

Red Lines, Sīla - Third Ethical Maxim

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Tips of the Day · 2 min read

The third of the six maxims suggested to fortify ourselves for the consequences of climate change asks us to draw our red lines. What is it we vow not to do, no matter how great the temptation? Buddhist ethics stands on the five precepts, the first of which asks us not to harm living beings. As climate change brings destitution and basic resources become scarce, violent conflict will become common. Defending our few remaining possessions against an intruder, what red line do we pledge never to cross? A pacifist chooses death by starvation rather than physically attack the intruder. But what if our household includes children or vulnerable adults? In her enquiry into the ethics of violence in early Buddhist texts, Elizabeth Harris writes: The person who feels violence is justified to protect the lives of others has ... to remember that he is risking grave [karmic] consequences for himself in that his action will inevitably bear fruit ... Such a person needs to evaluate motives ... yet might still judge that the risks are worth facing to prevent a greater evil. Bhante's essay on armed intervention argues against pacifism as an absolute stance. He points out that amongst the hundreds of rules that govern monastic life, there is none against self-defence. When Sharon Salzberg told her teacher Munindra-ji about being attacked by a drunken man, he said "Oh Sharon, you should have hit that man over the head with all the compassion in your heart!" It is the motivation that counts. Where there is only a choice between evils, kindness demands that we prevent the greater evil. The Dalai Lama said that to prevent a mass-murder, he would shoot the attacker, not to kill but to disable, prevent them killing. Bhante's essay distinguishes between force and violence. Force is the energy needed to put right what is wrong, violence is the same laced with some form of ill-will. Again, it is the motivation that counts and also the clarity to judge right from wrong. That clarity will be very hard to find amidst widespread poverty and starvation. Who knows how many children the intruder needs to feed? If they were a climate refugee, homeless, stateless because our affluence has made their land uninhabitable, should we not willingly give them our provisions? Because it will be so difficult to judge whether harming another is the lesser evil, I can see the wisdom of preparing red lines e.g. pledging never to use violence except to defend an immediate attack on my life or the life of someone who depends on me. The line could also be drawn at a higher level. Already close on 70, I will be very elderly if and when things deteriorate to this level; the red line could be taking any food once it becomes so scarce as to threaten lives of younger people; after all it is they, not me, who could allow civilisation, including the Buddha-Dhamma, to survive. Whatever red lines we draw, it will be a challenge to keep them in a dangerous situation when we may well be ill or famished and have little capacity for clear thought. There is an urgent need to start practicing this maxim now. To this end, I've set myself some red lines (simple ones but a challenge to habitual desire) as preparation for next month's tip on practicing with this maxim.

Red Lines, Sila - Third Ethical Maxim

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.