which we get smriti in Sanskrit, sati in Pali—mindfulness. So that "sara" is the same as sati. Vippatisara is regret or remorse, and what it refers to is our relationship with the past, based on memory.

In other words, there's something we have done in the past that bothers us today and leads us to obsess about the past. Or there's something we have not done in the past which bothers us today and leads us to obsess about the past. This obsession pollutes our relationship with the present. And of course, if our

relationship to the present is compromised, the meditation practice becomes a lot more difficult.

Avippatisara is the opposite. Now, this "a" can be translated in two ways. One is as a simple absence: no regret, no remorse. But it can also be translated in a stronger form—what in English would be "anti"—the opposite of regret and remorse. I think this is what the Buddha is getting at here. Non-regret indicates a positive state of happiness or contentment with one's life, even rejoicing in how one has lived. Looking back on how one has lived and feeling good about it. This is suggested by the fact that joy arises in one who experiences non-regret. Non-regret is a felt sense of satisfaction with the way one has lived, which causes joy to arise in the heart.

Here is a personal example. I remember back in the day when I'd finished a BA degree at the University of Sydney and then thought, well, I've got to do something useful. I went to the University of New South Wales and started studying law, thinking I'd be a good lawyer. I could nitpick with the best of them.

One day I was in the law library, preparing for an assignment. The cubicle was piled high with learned legal tomes, and my head was buried in D.T. Suzuki's *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, Volume One. I looked up and gazed at the heavy volumes of knowledge. I got up, returned the books to their shelves, walked out of the library, walked out of the university, and never came back. Dropped out, made money, headed off to Asia.

Now at the time, it was a completely insane thing to do. And this was explained to me by a number of people, earnestly and hopefully. But looking back, I rejoice in that decision. I think I did the right thing. And I feel chuffed by it. A non-regret arises in the heart.

So this relationship to the past, for the Buddha, is important. It has real significance. For example, we talked about the virtue of generosity. One of the practices he recommends is reflecting on one's own generosity.

To give an example: these days, let's say you want to give to a charity or some worthy organisation. What they really want you to do is set up an ongoing payment out of your bank account. And once you've set it up, what they really want you to do is forget about it. Maybe ten years' time might be the first time you think about it. But if you're cultivating the virtue of generosity, an excellent practice is this: when you get your bank statement, go through it and mark where you're making these donations, and rejoice in your generosity. I'm making a contribution. This organisation is getting money which it would not otherwise have because of my generosity. I'm making a difference. And one feels chuffed by that. One feels happy by that. Non-regret arises. And as a result, the heart is settled and samādhi becomes that much easier.

So this is the psychological result, the psychological harmony, that comes from sīla. It gives rise to joy, and the Buddha goes on to explain that joy naturally gives rise to rapture, which leads to tranquility, then happiness, concentration, realistic understanding and seeing, disenchantment, the fading of obsession, and the understanding and seeing that comes from liberation. He says, "In this way, moral virtue leads

progressively to the highest." Sīla leads progressively to the highest.

What the Buddha is talking about is a seamless progression from the everyday practice of ethics, through the depths of meditation practice, and from there to the heights of realization and enlightenment. It's all one progression. It's all part of one seamless whole.

In that list, the terms from rapture through to concentration are technical terms about meditation practice, while disenchantment through to the understanding and seeing that comes from liberation are technical terms for awakening or insight. So sīla functions as a support, an indispensable support, for meditation practice and its result. It does this by grounding us in a way of life that brings a deep sense of satisfaction. That's its job. That's what it's meant to do.

And the teaching is quite radical. Because the Buddha is not saying that practicing sīla gives rise to harmony and so to a way of life that supports the path to awakening. What he's saying is that any way of life that gives rise to harmony, both social and psychological, is sīla. One implication of this is that sīla cannot be captured by any set of rules, because it's fundamentally not about obedience. Obedience is not a virtue for the Buddha.

It's interesting that if you ever ordain in the Theravāda—the Theravāda, by the way, has a secret and esoteric name. It's also known as the Terrible-vāda, because it is the most terrible of all the vādas. But if you ordain as a bhikkhu, you take on 227 precepts, and these really are precepts, these are rules. If you ordain as a nun, you take on 311.

Now I haven't looked at the 311, but I did go through the 227, and what struck me as very interesting—interesting for someone who'd come out of a Catholic background—was that you do not find the word obedience anywhere in those 227 rules. It's just not there. It's completely absent. And this is a real shocker.

If you come out of a Catholic background, if you're ordaining to a religious order in Catholicism, you've got only three rules: poverty, chastity, obedience. Fully one third of the path. If you're in the secular clergy, it's just chastity and obedience—half of the path. But for the Buddha, it's just not there. You do get the word respect, which is peppered throughout, and respect on the outside can look like obedience, but it isn't. It's something different.

You do not find obedience anywhere in the rules. And I think this is not accidental—I think it is significant.

So ethics cannot be captured by rules, because it's not about obedience. It's about what cultivates harmony. And sometimes what cultivates harmony is breaking the rules. Behind this idea lies a particular view of human nature.

Let me give you a sense of how this distinction between obedience and respect actually works. One time I

was attending a retreat here as a mere humble meditator—I wasn't on the throne. A Burmese Sayadaw was teaching. Each day I would do my stretches in order to survive the demands of the retreat. One day I went into interview and the Sayadaw was looking a bit embarrassed. I thought, something's happened. He explained that one of the meditators had dobbed me in for doing yoga at a Buddhist retreat. He said, "You mustn't do that. You mustn't mix your practices."

I said, "Yes, Sayadaw." No argument whatsoever. I went off afterwards and I obeyed. I did not do any yoga for a full twenty-four hours. In doing so, I showed my respect for him. And then I continued to show my respect for him by continuing my yoga practice in the privacy of my room where nobody could see me.

Now, was I a bad boy because I was disobeying? Or was I a good boy because I was showing respect? I would say in the Buddha's context, it's the latter more than the former.

The Buddha's approach to sīla—to ethics—is based on his view of human nature. He believes that we are constituted in such a way that if we act in ways driven by obsession, aversion, and delusion, we will cultivate disharmony, even chaos, within us and around us. This will make us and those around us unhappy. But if we act in ways not driven by obsession, aversion, and delusion—motivated instead by the opposite qualities—then we will cultivate harmony and well-being within ourselves and within our community. We will be happy, and the people around us will be happy.

This has got nothing to do with the will of a divine being—even a divine being whom we might surreptitiously name "Buddha." And it's got nothing to do with the orders of authorities, whether of this world or another. It's simply the way human beings are constituted.

So practicing sīla involves cultivating a sensitivity to harmony and disharmony in our lives. We might begin by noticing: What brings disharmony? What disturbs me? What do I do that promotes disturbance in my life? These are things I should examine with a view to abandoning them. And what do I do that promotes peace and harmony in my life? These are things I should examine with a view to cultivating them.

The Buddha speaks about this in terms of abandoning the unwholesome and cultivating the wholesome.

A question from the audience: Do you know why women have more precepts than men today?

Because their social situation was much dodgier than men's. There were female renunciants in India before the Buddha, but life was far more dangerous for them. Remember, life as a bhikkhu or bhikkhunī meant you were essentially a wandering beggar. A man—especially a couple of men travelling together—was relatively safe. They were men, they were wearing the robes, so they were sacred beings.

But women wandering around without men to supervise them? This violated the whole family ethos in ancient India, and such women were considered legitimate targets. There are cases in the Vinaya describing violence against bhikkhunīs. So a whole variety of rules developed to protect them, restricting

their freedom of movement so it would be safer.

Plus, there are some rules actually designed to keep them safe from bhikkhus. For example, it's against the rules for a nun to accept the laundry of a monk and do it for him. No, mate—you do your own laundry.

So that's essentially why these rules existed. It wasn't based on a sense of the inferiority of women. It was based on a cold, sober assessment that the social position of women in that culture—as free, self-governing individuals, living in female communities, autonomous, with no men in charge—that exposed them to all sorts of pressures from the outside world that the men didn't have to put up with. So they had to make arrangements. It was about their safety, essentially.

But the key point is that they had their own self-governing communities. They weren't dependent upon men.

Sometimes questions arise about whether the nuns still wandered like the monks. Yes, they had the right to. Sometimes they chose not to because of physical difficulties, but sometimes they wandered. And there are all sorts of records about women who just wandered off into the forest and meditated, exactly as the men did.

The society was used to female renunciates, but the nuns were more exposed. They were in a more dangerous situation.

As far as we know, that was the case. And the earliest records, the earliest epigraphical records—like carvings that have survived—these are associated with the stupas that were built. Archaeologists have found many carvings of people who had made donations to the stupa and to various activities. These were quite important people, significant people in the Buddhist community. And a lot of them were Buddhist nuns. So they were clearly people of status and importance. That's as far back as we can go in terms of the record.

There's often a question about the story of how the Buddha agreed to ordain women. The traditional account says it was Ananda who petitioned him quite persistently, and the Buddha initially refused.

That's the story. But one of the things that research has shown is that if you're looking at misogyny and anti-gay prejudices in the Buddhist tradition, they develop over time. You find writings to that effect in the commentaries, but you don't find it in the earliest tradition. It develops over a period of time. It's like the external world kind of came in.

Now, the story about the Buddha's reluctance to ordain women and the eight garudhammas, the eight heavy things—special rules that he supposedly agreed to, saying "Okay, you can ordain, but you must follow these eight special rules"—modern researchers have become convinced that this was a later addition. This did not date from the Buddha. There are too many incoherences, too many contradictions. It just doesn't fit. It does fit a later era, where they're projecting back to the Buddha to justify the misogyny

which was starting to creep in.

I'm pretty sure that the consensus among people who study early Buddhism is that this story is a fake. It was planted later.

The Buddha's aunt was said to be the first woman ordained. And Ananda figures prominently in the story. Ananda was an old softie. There's a whole series of stories in which he gets close to the nuns and helps them out. He is paired in the tradition with Maha Kassapa. And Maha Kassapa—he was an old toughie. He was a forest monk and he was very strict. He was very strict on Ananda, and he was very strict with the nuns. He criticized Ananda for being too friendly with the nuns.

This is not appropriate. You're hanging out with them. You're getting too close. You shouldn't do that.

This was partly because monks had to keep their distance, and partly to give the women space to make their own decisions. So Ananda was criticized for getting too close to them. But it comes out in the stories that he was just an old softy. He just liked to help people out. So he had that reputation in the early Sangha.

And the relationship between Mahakassapa and Ananda was very interesting. It was Mahakassapa who took Ananda in hand after the Buddha's death and basically turned him into a fully awakened one and a teacher in his own right. In the Zen tradition, Mahakassapa became the Buddha's successor, as you probably remember, and his successor was Ananda—not Sariputta. Sariputta is not part of the Zen lineage. In Zen, they trace it from Buddha to Mahakassapa to Ananda. Ananda is the second ancestor.

But in the early traditions, there are all these stories about their relationship in which basically Mahakassapa is scolding Ananda, telling him to get his act together. There's one story in which Ananda, as a teacher, goes off wandering around with his students. Weeks or months later, he bumps into Mahakassapa, who says, "So where are your students? What happened to them?" And Ananda says, "Well, actually, they disrobed." Mahakassapa says, "What is wrong with you?" He scolds him and calls him a boy. And Ananda says, "My hair is grey and you're calling me a boy." And Mahakassapa says, "Yes, well, you behave like one."

So there's this whole dynamic between the pair of them that gets preserved in the stories. And it would be partly a genuine memory because I don't think people would fabricate these stories. But this also shows that part of the dynamic within the Sangha was that it had all sorts. You have the tough ones, the blokes, the footy players of Dharma: "What are you doing, hanging around with the sheilas?" And then you have the softies who were helping out the women—and Ananda with his photographic memory. So you get different attitudes and understandings and so on.

The picture that you get from the early records is this diversity of community—all these different people doing different things, sometimes clashing with each other, sometimes working together.

As for the Vinaya, that would have been fixed early because it's part of the Tipitaka, so it's in the earliest layer. But what keeps growing after that are the commentaries and the sub-commentaries and the sub-sub-commentaries. Because the Vinaya is a set of rules—it's a legal code. And if you've got a legal code, you get lawyers. And if you get lawyers, anything becomes possible. So the Vinaya keeps growing and developing over the centuries.

But the basic principle they had—and this is Mahakassapa—was established when the Buddha died and people were gathering for the funeral. One monk said, "Oh, well, you know, this is terrible, the old man's dead, but..."

At least we can relax now. He's not breathing down our necks anymore. We can relax a few of those minor rules.

Mahakassapa heard about this and declared: "There's no way. We are not changing a single rule, even the most minor ones. We're keeping them all."

So that was the initial aspiration. And then, of course, you had to develop an elaborate legal code so you could get around the rules.

What you find is that different schools of Vinaya developed over time. We're just talking about the Theravada at the moment—that's one lineage. Then you have other lineages, particularly the Buddhism that went out into Central and East Asia. They modified things considerably.

For example, consider monks and nuns wearing trousers. In India, people wore robes, and in the Theravada today, they still wear robes. They don't wear trousers. But of course, robes weren't much use in the northern Chinese winter, so they changed their system of clothing. They adapted the Vinaya for those sorts of practical considerations.

The way of life in East Asia is much more communal, partly because of the winters. In India, you could live in a little hut alone all you wanted. But if you lived in a hut alone in China or Korea or Japan, you were likely to freeze to death in winter. So people gathered together into communities that could be heated—literally. Then you get the development of rules reflecting a communal way of life that fits that culture.

The disadvantage the Theravada has is that if you're a strict Theravada monk or nun, you're leading a life based on a set of rules which make perfect sense in ancient India but do not necessarily make the slightest sense in contemporary Australia. But if you're a Mahayana monk or nun, you can adapt, because they've developed this theology of adaptation. They're not so hidebound.

Cultural transition creates real problems. Take the Tibetan monks when they came down to India—they were ravaged by tuberculosis and other diseases which simply didn't exist up in the Himalayas. The germs don't survive up there, so they had no resistance, and Tibetan medicine had no cure because they had

never encountered these diseases. They faced all sorts of problems that were purely environmental. They would also often cling to eating habits appropriate for the Himalayas but not appropriate for the plains, not necessarily adapting.

In Thailand, the greatest cause of death among monks is diabetes and other sugar-related disorders, because Thais have a sweet tooth. And when you've got no sex, no drugs, no rock and roll—at least you've got sugar. But that's a feature of that particular culture, not specific to monastic life.

It is harder, though, if you join the Theravada as a monk or a nun. One of the things you give up is control over your own diet, because you eat what people give you. When I was in Burma at a meditation centre, some people who came to meditate were driven crazy by the fact that they had to eat this diet, which they found appallingly unhealthy and unsuitable. But they had no choice. Some of them left as a result—they couldn't handle it. Others got sick. There are all sorts of cultural transition problems to navigate.

Very, very oily. In Burma, it's a sign of hospitality to add oil. More oil. And still more oil. I've never consumed so much oil in my life.

But in Brisbane, we are parishioners of a Korean Mahayana monk, of his little temple. And one of the things he really likes to do is to come out to lunch with us. We either feed him at the house or we take him up to a restaurant. If you're a Korean monk, you're dedicated to vegetarianism, so what he likes to do is to get out and indulge in some meat. We feed him up on a regular basis.

Which you can do. You've got the adaptability. The other thing is that he will eat with us at the same table, and we just share. You can't do that with a strict Theravāda monk because the protocols are too strict. They have to eat separately. But you get a much more at-ease relationship in the Mahāyāna.

There's one of the rules in the Bhikkhu Vinaya that you cannot give a Dhamma talk to an audience which includes someone holding an umbrella above their head. Until they fold that umbrella, you cannot give the talk. And the reason is because an umbrella in ancient India is a sign of status. A servant would be holding the umbrella, sheltering the VIP from the sun. So what the person under the umbrella is saying to everybody else is, "I'm important. I'm more important than you are." Mate, not in a Dhamma gathering. You're no more important than anybody else. Get rid of that umbrella. So again, these are rules that make no sense for our culture, but they make perfect sense in context.

There's also one about not attending theater, and no entertainments. And one which causes a certain amount of controversy is no sporting in the water. This apparently came about because monks would bathe in tanks or in rivers. But apparently somebody—a lay person—complained. A lot of these rules come about through lay people because they see something and they think, "Monks or nuns shouldn't do that." So the Buddha, in order to avoid scandal, makes a rule: don't do that.

Someone saw the monks splashing around and chucking water at each other and having fun while they're in their bath, basically. And he thought, this is not dignified. So he complained to the Buddha. And the

Buddha said, "Okay, bathe in the water, but don't sport in the water."

Now, the way this is interpreted today, most people say it means monks cannot swim. But other monks would argue, no, this is about playing around in the water. Swimming for health? No problem. Just jet-skis are off the cards. Beach volleyball? No way. But swimming for health, yes. So some monks do swim for exercise.

As for different sexualities in the Vinaya, given the culture of that time, the Buddha never mentions it. For him, sex is sex—whether it's male-male, male-female, or female-female. In the monastic life, it's strict celibacy. Break that rule and you're out for life. Never to be re-admitted.

"Even self-pleasure?" someone asks.

No, that's a *sanghadisesa*—an offense that requires public confession before your community.

Again, transparency. No secrets.

Someone raises another question: "The center in Tucson has a flat upstairs. The rent from that flat helps keep the center open. I always ask everyone who wants to stay—people usually live there for about a year before moving on—I ask them, 'Why do you want to live above a Buddhist meditation center?' I get various answers, nothing that's ever turned me off.

"So the latest renters are a couple in their forties. He's Indian, fresh from India. Over time, we've gotten into some really interesting conversations because he's a yoga scholar. What he knows—I wish I knew this stuff about yoga, and he knows almost equally as much about Buddhism.

"He's been casting about looking for what to do here. He had a school in India with about thirty students and sold that. He's been looking for what to do in America, and I've been helping him with permitting, understanding what contracts really mean, what to look for—all of that.

"So he went off to visit some friends and came back with an idea. The friends had this business of supplying dairies and corner shops with various goods. It never dawned on me that those goods included tobacco and alcohol—until the day he walked in and said, 'Can you help me get the tobacco license?'

"I said no.

"He was shocked. And I was shocked that he would even consider selling tobacco. Tobacco is a bit different than alcohol, you know. You can get ill from tobacco relatively easily, just from the exposure.

"We talked back and forth about it at length. How, with his knowledge, could he even think about selling tobacco to whoever walked in the door? He wasn't even the retailer in this situation—he would be the wholesaler, distributing to all the dairies and shops.

"I asked him, 'What do you know about the Buddha's practice? How can you even think about doing this?' He said, 'It's business.'

"I used to tell him, 'You know, there's two sets of rules in India.' He said yes. Is that true?"

Well, there's a certain pragmatism, and why not? You can have one set of rules for the family, one set of rules for business, one set of rules for the Dharma. It can happen. But I don't see that in the Buddha's teaching. There's no indication the Buddha had that attitude. I think it's more of a cultural thing.

"So after all that talk," the questioner continues, "now all of a sudden I've got three sets of standards to navigate."

"What didn't have any give?" someone asks.

The rules. Everything. If you're a monk or a nun.

We're talking about the Vinaya here—the monastic discipline.

We're not talking about lay people. Let me back up.

Why have teachings that promote morality and a sense of peace and harmony in the community, and then allow private rules that say, "Oh, I can do that"? It depends on the effect of having those rules. Do those private rules create disharmony or not? You can have a social context in which they do not create disharmony. In fact, you might even argue they create harmony.

This is one of the things about the Buddha's approach to ethics. For lay people—and again, it's different for monks and nuns—but for lay people, you have to work it out for yourself. What is the effect of what I'm doing? And you can have two people, both good people, who come to opposite conclusions. Because you don't have absolute rules. You don't have absolute rights and wrongs. It's up to people to decide for themselves. And you have disagreements.

So if you come to a Dharma centre, a meditation centre in Australia, the food invariably is vegetarian. Now, if you come out of Burma or Thailand, they think, "That's crazy. Why would you do that? Why can't you feed these meditators a bit of beef? Strengthen them up." But here it's felt that's not acceptable. And that's something people here have worked out for themselves. Meanwhile, you get people who run meditation retreats who are sometimes criticized by others who say, "You should be vegan. How can you be merely vegetarian? That's appallingly unethical. You must be vegan."

So it's not that there's one right way. People work it out for themselves. What fits that particular social context is what's done. And where you have different social contexts, you may well have different practices.

People in the past, writing about right livelihood, have stipulated the sorts of things you should not be making money from. The slaughter of animals was one of them. So was the sale of drugs and alcohol.

These have been left in the list. Yes, these constitute wrong livelihood.

So if this has been described as wrong livelihood according to the Eightfold Path, if you're following that path—but is this person following that path? Just because they know a lot about Buddhism doesn't mean they say they're Buddhist. I wouldn't sell tobacco. But listen, this fellow is so much a vegetarian that he won't eat off the same spoon that's been in with the spaghetti, yet he doesn't mind selling drugs and alcohol and tobacco. You see? Perfectly consistent.

Anyway, I think we've gone on long enough.

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