

# Sīla - Good Conduct

Bhante Bodhidhamma · DhammaBytes · 9:52

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*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa* — Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

The word I'd like to look at this evening is the word *sīla*. It translates as morality, ethical behaviour. And it always comes first in the teachings. It's always *sīla-samādhi-paññā*. It's always ethical behaviour, concentration, and then wisdom.

To understand that, I have to go back to the beginnings as to why unethical behaviour happens. And it goes back to that point where we make a mistake. And this mistake of who we are, or what we are, manifests in a relationship of attachment to the world, or better, seeking happiness in the world. That's how the Buddha would put it, seeking happiness here and there. And that sort of relationship creates conflict. So we're always trying to manipulate the world and other people to make ourselves happy. And if they don't, we tend to want to just get rid of them. So you can see how from that basic mechanism, it's very easy to begin to behave in a way which is harmful. And that would be the definition of something which is not ethical. If it does harm to others or to ourselves, then it's unethical.

The five precepts — that's how we translate it, but the actual word *sikkhāpada* is a path of training. They're not actually commandments as such. Ethical behaviour is a measure of our delusion or wisdom. When you realize that you start at the basis of your behaviour, then that's actually where your training is.

Take something, the first one that we take, which is pretty straightforward, not to harm or kill any living being. So we start there. I think most of us have probably given that up. But then there's a more subtle way of harming living beings in perhaps ways that we weren't particularly aware of, like not putting food out for the birds in the midwinter. There's all sorts of little ways where our lack of interconnectedness manifests in ourselves as callousness.

So it becomes very fine, and then once we begin to see where that is, then the thing begins to flip. And just as we might have been cruel towards animals, that moves over towards compassion. Just as we were perhaps once thieving from banks and not sharing things with people, it moves towards generosity. All these things, like not being truthful, even to the slight point of exaggeration, it moves towards truthfulness. So it's not as though you move towards a place which is not ethical, you move towards the more positive places.

Now that movement doesn't come without wisdom, and that's the important thing to realize. So the approach to our happiness, to our ultimate happiness, has to have this sort of two-pronged approach. It's

not only the growth of wisdom, it's not only the growth of understanding, but the change in behaviour. So the whole thing has to be systemic. And that's what *sīla* is pointing to.

And it's there, of course, within the Eightfold Path. So, with the right understanding, there's a change in the heart. And that's the second of the path, the right attitude. From that is right speech, right action, and eventually right livelihood. So it's a systemic process.

Now, some would say it happens naturally with the meditation, and I think that's true. But it's also good just to egg it along a bit, just to keep pushing it a wee bit and just to notice how sometimes our behaviour upsets people. Of course, it might be their problem, not yours, but even so, it's that ability to be sensitive to our relationships to people, which actually makes us more aware of intentions that we weren't perhaps particularly aware of.

One obvious thing is when we want to help somebody. Whether we like it or not, there's always that sort of self-regard within it, a certain conceit that needs to be thanked, that needs to be acknowledged, that needs to be appreciated. And if the person whom you've just given all your money to doesn't say thank you, you feel very upset. It's a case of being aware of those things.

And what our *vipassanā* practice is telling us is not to get judgmental about it, it's just a conditioning. It's no good then berating ourselves and judging ourselves as evil. It's a recognition of, that's a conditioning, and all I have to do is be aware of it and not empower it. It's as simple as that. And as we stop empowering those behaviours that we see are not ethical, not *sīla*, they atrophy, they just die away. You don't have to do anything. That's the simplicity of the path.

And then, of course, there's a refinement of that until you're really talking about even small movements like making a noise when you're eating. It can get extremely fine about your behaviour and about a certain delicacy, a certain courtesy. It moves towards a real gentle way of being in the world. Stabbing the plate with our knives and forks. Have compassion on the plate. Never meant any harm. Just the way we brush our teeth, gently. Just getting it over with. Things like that. So it moves us towards a real refinement of behaviour. And that's really that process of *sīla* as a show of how wise and gentle, compassionate we can become. So *sīla* is really quite a basic teaching.

When Buddhism first began as a practice in the 60s and 70s and 80s, people were very afraid to talk about *sīla*, talk about behaviour, especially sexual behaviour because it was meant to be free and easy. But eventually it affects the whole way that you treat human beings. And you go back to that golden rule, which began in that axial age with the Buddha, Lao Tzu, Socrates, Jeremiah, all these people, and it was just that one, you can reduce it all to that one phrase, do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Not do unto others before they do unto you. We have to abandon that.

So I hope my words have been of some assistance. May you be liberated sooner rather than later.

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