Sīla Part 2: Consequentialist Ethics

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 1:02:50

Tonight we're going to continue our series on sīla, ethics, and look at consequentialist ethics.

We've talked about how the Buddha's approach to ethics could be described as a form of virtue ethics, in the sense that the central project is to become a person whose life embodies certain virtues and therefore will live well and happily. At the center of any kind of program like this is training, so that we learn how we can move beyond our limitations to become the kind of person that we would aspire to become. The fundamental template for the training is the Eightfold Path. We talked about how it consists of eight interrelated virtues collected into three systems of training: sīla, samādhi, paññā.

We looked in particular at the link between sīla and samādhi, between ethics and meditation. For the Buddha, samādhi is grounded on sīla, because sīla promotes harmony. For the Buddha, ethics promotes harmony, both social and psychological. And this harmony is necessary for us if we want to deepen our samādhi, our meditation practice. As the samādhi develops, we find that psychological and social harmony becomes more natural to us. We find ourselves more naturally attracted to a harmonious way of life.

This link between sīla and samādhi, ethics and meditation, is causal. In other words, it's an instance of dependent arising, paṭicca samuppāda, which is the basic framework for the Buddhist teaching. So we have a relationship between sīla and samādhi, ethics and meditation, in which each conditions the other. When there's one, the other will be supported. When that one is supported, the first one will be supported.

When we start talking about dependent arising, that brings us to the second aspect of the Buddha's ethics as a form of consequentialism. This is an approach to ethics which looks at the consequences of an action. The moral rightness or wrongness of an action depends upon its consequences. If what I am doing results in good, then what I am doing is good. This is the basic principle. In the Western tradition, when taken to its extreme, this becomes utilitarianism.

What the Buddha does is combine these two approaches. He combines virtue ethics with a concern for consequences, and all this comes out of his understanding of dependent arising. The Buddha's basic project is to teach a way of life that leads toward human flourishing. If you're going to do anything like that, then an understanding of causality is built into the project. What is it that will condition the arising of the path? What will prevent the arising of the path? As practitioners, we need to distinguish between what moves us towards awakening and what takes us away from awakening. This is all about conditionality, causation, dependent arising.

For the Buddha, awakening—bodhi, or enlightenment—represents his ideal of an ultimate human flourishing. We may have other ideals of human flourishing, but the principle remains the same. How do we distinguish between what moves us towards that direction or what takes us away from that direction? This involves dependent arising.

One way the Buddha talked about this distinction was through the concepts of kusala and akusala, the wholesome and the unwholesome, the skillful and the unskillful. Kusala is what moves us toward awakening, while akusala, the opposite with the negative *a*, moves us away from awakening.

There's a famous verse in the Dhammapada, verse 183, that sums up the teaching of all Buddhas, not just our Buddha, but all of them. It says: "Not doing any wrong, cultivating the wholesome, purifying the heart—this is what Buddhas teach." Notice that Buddha is in the plural. Buddhas teach this. For the Buddha, this is really fundamental.

Let's look at this wholesome and unwholesome, kusala and akusala business. We start with the word kusala, which I think we've mentioned before, but it has a cluster of meanings. In its wider sense, kusala indicates health. It's interesting to look at what this implies. If we ask the question, is health a good thing? We'd probably answer yes it is. If you meet a friend and your friend says, "How are you?" and you say, "I'm going great, I'm in perfect good health," would you be puzzled if your friend frowned and said, "So what's so good about that? What's the point of that?" It would be a bit of a puzzle, because it's obvious that health is good. We don't have to justify why health is good. It's just obvious that it's good. In other words, health is intrinsically good.

It is good within itself. It needs no justification beyond itself. So this is kusala, translated as wholesome—that which is good within itself, that which is intrinsically good, that needs no justification.

Now, if you're talking about health, health also has an instrumental value. In other words, if I'm healthy, then I can do things which otherwise I could not. I can accomplish things I otherwise could not accomplish—which is something you discover when you get aged and decrepit. You young people don't know yet. I've come to realize that there's only one thing wrong with young people: they're young. But apart from that, they're okay.

So this brings us to the second meaning of kusala, which is skillful. Here, the word kusala—or kushala in Sanskrit—is associated with kusha grass. This is a particular species of grass in northern India, and it has sharp edges. It apparently has strong pranic power because traditionally it's woven into seats used by yogis for meditation purposes, including the Buddha. Sometimes you have a reference to the Buddha sitting on kusha grass. This grass has healing properties, a very strong pranic energy field, and so it's associated with yogis. But kusha means sharp, because the edges of this grass are sharp. These sharp edges make it difficult to handle, so it takes skill to handle it, to weave it into useful products. It takes expertise to create useful products from it. So kusala therefore indicates skill. Now, it could be a mundane skill, such as the skill of a good craftsman, or it could be a dharma skill, like the skill of a good meditator.

So kusala has two aspects. That which is kusala is good within itself, and it leads to a good result. The first aspect—good within itself—points towards the virtues. The second aspect—leads to a good result—takes us to the Buddha's teaching of karma, action and its ripening.

So here we come to the second aspect of the Buddha's understanding of sila: we focus on the results of an action, its consequences. When kusala is translated with an emphasis on its consequences, it's usually rendered as skillful. So you have wholesome and unwholesome, skillful and unskillful, and it depends on which aspect of kusala you're emphasizing in the translation.

Let's look at action and its ripening. This is karma vipaka. We'll go back to how the Buddha framed the fundamental ethical question: How shall I live? He asks: What is wholesome? What is unwholesome? What is praiseworthy? What is blameable? What ought I to do? What ought I not to do? Having done it, what will bring me harm and suffering over the long term? And what will bring me welfare and happiness over the long term?

Notice this emphasis on the long-term results of one's actions. What brings me harm and suffering over the long term? What brings me welfare and happiness over the long term? In other words, what are the long-term consequences of my actions? This brings us to the teaching of karma.

The word karma is originally Sanskrit, but it's become English because English borrows words. In Pali, it's kamma, and it simply means action—just action. For the Buddha, karma is very important. He lived in this complex multicultural society where there was no established orthodoxy, but the different schools of thought and practice were battling each other for market share. The Buddha looked at the teaching scene and made different classifications of the kinds of teachers that were around.

He saw some teachers as teachers of action—they taught kriyāvāda. And others were teachers of inaction, akriyāvāda. He classified himself as a teacher of action. In other words, actions have real consequences, so we need to pay attention to them. In contrast, those who taught akriyāvāda did not teach the importance of the consequences of action. He described these as teachers of non-action, and he wasn't being complimentary. In fact, he had absolutely no respect for these characters. He thought they were leading people astray.

So the teaching of karma focuses on the results of actions. The concept begins in the Vedas, where karma referred to the physical actions performed in rituals, especially the ritual of sacrifice. Sacrifices were held to be powerfully effective in bringing good fortune to the people who sponsored them—in other words, paid for them. They were powerfully effective. You could even, if the sacrifice was powerful enough, bend the gods to your will. But you could only do this if the actions of the rituals were performed correctly, in exact accordance with the texts. Hence the importance of the specialist Brahmins who ran the sacrifices and were paid to perform the rituals, and hence the importance that the action be correct. Otherwise you don't get the result. So this is in the Vedas.

Later on, karma was taken to refer to moral action—action that has a moral effect. Among those who taught this were the Jains, who were competitors of the Buddha. They extended this idea to moral actions, but again, like in the Vedas, for them the actions were physical actions, actions of the body. The Buddha took this and then changed it by focusing not on the physical action, but the state of mind that stimulates the action and is in turn shaped by the action. This is how he expressed it: "I declare that choice is action. We perform actions of body, speech, or mind after choosing."

This is the Buddha's particular spin on the teachings of karma. When he says "I declare," this is an emphatic statement. He's saying, this is important, pay attention. "I declare that choice"—this is cetanā, often translated as intention—"choice is action. We perform actions of body, speech, or mind after choosing." So for the Buddha, it's the choices that shape our lives that constitute karma. We are always making choices, and these choices create ourselves and the life that we lead.

If we ask how this links up with virtue ethics, well, we become a particular kind of person because we are shaped by the choices we make. If we choose to do things that develop a particular virtue, we become a person who has that virtue. If we choose to do things that develop a particular vice, we become a person who embodies that vice. For example, if we practice generosity, we become a generous person. If we practice stinginess, we become a stingy person. We're always faced with a choice: What kind of actions will I do? Will I perform actions that lead to becoming a virtuous person, actions that lead me along the path? Or will I perform actions that lead to becoming a person lacking in the virtues, which takes me in the opposite direction of human flourishing? This is the Buddha's emphasis on the centrality of choice. This is what he's really getting at when he talks about karma.

Now, one of the things about understanding what he's talking about with karma is that karma-vipāka—action and its ripening—is not a system of rewards and punishments, although often when people talk about it, that's the way they present it. It's a law of nature, like the law of gravity. We're not talking about rules, and we're not talking about someone upstairs who's enforcing those rules. None of this has anything to do with what the Buddha is talking about. We're talking about how nature works. Let's say, for example, I fall down the staircase and injure myself. I don't look up and think that the staircase has punished me, or that the Buddha has punished me. It's just nature—if one falls down the staircase, one is likely to be injured. It's simply the way nature works.

And in the same way, if I suffer painful consequences because of a particular action, this does not mean I am being punished. And if I enjoy pleasant consequences because of the nature of an action I've done, this does not mean I am being rewarded. It's simply nature—certain kinds of actions lead to pleasant results, and certain kinds of actions lead to painful results. It's just the way nature works.

Kamma vipaka, action and its ripening, is a teaching of causality in the natural world. It has nothing to do with any kind of supernatural interventions.

There have always been different ways of looking at kamma and understanding it. From the Buddha's

perspective, some of these are misunderstandings. A major misunderstanding, which you find throughout Buddhist Asia, is to see kamma as some kind of fatalism. This understanding is quite common, and yet it was specifically rejected by the Buddha in the Titthayatana Sutta, the discourse on "Outsider Teachings," in Anguttara Nikaya 3.61.

This sutta is very interesting, because here the Buddha lists three views held by teachers in other traditions—outsiders—that deal with the question of what creates the conditions of our lives. The three views he rejected outright were: first, whatever we experience is caused by what we did in the past; second, whatever we experience is caused by the will of God; and third, whatever we experience has no cause but arises spontaneously.

His basic reason for rejecting these views was that if we actually believe—genuinely believe—in any one of them, we would have no motivation to cultivate an ethical life. Why would we bother if everything has already been decided? If we can do nothing to change our situation? If everything comes about through no cause at all, what's the point of doing anything? If everything is determined by the past, I cannot relive my past. If everything is the will of God, I have little chance of getting him to change his mind, so I may as well give up.

Notice that he doesn't reject these views because they are factually wrong. He rejects them because of their consequences—and again, he's interested in cause and effect, in consequences. Our views are important because they have real consequences for the way we live. The Buddha is concerned with the actual truth of a teaching, but he is more focused on the results that come from holding onto that teaching. What we believe is happening necessarily affects the way we live, and this is why the Buddha places right view, sammā diṭṭhi, at the beginning of the path. Here, right view is right because of its consequences. Right view moves us along the path; wrong view takes us in a different direction.

Now let's look at this misunderstanding more closely. The tendency to read the teaching of action and its ripening as some form of fatalism is based in part on whether we see the relationship between action and its result as indicating a linear process or a non-linear process. This is what we need to examine now. "Linear" can refer to time, or it can refer to input and output. In regard to time, linear means operating over time, while non-linear means operating now, in the present.

In regard to input-output, linear means that the output—the result of an action—is proportional to the input, the cause. A small cause brings about a small result; a big cause brings about a big result. Whereas nonlinear means a small cause can bring about a big result, and vice versa, a big cause can bring about a small result.

Let's look first at linear and nonlinear in terms of time—this is where we get into that aspect concerning the past. If we look at karma as linear over time, it's based on a sense of the centrality of the past. We define ourselves in terms of our past. When we do that, karma becomes fate. It robs us of choice, because the past is already decided. We tell ourselves that we get what we deserve and that we cannot do any

better, because we're looking back to the past, defining ourselves in terms of our history. There's nothing we can do about that.

This is one reason why remorse or regret can be so destructive—when we use it to construct an identity. For example, I might construct an identity of myself as an unworthy person or an immoral person for whom there is no hope of redemption, because the future is already decided. It will be the same as the past. This is what happens when karma is seen as linear over time.

But if karma is seen as nonlinear over time, it's based on the centrality of the present. In a linear system, what's central is the past. But when it's nonlinear, what is central is the present—now. When we define ourselves in terms of our present, karma becomes choice. The focus is on possibilities arising now, and it tells us about our opportunities to shape our present and therefore to shape our future along certain lines.

This is the Buddhist approach to karma. This understanding emphasizes the openness of the future. If we're focused on the past, the future is closed because it's already been decided. But if we're focused on the present, the future is open, because we're in the process of deciding it now. It emphasizes the possibility of change and transformation.

This, I think, is a central principle of the Buddha's understanding of karma-vipāka—action and its result—that many people don't grasp: it represents a teaching of opportunity. There is something we can do to improve our situation. There is always something we can do to improve our situation. This is why the Buddha rejects the idea that everything that happens occurs as a result of the past, because then we're trapped in the past.

Now we come to linear and nonlinear in terms of input-output. Here the Buddha uses the simile of a lump of salt to explain it. This comes from a very interesting discourse: Aṅguttara Nikāya, Book of the Threes, number 100—the Loṇa-kapalla Sutta, "A Lump of Salt."

The Buddha explains that if we drop a lump of salt into a small bowl of water, the water would become salty—all of the water would become salty and even undrinkable. If we drop the same lump of salt into the river Ganges, the water will be unaffected.

The Buddha says that in the same way, one whose ethics is poor, whose heart—citta—is narrow and limited, and whose wisdom is undeveloped, may do a comparatively minor bad action, and this leads him to hell. While one whose ethics are good, whose citta is wide, and whose wisdom is developed, may do exactly the same action, and the ripening is experienced as a mere inconvenience—a temporary inconvenience in this life. Completely different results.

The principle here is that the results of action do not come about automatically, and they do not come about because of some predetermined cosmic code. It's not that if we murder someone, we will be murdered in our next life. It's not that if we steal in this life, we will be poor in the next life—although in Asia, karma is frequently taught like this. I recently visited Vietnam, and we'd go to visit some famous

pagodas and temples.

And in the courtyard, they very often have these enormous charts that show illustrations of what happens if you do this deed or that deed. And it's exactly in that order: if you do this, that will happen. That's it. Full stop. So don't do this. I suppose it's a convenient way to teach basic morality, but it's not what the Buddha taught.

What the Buddha is saying is that there will be a result of our actions, but the degree to which we are affected by these results will depend in part on how developed we are as human beings and how we practice in the future. And we can see here how the Buddha's consequentialist ethics intersects with his virtue ethics. What kind of person we become affects how an action ripens within us. One who is narrow and limited in their heart may be greatly affected by even a comparatively small action. Or one who is wide and deep in their heart may be affected by a larger action to such a small extent that it's barely noticeable. When we become a highly developed person, we may be relatively—and I emphasize relatively—immune to the effects of unwholesome and unskillful actions. However, these actions will have their effect. They will have some effect.

This teaching is emphasized by the Buddha giving the example of the results of theft. He points out that one person steals a certain amount of money and is grabbed by the law, tried, and imprisoned as punishment. Someone else steals exactly the same amount of money and is not grabbed by the police, not tried, and not punished. The Buddha asks, what's the difference between these two people? And he says the difference is very simple. The person who is punished is one who is poor. The person who gets away with it is one who is rich.

I really like this example. The starkness of the social realism is quite striking—oh wow, this is not very spiritual. But of course, it's real. So here we have the ripening of action, and you notice it's got nothing at all to do with justice. It's got everything to do with one's social position and influence. A person with social status and influence can get away with a crime, while a person without them cannot. And again, this is karma being presented as simply nature. This is the way the world works. There's one law for the rich and there's another law for the poor. It was true in the Buddha's time. It's true in our time. It's just the way it is.

So the Buddha is suggesting that action and its ripening is not a principle of cosmic justice. It's just the natural workings of cause and effect. Now this can sound disappointing, because we would like to think there's some kind of principle of cosmic justice, and the bad guys will get it in the end. But the Buddha points out in this discourse that it's because the working of action and its ripening is not mechanical, because they do not represent some inexorable law of cosmic justice—it's because of this that liberation is possible. From his perspective, if we had to go through the consequences of our actions without any hope of reprieve, then the process of samsara would never end. Because the universe is so complex and so non-linear, it's because of this that we can learn to ride the conditions, the complexity of the conditions, for our benefit and for the benefit of others. And this is the liberating power of the path.

This teaching is partly based on the Buddha's sense of the time span that he's working with. Decades ago, at Sydney University, there was a very senior European Jesuit—I think he was Belgian—who lived in Japan. He was an expert on Japanese Buddhism, particularly Pure Land Buddhism. He came to Sydney University and gave a public talk. All the Zen people came because the teacher of the Sydney Zen group at the time was Robert Aitken, actually. Robert Aitken Roshi got entangled with Zen when he was a civilian internee in Japan during World War II. Before the war broke out, he was working in Guam for a mining company. The Japanese came, and because he was a civilian, he wasn't a prisoner of war, but he was shipped off to Japan to an internment camp where all the enemy alien civilians were interned. This place was a seaman's mission. Apparently it had a good library, so he spent the war in the library. This is where he got interested in Zen. And one of the people in this camp was this then young man

Jesuit missionary. We knew about this because Robert Aitken had an interesting discussion with him. I should tell you this, shouldn't I? Because it's part of the story.

Robert Aitken was wrestling with the problem of the historical genuineness of the Buddha. Did the Buddha really exist? Was he really alive? Or is it just a story? And he was discussing this with a young Jesuit priest. He asked him, "If it could be conclusively proved that Jesus Christ never existed, how would this affect your faith?" That was the question he threw at this Jesuit. And the Jesuit said, "It would destroy my faith."

It's decades later that Robert Aitken Roshi is telling us this story. And he says, "Even though I was a young man and didn't know anything, I knew this was the wrong answer. I didn't know what the right answer was, but I knew it was the wrong answer." And then he paused and he said to us, "Even if it could be conclusively proved that the Buddha never existed, it would make no difference whatsoever to the truth of Buddhism."

And I think he's right. Again, it just works. It's nature.

Anyway, this particular Jesuit, now an old man, was giving a talk in Sydney, so we all went along. He gave a kind of standard academic talk about Japanese Pure Land Buddhism, and then there were questions. One of the questions that popped up was, "You've spent decades studying Buddhism in Japan, and you're a Jesuit priest. What is the basic difference between Christianity and Buddhism?"

Without hesitating, the Jesuit priest said, "If you're a Christian and you die, you might go to heaven. If you're a Buddhist and you die, you will go to hell."

There was exactly that response in the room—a combination of horror and nervous laughter. He waited for it to end, and he said, "Because in Christianity, you've only got two lives. You've got this life and the next one. And you've got heaven or hell. So you may go to heaven. But in the Buddhist world, you have life after life after life after life. In the Buddhist world, you've already been to hell many times. You've been to heaven many times. And afterwards, you will go to hell many times. And you will go to heaven many

times—until you're enlightened."

Of course he's absolutely spot on. I don't know why I told you this. That's right—this is the time span.

So from the Buddhist perspective, we don't just drag with us the accumulated bad karma of everything we've done since conception. It's lifetime after lifetime. We're never going to work our way through that. Think emptying the Pacific Ocean with a bucket. Good luck with that.

It's because karma is a non-linear system that we can cut through and short-circuit all of this process. That's what makes liberation possible from the Buddha's perspective. And hence the liberating power of the path, puñña—it allows us to short-circuit saṃsāra.

So again, karma is the law of nature, but nature is immensely, infinitely complex and non-linear. One famous example in the tradition is that of the serial murderer Aṅgulimāla. He was on this crazy, apparently spiritual path where he had to complete a thousand murders and then he'd be—whatever, enlightened or whatever. He had managed to chalk up 999 murders, and for his thousandth victim, he zeroed in on the Buddha.

Now, he was converted by the Buddha, so he stopped being a serial murderer and in fact became a bhikkhu. If he had to go through the results of those 999 murders just in this life, much less what he got up to in previous lives, then his awakening, if it happened at all, could only be after an immensely long period of cosmic suffering. However, somehow, through the infinite complexity of causes and conditions operating through dependent arising, he was face-to-face with the Buddha as his thousandth victim, and somehow he had an affinity.

And at that moment, when he encountered the Buddha, his heart was open enough that instead of adding another murder to his list, he converted and became a Buddhist monk. He did the practice, and he became an Arahant, fully awakened, in this very life.

Now, he still had to suffer the ripening of his deeds in this life. Basically, he would go out on alms round, and every time he entered the village, the village people would attack him and beat him mercilessly. Because they knew who he was, and he would crawl away and bandage up his wounds and maybe get some food from somewhere. And the next day, he'd be back there because he was receiving the results of his actions. What he was going through was minor compared to the pain that he had inflicted on the people of this area.

Anyway, Angulimala becomes a Bhikkhu, and the Buddha takes him under his wing. They proceed to Savatthi, which would have been better for Angulimala because nobody actually knew him there. The Buddha is camped out, and he's visited by King Pasenadi, the king of Kosala, who is his personal student. Behind the king, there's this big troop of armed and fierce-looking individuals.

The Buddha says, "So, what's happening? What's going on?"

King Pasenadi explains that there's this crazed serial killer, Angulimala, just rampaging across the country. He's received all these complaints. He's called out the military, and he's going out there to find him and punish him for his crimes.

The Buddha said, "So how would you respond if, let's say, this crazed serial killer had in fact stopped being a serial killer and had ordained and was now practicing the path as well as any other venerable one? How would you respond to that?"

Pasenadi was taken aback. "That's impossible. That is ridiculous. But I tell you what, if it happened, I would bow at his feet and become his disciple."

The Buddha says, "Really? Your Majesty, meet the Venerable Angulimala. Venerable Angulimala, meet the king."

And Pasenadi was as good as his word. He bowed at Angulimala's feet and became his disciple. And of course, the expedition was abandoned.

This story illustrates the power of Dharma and the malleability of karma. It's part of nature, but so is awakening—part of nature. It's not a supernatural intervention. The path is part of nature. It's not a supernatural intervention.

This attitude, by the way, extends further. A good example is in Burma. The first prime minister of Burma was U Nu. He was a devout Buddhist and a personal student of Mahasi Sayadaw. The early government passed a law. First of all, they had a teaching meditation in prisons program. And they passed a law saying that if a prisoner was certified by a reputable teacher as having attained the first stage of awakening, that prisoner was immediately released, no questions asked, regardless of what crimes they had committed. The reason was, if someone's attained the first stage, then they will lead an ethical life and they're no longer any kind of danger to society. So why are we keeping them in prison? As far as I know, that law is still on the books. It gives a certain edge to teaching meditation in prisons.

Now you notice that from the Angulimala story, what radiates from it is a sense of optimism. Anything is possible if we set out along the path in the right direction towards awakening. In other words, I think the lesson is: do not underestimate the power of the Dharma.

Finally, notice how the Buddha speaks about the results of action. He uses the term vipaka, which literally means ripening. So often kamma vipaka is translated as action and its result, which is technically true, but it misses out the feel of the literal translation—ripening. Vipaka, ripening, is an agricultural term. In other words, the Buddha is saying our actions gradually ripen like fruit. But for fruit to ripen, they need a variety of conditions: good seed, the right soil, the right temperature, the right amount of water, suitable care, and so on. It's not a question of planting a seed and the fruit jumping up and hitting us in the head. And so, in the same way, action and its ripening

points to the fact that this process takes place within an infinitely complex context of dependent arising—an infinitely complex, fundamentally non-linear universe of constant swirling and movement. And out of that emerges the results of action.

Similarly, we have the term *bhavana*. This is the term that gets translated as meditation, and *bhavana* is another agricultural term meaning cultivation. So what we're doing here is cultivating. We're cultivating ourselves, and we are gradually ripening as a result of that cultivation. When the conditions are right, there will be a crop. It's just nature.

This is the Buddha's essentially optimistic teaching: if we cultivate the wholesome through the choices we make in the present, we're going to get a good result. And that good result is going to be a flourishing way of life—one that expresses *sīla*, ethics.

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*Question:** It seems like in the current day and age, the pace of awakening has slowed down compared to these stories. You give someone a teaching, and the student fails to awaken. Teachers in the twentieth century were bringing students to the first stage of awakening, so what's happening?

The traditional answer would be the decay of the Dharma since the time of the Buddha. Basically, Buddhism has been downhill ever since the Buddha died—in fact, even before the Buddha died. There's one discourse in which Ananda approaches the Buddha and says, "When we started this whole business off, the monks and nuns had very few rules and lots of enlightened people. Now that we've developed this enterprise for so many decades, we've got lots of rules and much fewer enlightened people. So what's going on?" And the Buddha said, "That's the way it is."

So according to the traditional view, the Dharma is decaying from its high point in the lifetime of the Buddha, then gradually crumbling. Our capacity to access it and practice it—the conditions are such. But that's the traditional answer.

I think basically the answer is we don't know. We have these stories about all these people getting enlightened as soon as the Buddha opens his mouth. Is it true? Is it not true? Are these exaggerated fairy tales? We don't know.

*Question:** But there would be some information from the twentieth century that's available, confirming how many people awaken Mahasi style.

Oh yes, that's available. They keep records. And I can imagine it's still slower than what it used to be in the twentieth century. Do you know that?

Not that I know of.

Do you know any statistics?

No. They keep them secret. They do keep lists—a record of students and how far they get, especially for people who have finished the course, quote-unquote. But I don't know how many there are. They do that because it's important to them, but at the same time, they're very cagey about saying anything publicly.

One of the general traditional principles is that if you think or know you've attained some level of awakening, you never tell anybody about it. And the reason, as explained by a senior Korean nun, is if you make—

any claim to enlightenment, you will spend the rest of your life defending it. You're just buying trouble. So keep your mouth shut—it's the safest thing to do.

People are very reticent to talk about it. And sometimes when people do talk about it, it's self-promotion. "Come to me. I'm an Arahant and I can teach you how to become an Arahant. And this week we've got a discount." I find it very, very dodgy when people make claims. But if you get to know people—again, it's the principle of association with good people, with authentic people—you get to know them and you recognize there's something happening there which is not usual. There's something you would like to share.

But as for the stories about the Buddha himself, who knows? Historically, you can't say. All we know historically is that his movement was very successful. It was successfully exported. It flourished and didn't die out. Most of the other schools from that era either died out or morphed into something completely different, and they're quite small. Whereas Buddhism became probably the world's first world religion. So there was something about it that was very dynamic and very successful over a period of generations.

I go on and on about what the Buddha did—obnoxiously so. And invariably, someone will ask me, "Are you awake?" And I say to them, if you say it as a noun, no. If you say it as a verb, yes. That's a good way to slide around the question.

Someone asked about the difference between serving our heart and Buddhahood. Theologically, philosophically, there's a difference. But I think in practical terms, there wouldn't be much of a difference. Except, well, in the traditional sense—the Buddha wasn't just an Arahant. He was an Arahant, but he was also a Sammasambuddha. What that meant was, first of all, he figured out the way for himself. He didn't have someone who taught him the way to Arahantship. Eventually, he figured it out by himself. And secondly, he had the package of talents which enabled him to found a Buddhism. He was a brilliant organizer, a brilliant politician, a brilliant lawyer, a brilliant teacher. And he managed to set up this organization that even in his own lifetime spread across the Ganges Valley, and was so well organized and structured that it survived for centuries and was successfully exported to other parts of the world.

So a Sammasambuddha is not just awakened, but they have that package of talents. Because you can have someone who's awakened, but they're not very good at teaching or explaining or whatever. They're just awake. "Work harder."

Someone raised a question about precepts—lay people have these five precepts, these trainings. Monastics have more: men have 227 and women have 311. So if the odds of being enlightened as a lay person are the same as for a monastic, why would anyone become a monastic?

Oh no, people become monastics because they like the life. Is it also more advantageous for awakening? It can be. It depends on how you treat it. Some people become monastics and kind of go to sleep. I mean, it's a comfortable life. If you basically just don't have sex and behave yourself, you're looked after, you're respected, you're bowed to. You have a job teaching the Dharma—not necessarily particularly arduous. You've got a lot of time to yourself, for your spiritual development or whatever. You can hide away. You're looked after. You never go hungry. You never have to face rental increases that you can't manage. You never face that kind of problem. No rat race. You go up the ladder by seniority.

But the good monks—if you meet good monks or good nuns, ones that really strike you as genuinely good—

They're good at this. One thing they all have in common is they enjoy being a monk or a nun. They really like the lifestyle. They find a freedom in it that most lay people don't have because they've got to scramble for a living. So you can take those conditions and use it as a launching pad for awakening. Or you could take those conditions and use it as a launching pad to go into sleep. Or anything in between. There's no magic in it.

A student speaks about the teaching being sustaining and applicable.

So you feel optimistic? The diamond's on the way up. Good. We may not get as many full-blown enlightened people walking around, but that's alright. I don't know how many there are anyway.

But yes, I mean, this is the traditional view that it's all crumbling away. And it's one of the motivations. Mahasi Sayadaw and the people around him felt, let's get it out there as quickly as possible. But you know, the Dharma is flourishing in certain parts of the world where it hadn't flourished before, and it's having a significant cultural impact. We don't know how it's going to develop. Basically, we're inventing Western Buddhism. We don't know how it's going to look.

If you compare the movement of the Dharma from Asia to the West, the cultural journey, the cultural distance they had to travel, is pretty much the same as when it moved from India to China. We tend to think, oh yes, India, China, just Asians, they're all the same. No. There's a huge cultural gap between them. And in China, it took about three centuries for the record keepers, the Confucian scholars, to even notice that there was this thing you could call Buddhism, which wasn't Taoism. They just thought it was an offshoot of Taoism. It took several centuries for enough genuine Chinese Buddhism to start to emerge. And we're just beginning. So who knows what it's going to look like in a century or two centuries or three centuries.

A student asks what the West will bring to Buddhism.

I don't know. For me, it's too soon. There's psychology, but that could be dangerous.

The student clarifies: psychology.

Yes, the West is bringing psychology to it. But that's a big danger because psychology is in the world of concept. So far, anyway. So that has good things about it, but there are also disadvantages.

There's an organisation in Sydney, ABCAP. It could be that Buddhism influences psychology. There's a big dialogue between them and lots of getting together. They're not necessarily going down the same road.

Sam Hill is a psychologist. So you don't think my suggestion about simply banning psychologists from my retreats is a good idea?

There are all sorts of interesting dynamics here. What I think is really significant for Western culture is this: Buddhism has what you could call a technology of meditation, or contemplative practice—a methodology, a way you can actually go about doing it. The West has never had that, partly because what's been dominant has been the Christian church, and they've either suppressed this because it's a threat to the bureaucracy, or simply not been interested in it.

But now this understanding—the skill with which you can work directly with the mind, which we call meditation—is starting to filter out into Western culture. And this is revolutionary. It's never happened before. The influence on contemporary psychology is huge. It's just coming out everywhere, and it's not always packaged as Buddhist. It's in every corner of the culture, in all sorts of forms.

I think as the influence of the Dharma spreads out, it necessarily becomes shallow. If you want depth, you're going to have a few people. And this has always been the case. If you look at traditional Buddhist societies where everybody is a Buddhist, well, for most people, being a Buddhist means you go to the temple every now and again and you chant to the Buddha, you ask him to help you with this or that, and you toss some offerings to the venerables. Shallow. But you get a few people who really go into it. It's always been the case, and I suspect it will continue to be the case.

So shallow is good, because shallow is wide. It touches so many people, and some of those people are touched by it and think, "I want this fully." And they'll go deep.

There's an optimism in other schools about this—a confidence that the essential teachings are going to manifest and merge with whatever expressions of society as it moves through time. I think there's a movement in Tibetan Buddhism now where they're trying to preserve and transmit the teachings because of that awareness. In China it's similar—a more traditional view. But of course, we gloomy old Theravādans—what can you expect?

Someone asked about the role of volunteers and financial support. Well, it certainly has an effect. In this country, a major barrier to more retreats isn't the lack of teachers—it's the lack of managers and material support. The main bottleneck for having more retreats in this country isn't teachers; it's retreat centers.

This place, for example—it runs, it has survived. One of the management committee was saying in a discussion some time ago that the greatest achievement this center has had is that it has survived. It's still here. And that's amazing.

Count up the number of volunteers who have come through this place to keep it running. Even the managers are volunteers. Everybody's a volunteer. Gabriel has an office job up there, part-time—she's the only paid person. Everyone else is a volunteer. And it's a very big job. Some people say it's bigger than teaching. All volunteers. All of them keeping this place running.

Someone mentioned they'd thought about offering to help but live in Victoria. You'd need people who live locally, I assume. I'm at Coffs Harbour myself—so I have no excuse.

As for whether raising the prices of courses would reduce attendance—yes, there would be yogis who couldn't afford to come. It turns it into a middle-class luxury.

Well, look, something's got to move. It's moving—yes, it's happening. But the first thing that goes is maintenance on a facility like this, and then sometime in the future it just comes and bites you. The building's still here, it hasn't collapsed—don't be such a gloomy old pessimist! But not everybody has five hundred dollars extra. It doesn't have to be straight across the board though; it can be scaled.

I have actually thought of putting a meter at the door of the interview room—tap as you come in and as you go out, if you like.

Just before I left, I checked Spirit Rock to see what was happening. They had a thirty-day retreat: eleven thousand dollars at the benefactor rate, and the standard rate is just over six thousand. But how that translates for me is that I can fly here at the comfort rate, pay for the course, and still come out ahead—and have a nice time. So perhaps we should be advertising in the United States.

That's very good to have in mind. As soon as we finish this talk, I can explain what's going to happen tomorrow. So let's finish it.

Thank you very much.

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