

Shila

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Shila, ethical conduct, moral rules, discipline. by Guy Mokuhō Mercier



Buddha declared :

“ It is necessary to find a certain discipline of mind, for an undisciplined mind always finds an excuse to stir up selfishness and act in an incoherent manner.

When the mind lacks discipline, the body will also be indisciplined, as will speech and action in the same way.

You are the master and you are also the way. Is there any need to seek further? As a merchant prepares a beautiful mount, this is how you must become master of yourself.”

Following on from patience and energy, let us return to the second paramita, a virtue that in the present health measures is really of primary importance. In essence, *shila* represents the collection of rules which permit communal life to be possible, offering a means of assuring the success of everyone. And at the present time, on a global scale, where the fear of death is present everywhere, we should all undertake the practice of this virtue.

In addition, we see and experience today how individual and selfish shortcomings in relation to our collective obligations as imposed by our governments (or spiritual authority) can threaten the health of all, or even be harmful for general security. It is becoming clear that the behaviour of each person interacts with the well-being of everyone else.

Ethical conduct, or morality, is and is not individual. In general, each person intuitively knows the rules of how to live together even if they have never read anything on the subject. Each person knows by their intuition or learns by their own experience, the battleground that these rules comprise. Then there is adherence to the rules because of generosity and spiritual maturity or there is transgression due to ignorance, arrogance and selfishness.

Moral law, ethical rules, in setting out precisely how one should behave, inserts the individual into the working of the collective group. On the one hand, he gains something by being capable of harmonising himself more easily with others, but on the other hand he loses his personal autonomy.

The individual ‘me’ has to melt into the collective ‘me’, which for certain individuals is a difficult or even impossible step.

Buddhism, a spiritual school before it became a religious one, prioritises individual liberation above all other necessities, whether economic, political, material, affective or collective, one could think.. Keeping this idea of individual freedom, and thus not being in favour of any collective or political system, Buddhism

has 'partially' escaped the attraction of power, despite occasional deviations. It leaves political choices up to the individual, so long as they do not transgress the precepts and moral conduct and that they are founded on the mutual interdependence of all beings.

Certainly, in the course of history, personal enterprise or doctrinal deviations have sprung up and disturbed the ideal of peace that the disciples of Buddha usually enjoy.

What Buddha taught, at the beginning, is really an attitude, a way of life and conduct tending to end suffering and reaching awakening.

This first code of conduct initiated at the time of Buddha, the *Vinaya*, set out precisely how the monk or nun should behave in everyday life, in his or her relationships and in relation to material things.

The model of the Bodhisattva which was set out later, in integrating this first code of conduct, proposed an ideal of life, based on a collection of ethical rules and Precepts (Prohibitions) in respect to essential values which are those of the simple human.

It was at the same time that the Paramitas appeared, to complement and support the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path, which allow moral conduct and wisdom to exist in the same practice.

The monks, nuns and lay persons by the practice of virtuous conduct are led towards awakening to emptiness, the first goal of the Mahayana. From this 'vision' of emptiness, compassion is born. For this, they are prepared to rely on the rules, the commandments, precepts, rituals in order to structure and facilitate the life of the religious or secular. In this somehow compelling frame, one must give up attachments, the 'me', and achieve the balanced mind of the bodhisattva.

On the other hand, the religious mind, in order to serve and preserve the institution, is tempted to model and control interior practice of each person, in a more or less authoritarian way, such as the military does, demanding, sometimes shaming, and sometimes stripped of humanity. Investing into spiritual life with blind and fearful obedience leads to a harmful deviation from the original intention of the moral rules formulated by Buddha.

Master Taisen Deshimaru, an atypical autodidact, was very much against the formal monastic training of the Soto Zen school in Japan. Japanese Zen, founded on the Samurai Warrior spirit, cannot, nevertheless, be rejected in its totality. Beyond the severe and sometimes sectarian conditions imposed on the aspirant monks, respect and the maintenance of the original rules persist and have a meaning for those who truly have the mind of awakening. The objective, more or less intentional, of the Japanese monks open to the spread of zen outside Japan, was to transmit the practice of the masters to future generations, whilst keeping the institution alive. A difficult contradiction which gave rise to a lot of resistance.

Submitting to a rule without reservation or systematically opposing it are two extreme attitudes. They are both opposed to the imperative need of a code of sincere moral conduct on the spiritual path and very often come to a full stop with painful deadlocks.

Let's return to Shila.

Literally "*Obligations, commandments*"; the term Shila denotes the totality of ethical rules which regulate the lives of monks, nuns and Buddhist laity. They originally led to renunciation of worldly life and all the glittering and illusory aspects of Samsara (our dualist world).

In the Zen schools, practice and clear vision lead naturally to understanding that freedom – nirvana – must be achieved in the very heart of Samsara, teaching that they are indivisible. It is not a question of renouncing worldly life, but of making it the very place of awakening.

To lead to this renunciation, the obligations and commandments are expressed in the negative –



“ Don’t do this or that. ..” Precepts which forbid something, whilst leaving each individual free to make up their own mind. They encourage the disciple to live a simple life, whilst helping him not to fall and allowing him to be constantly aware of the continual contradictions of a world animated by dualism. Awakening cannot exist outside daily life and there is no merit in continually depriving oneself if one has not realised the heart of Buddha’s teachings and the non-reality of a ‘me’ separate from the Source. True understanding of what Shila is, moral conduct, can only take root in the wisdom that arises from a vision of nature, empty of all things. It is starting from the point of view of wisdom that compassion suddenly appears along with kindness in our human relationships.

What do the texts say?

Shila, morality, is natural honesty. It is to diligently follow the good path, without allowing oneself to slip. It consists of avoiding wrongdoing and following the Precepts (the Prohibitions) strictly as one would watch over a precious treasure, or as we defend the life of the body.

Discipline is of eight types: to abstain from killing, stealing, forbidden love, lying, abusive speech, hurtful speech, idle speech, intoxication and to always use pure means of existence.

“Morality is the seat of all the good dharmas.

In the same way that it would be useless to try walking without feet, flying without wings, or crossing the ocean without a ship, in the same way one cannot obtain good outcomes without morality.

Whether one is noble or mean, small or large, as long as one observes morality, one always obtains great advantages. But if one abuses morality, neither nobility, nor humility, nor greatness nor smallness will allow one to receive the fruits of the Way.

An immoral man is like a still pond full of poisonous snakes, one does not bathe there. He may be born in a noble family, have a wonderful body, be very well educated and knowledgeable, if he doesn’t live according to morality, he will ignore kind and compassionate thoughts and will certainly be brought up short. “

Morality is not an abstract term. It is a virtue that needs to be cultivated on a daily basis. It is an attitude of mind which includes kindness and compassion for others, and if one wishes to save them, if one knows the deep meaning of the Precepts, thoughts become pure and free of self- interest. This is how one comes directly to the state of Buddhahood.

In great sickness, morality is the cure.

In great terror, it is a guardian.

In the dark of suffering, it is a light.

On perilous journeys, it is the pillar of a bridge.

In the ocean of death, it is a great ship.

So the mind of awakening cannot be dissociated from individual commitment. The Bodhisattva is before anything else, a responsible individual. Each thought, each word pronounced, each action, each movement, each of these is vital to him, as more than anyone, he knows the interdependence of all things and know that his behaviour affects all beings. The Bodhisattva cannot stagnate in mediocrity: he doesn’t know laziness or indifference. He applies himself at each moment, for even if following the precepts sometimes seems arduous, the reward comes very quickly.

‘In the same way that we put a little sugar into a bitter medicine so that a little child can swallow it, so we first emphasise the virtues of morality, so that people can observe them. When they have observed morality, they will take the great resolution to arrive at the state of Buddhahood. This is how morality gives rise to the virtue of morality.’

To protect the precepts, the Bodhisattva is capable of sacrificing his life, as he will not renounce his vows. He is firm and has no regrets, this is how the virtue of morality is. His thoughts are good and he does not fear the difficulties of existence : he only seeks goodness and purity: he perfumes each thought with the help of morality, so as to improve it. This is the virtue of morality. He observes morality in a mind of great compassion, gives birth to the six virtues (the Paramitas). He practises each one with the help of the other five :

‘In this way patience (ksanti) is the great force that consolidates morality and makes it unchangeable. One should arm and govern one’s thoughts, for it is only because of thoughts that we enter the three bad realms (that of the Gakis, animals, and hells.)

Thus, excluding all negligence and by his continued effort (virya) the Bodhisattva renounces his attachments, enters the stream, takes the resolution to save all beings and in that great thought, there is no laziness. This is how morality can give birth to energy.

It is the same for the other virtues (paramitas) which are all born from the virtue of morality. And they all mutually validate each other.’

Often, we prefer not to look at, nor renounce our illusions, as we fear we will lose something. Renouncing our attachments comes when we see the causes and conditions which have made them appear. This is what it means to ‘study the me’. We make mistakes and this leads us to see the benefits that a correct moral path can bring. This vision gives birth to the virtue of wisdom, that which sees the emptiness of things.

Even if its origin is in the mud, the splendid lotus takes root there. Morality protects and wipes out faults and errors, and when we lean towards good, it fills us with happiness.

Following the Buddhist path and renouncing the ‘me’ shouldn’t be a sad practice, stripped of pleasure and humour, but illuminating and perfumed with emptiness. In the present circumstances of the pandemic, moral conduct or discipline, kindness towards others and patience in our human relationships should become our priority. This is the teaching of the Buddha, whose disciples we sometimes pretentiously claim to be.

What does it mean to be a disciple of the Buddha?

Buddha replied :



‘Conduct yourselves to be conscientious and full of tact, attentive to others. You should train yourselves by saying :

‘We will become undefiled in our conduct, shining and pure. We will never puff ourselves up, we will never despise the other whoever they may be.’

You should conduct yourself correctly.

Go home and learn how to do what your parents or those who you love expect of you.

Continue to practise clear vision and peace in your heart, in reciting your prayers.

At the same time, don’t neglect yourselves, be clean and well dressed, and work hard every day.

When you have learnt how to do all that, perhaps then it will be possible for you to become one of my disciples.’

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