

Sīla

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The word *sīla* (*śīla* Skt) has many meanings. When it is used as a suffix, it means nature, for example, *dānaśīla* means liberal, one who is naturally inclined or disposed to give *dāna* or *kalahaśīla* means one who has the nature to fight. In words like *cintanaśīla bhavanaśīla dayāśīla, puṇyaśīla*, it means nature.

Śīla also means character. Whereas *parisuddhaśīla* means one of excellent character, *pāpaśīla* means one of wicked character; *adānaśīla* is one of stingy character; *bhaṇanaśīla* is one who does not speak much; *duśśīla* means of bad character and *vādaśīla* is a quarrelsome character.

It also means ethical precepts which are five, eight or ten according to the Buddha. It is in this sense that *sīla* (Pali) is used in Buddha's teaching. Here, it means code of morality. One can be said to be a person of good character if one observes ethical precepts prescribed by the Buddha.

Sīla is connected with the voluntary actions of a person i.e., a person of sound mind who can take a decision between what to do and what not to do, who can make a distinction between what is good and what is bad. If a person does not have a sound mind and has no control over one's actions, such a person does not come under the purview of *sīla*. *Sīla* is connected with one's volition (*cetanā*).

Actually, *sīla* is connected with a person's physical and vocal actions. If these actions are good, they don't cause any harm to one and others, and it can be said that one observes moral precepts and is virtuous. Wholesome physical and vocal actions are respectively called *sammā kammanto* and *sammā vācā* — the two constituents of the Noble Eightfold Path. The third constituent called *sammā ājīvo* (right livelihood) also comes under *sīla*, which comes under *Ājīvapārisuddha sīla*.

Let us understand it like this. If one kills, steals and commits adultery, one is doing harm to others. When one kills, one takes the life of others. When one steals somebody's property or belongings, one does that person harm. When one commits adultery, one does wrong to the spouse or partner of the person one commits adultery with.

All these are physical actions. By committing these actions, one harms others. But this is not all. One also harms oneself. A person cannot kill somebody without being angry, without having aversion. A person cannot steal other's property without being greedy and having the desire to cause the other person loss and cannot commit adultery without being overwhelmed and overpowered by sexual desire. When one commits all these physical actions, besides harming others, one harms oneself. Doesn't one harm oneself if one is overpowered by sensuous and sexual desire?

Similarly, when a person tells a lie out of fear or greed, slanders somebody out of jealousy or brings about rift between two friends or when one makes harsh speech out of anger or makes useless talk either to sound very big or knowledgeable; in all these cases, one does harm to others but at the same time, does great harm to oneself. In fact, one first harms oneself before causing harm to others. An angry man before taking revenge on others and a jealous man before committing murder, burns with the fire of anger and jealousy himself for a long time. In the same way, if one earns one's livelihood by wrong means, one breaks the *sīla*.

Sīla, like language, is a social activity. Observation of moral precepts (*sīla*) is possible and meaningful only in a society. One observes moral precepts like abstaining from killing, stealing, committing adultery, telling lies etc. because while observing moral precepts, one does not cause trouble in society, does not cause law and order problems and as a result there is peace in society. Had there been no human society, had there been only one Alexander Selkirk in this world, observation of moral precepts would not be necessary.

Two qualities are necessary for developing moral consciousness. One is to be ashamed of what one ought to be ashamed of. For example, one should be ashamed of doing unwholesome actions; one should be ashamed of doing harm to others thinking that oneself would also not like to be harmed by others. So why harm others? This is called *hiri* or a sense of moral shame. One should have the feeling of "If I do this, others will raise their fingers at me to say how shameful!". The other is *ottappa* (conscience, moral dread, remorse, regret). It is out of moral dread that one keeps himself from doing unwholesome actions. He does not like to do things where his conscience pricks him. These two things protect human beings from committing all kinds of unwholesome

actions, including incest, and prevent the world from becoming a jungle. What we call civilization and culture, that we have taken so much time in the evolutionary process to attain, would topple like a house of cards without these moral qualities of *hiri* and *ottappa*.

Observing moral precepts means keeping one's physical and vocal actions pure. If these two types of actions are kept pure, mental purity is automatically achieved because, as it is said in the *Dhammapada*, all actions proceed from one's mind (*Manopubbaṅgamā dhammā, manoseṭṭhā manomayā/ Manasā ce paduṭṭhena bhāsati vā karoti vā... Manasā ce pasannena bhāsati vā karoti vā*).

Mainly there are five moral precepts. They are: abstaining from killing any living being, stealing other's property, abstaining from committing adultery, abstaining from telling lies and abstaining from using intoxicants. Purity of vocal actions also includes refraining from harsh speech, slanderous speech and useless talk.

Under *aṭṭha sīla* (eight moral precepts) further come abstaining from eating after mid-day, abstaining from dancing, singing, music and shows, and abstaining from garlands, scent, cosmetics and adornment in addition to the five mentioned above.

Under *dasa sīla* (ten moral precepts) come two more besides the eight mentioned above. They are not to use luxurious beds and not to accept gold and silver.

Out of these ten *sīlas*, in fact, the first five are basic. If these five basic moral precepts are sincerely observed, many of the social problems and evils will be solved and much agitation and unhappiness felt by individuals will come to an end.

Sīla may be variously described. Instead of going into detail, only its important aspects are described here. The Buddha has prescribed some dos and some don'ts. Killing, stealing, committing sexual misconduct and lying are all unwholesome actions and should be avoided. They, therefore, come under the *vāriṭṭa* (avoiding) category. In other words, they should be avoided. One must guard one's sense organs because if they are left uncontrolled, great harm will come to him. The whole *papañca* (expansion, multiplication of desire and consequently multiplication of suffering) is created if sense organs are left

uncontrolled. They must be zealously guarded. Therefore, it is called *cāritta* (keeping, observing).

Out of the four kinds of *sīla*, *Pātimokkha saṃvara sīla* (restraint with regard to the Disciplinary Code), *Paccayasannisita sīla* (morality regarding the four requisites of an ordained person), *Indriyasamvara sīla* (restraint regarding the six senses) and *Ājīvapārisuddha sīla* (purification of livelihood), the first two are prescribed specially for *bhikkhus* (monks) and *bhikkhunis* (nuns). The last two are to be observed both by the ordained as well as the laity.

Pātimokkha saṃvara sīla is observed in order to make one's conduct and behavior perfect. One sees danger even in the least offence. So, one trains oneself in the rules prescribed by the Buddha and does not break them.

Paccayasannisita sīla is observed with right mental attitude. One makes use of robes to protect oneself from cold and heat, alms food just to have enough strength to be alive and practice one's *sādhana*, dwelling in places to protect oneself from bad weather and necessary medicines to keep oneself physically fit to take on the arduous task of striving constantly.

Indriyasamvara sīla means restraining one's sense organs, so that when one sees a form, a beautiful form or ugly form, one does not develop craving and aversion. One just sees but does not let craving and aversion arise for that form. Seeing is just seeing and not reacting with craving and aversion. It is the same with other sense organs (*Diṭṭhe diṭṭhamattaṃ*).

Ājīvapārisuddha sīla means earning one's livelihood in a befitting manner. One should not adopt unethical means to earn his livelihood.

Observing moral precepts has many advantages. The observation of the first two kinds of *sīla* enables the ordained to restrain their senses, to develop contentment and to have less and less mental defilements like greed, jealousy, anger, etc. The observation of the last two kinds of *sīla* enables the ordained and the laity to control their unsteady and flickering minds, develop concentration, see the nature of things as they are by practicing *vipassana* and developing wisdom (*paññā*) and realizing the impermanent nature of the worldly formations, developing non-attachment to them, becoming free from cravings for them and ending their sufferings. By ending their sufferings, a time comes when they come out of the cycle of birth and death and attain *nibbāna*.

Sīla purifies a person of inner impurities. Inner impurities are mental defilements like greed, aversion, anger, jealousy etc. They are very difficult to remove. The waters of the rivers, like the Ganges and Yamunā, are not able to wash one's impurities caused by these defilements. They can remove the stains on one's body and one's clothes but not remove the stains in one's mind. When one burns with the fires of greed, aversion and ignorance, observation of *sīla* works as ice cool water to douse the fires and like a soothing balm to heal the wound caused by them.

No scent can be compared with virtue's (*sīla*'s) scent, which goes with the wind as well as against it. The scent of the flowers cannot go against the wind.

It is the best ornament, the best jewel. One who has the ornament of *sīla* is far greater than a king. A virtuous man is like a burning lamp whose flame cannot be put out even by the fierce gale of untrue allegations. One endowed with *sīla* can withstand all odds.

Observing *sīla* has a great advantage. One can make one's mind steady, sharp and subtle. Whereas the power of other five sense organs (when they become weak) is improved by material aids, for example, one's weak eyesight can be improved with the help of glasses prescribed by a doctor, one's weak hearing can be improved with a hearing aid prescribed by a doctor but the fickleness of mind can be removed only by observing moral precepts. One has to do it oneself. Others cannot be of any help here. Mental defilements like greed, aversion, anger, jealousy etc. do not let the mind become steady and concentrated; unless these defilements are removed, concentration of mind cannot be attained. These defilements can only be removed by observing moral precepts. As said above, one kills because one has anger; one steals because one has greed; one commits adultery because one is overwhelmed by sexual desire. So, when moral precepts, like abstaining from killing, stealing and committing adultery, are observed then one can get rid of one's defilements and attain concentration of mind since it is the mental defilements which make mind fickle and unsteady.

By practicing *sīla*, one can attain concentration of mind (*samādhi*), and only with a concentrated mind can one attain wisdom (*paññā*) as said in the first *gāthā* of the *Visuddhimaggo* which, ultimately enables one to become free from suffering and attain *nibbāna*.

‘*Sīle patitṭhāya naro sapañño, cittaṃ paññañca bhāvayaṃ/*
Ātāpī nipako bhikkhu, so imaṃ vijaṭṭaye jaṭan’ti.’

Only a virtuous person who observes moral precepts can attain right concentration, can have the knowledge and vision of the things as they are, can attain disenchantment and dispassion and can ultimately have the knowledge and vision of liberation. Therefore, it can be rightly said that *sīla* is the foundation of the spiritual edifice that one builds. Without observing moral precepts, one cannot attain concentration of mind and without attaining concentration of mind, one cannot see the real nature of things i.e., cannot see their three characteristics of impermanence, suffering and no-self, cannot attain dispassion and disenchantment and cannot end one’s suffering and attain *nibbāna*. Given below is a quotation from the Path of Purification p.13 (Visuddhimaggo by Buddhaghosa) translated by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli that brings out the importance of *sīla*.

‘Discipline (*vinaya*, *sīla* or morality) is for the purpose of restraint (*saṃvara*), restraint is for the purpose of non-remorse (*avippatisāro*), non-remorse is for the purpose of gladdening (*pāmojjaṃ*), gladdening is for the purpose of happiness (*pīti*), happiness is for the purpose of tranquility (*passaddhi*), tranquility is for the purpose of bliss (*sukha*), bliss is for the purpose of concentration (*samādhi*), concentration is for the purpose of correct knowledge and vision (*yathābhūtañāṇadassana*), correct knowledge and vision is for the purpose of dispassion (*nibbidā*), dispassion is for the purpose of fading away [of greed] (*virāga*), fading away is for the purpose of deliverance (*vimutti*), deliverance is for the purpose of knowledge and vision of deliverance (*vimuttiñāṇadassanaṃ*), knowledge and vision of deliverance is for the purpose of complete extinction [of craving, etc.] through not clinging (*anupādāparinibbānatthāya*).’

Questions:

1. Define *sīla*.
2. *Sīla* is connected with man’s physical and vocal actions. Explain.
3. What are the four kinds of *sīla*? Explain each of them.
4. Explain *Ājīvapārisuddha sīla*.
5. Explain *Indriyasamvara sīla* in detail and show how it is important for not creating *papañca*.
6. *Sīla* is the foundation of spiritual edifice. Explain.

7. Right concentration can be attained only by a virtuous person. Discuss.
8. Bring out the difference between the scent of flower and the scent of virtue.
9. Bring out the meaning of the following *gāthā*:-
*Sīle patiṭṭhāya naro sapañño, cittaṃ paññañca bhāvayaṃ/
Ātāpī nipako bhikkhu, so imaṃ vijaṭaye jaṭan'ti*
10. *Sīla*, like, language is a social activity. Discuss