

## **The Concept of Ethical *Sīla* (Morality) in Buddhism**

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**Abstract**

*Sīla means morality. It controls physical, mental and verbal action. In short, Sīla means good conduct. Morality is the first stage of all wholesome things. Morality includes right speech, right action and right livelihood. Morality is considered as the essence of Buddhist ethics.*

*It is generally stated, "Morality is more virtuous than generosity". One might not be easily convinced, yet there is a deep significance underlying the statement. To comprehend this requires serious reasoning. In this world, to protect and safeguard others from woe and suffering is a noble deed. To enhance the welfare and prosperity of other is also another noble deed. Dana helps to be prosperous. Sīla (morality) protects others from woe and suffering.*

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## Introduction

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It is generally stated, “Morality is more virtuous than generosity”. One might not be easily convinced, yet there is a deep significance underlying the statement. To comprehend this requires serious reasoning. In this world, to protect and safeguard others from woe and suffering is a noble deed. To enhance the welfare and prosperity of other is also another noble deed. Dana helps to be prosperous. *Sīla* (morality) protects others from woe and suffering.<sup>1</sup>

## Purification of virtue (*Sīla-visuddhi*)

To realize the *Nibbāna*, the establishment of the Noble Eightfold Path has the important role. It can be explained by seven purifications (*Visuddhi*). The first of seven *Visuddhi* is purification of morality (*Sīla-Visuddhi*). Its constituents of the three morality group (right-speech, right-action, and right-livelihood), when considered in detail, become *Ājīvamhamaka-Sīla*<sup>2</sup> in the following manner:

1. I will abstain from taking life.
2. I will abstain from stealing.
3. I will abstain from indulging in sexual misconduct and taking intoxicants. (These comprise right-action).
4. I will abstain from telling lies.
5. I will abstain from setting one person against another.
6. I will abstain from using rude and rough words.
7. I will abstain from talking frivolously. (These four comprise right-speech).
8. *Sammā-ājīva* (right-livelihood) means livelihood without resorting to taking lives, etc.

This *Ājīvamhamaka-Sīla* is aimed at the lay followers of the Buddha. This morality-group of the Noble Eightfold Path corresponds to the purification of virtue (*Sīla-Visuddhi*). According to texts, there are four kinds of the purification of virtue. These four kinds of purified virtue are explained with reference to the life of a monk. They are as follow:

1. Virtue regarding restraint according to the Pātimokkha (Pātimokkha saCvara-Sīla)
2. Virtue regarding restraint of the sense faculties (*Indriyasamvara-Sīla*)
3. Virtue consisting of purity of livelihood (*Ājīvapārisuddhi-Sīla*) and

4. Virtue connected with the use of the requisites (*Paccayasannissita-Sīla*).

The brief explanations of these four kinds of virtues are given thus:

1. The *Pātimokkha* is code of fundamental disciplinary rules binding upon a Buddhist monk. This code consists of 227 rules of varying degrees of gravity. Perfect adherence to the rules laid down in the *Pātimokkha* is called virtue regarding restraint according to *Pātimokkha*.
2. Virtue regarding restraint of sense faculties means the exercise of mindfulness in one's encounter with sense objects, not allowing the mind to come under the sway of attraction towards pleasant objects and repulsion towards unpleasant objects.
3. Virtue consisting of purity of livelihood deals with the manner in which a *Bhikkhu* acquires the necessities of life. He should not acquire his requisites in a manner unbecoming for a monk, who is dedicated to purity and honesty.
4. Virtue connected with the use of the requisites means that the *Bhikkhu* should use the four requisites- robes, alms-food, lodging, and medicines – after reflecting upon their proper purpose.<sup>3</sup>

Meditators have to observe at least five precepts, if not eight or ten, so that they can attain purification of *Sīla*.

For meditators who have well observed the three constituents of the morality-group of the Eightfold Path and who have thereby established himself in the purification of virtue, *Micchājīva* (wrong living) and the seven kinds of wrong doing, namely, the three kinds of physical wrong doing and four kinds of verbal doing are entirely extinguished.

Then, in order to destroy the three kinds of mental wrong actions, the constituents of the concentration-group of Eightfold Path (Right-Effort, Right-Mindfulness, and Right-concentration) must be established. Establishment of the three constituents of the concentration-group of the Eightfold Path means practice of one of the forty subjects of meditation, such as *KasiGa* (meditation devices), etc.

Moreover, the second *Pāramī*<sup>4</sup> is morality, the purity of his conduct. If he be living the life of a recluse, he would try his best to observe the *Sīla* that pertains thereto; if, however, he leads to the household life he would adhere to the five elementary principles of regulated behavior, even in spite of his interests being at stake. He would not kill, steal, lie or slander, and he would avoid non-chastity, harsh speech, frivolous talk and intoxicants.

He would endeavor to observe these elementary principles as strictly as possible, for two transgress one of them means creating fresh troubles and obstacles

on the road to enlightenment. However, it must not be understood that a *Bodhisamta* is wholly infallible and totally free from evil, for one who had already attained complete perfection would have reached Buddhahood.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, the essence of *Sīla Pâramî* is to refrain from committing evil (*Duccaritadhammas*) to uplift one's moral conduct. Here refraining from evil (*Duccaritas*) ordinarily means refraining from three kinds of physical evil deeds and four kinds of verbal evil deeds. One who can refrain from committing them is said to be a person of morality. Not earning one's livelihood by doing evil is *Sammâjîva* (right livelihood). When one earns one's livelihood in the right way (*Sammâjîva*), *Sammâkammanta* (right action) and *Sammâvâcâ* (right speech) are also accomplished. Then a locality which is free from *Duccaritas*, *Sucaritas* (wholesome *Dhammas*) will flourish and as much as *Sucaritas* flourish there will be peace.

Here, *Sammâkammanta* (right action) means refraining from killing, from taking by force what belongs to others and wrongful sexual conduct called three physical misdeeds. Such refraining is called *Sammâkammanta*. *Sammâvâcâ* (right speech) means abstaining from falsehood, back-biting, harsh speech, and unbeneficial frivolous speech. Such abstinence is called *Sammâvâcâ*.

*Sammâjîva* means abstinence from the above mentioned evils in earning one's livelihood. If physical deeds not concerned with the earning of livelihood are done, it is *Micchâkammanta* (wrong action). It nullifies *Sammâjîva*. If verbal deeds not concerned with the earning of livelihood are done, it is *Micchâvâcâ* (wrong speech). It nullifies *Sammâjîva*.

It should especially be noted that mere observance of morality (*Sīla*) does not amount to the fulfillment of *Sīlapâramî*. Only when one does not long for *Bhavasampatti* (higher existences) and *Bhogasampatti* (wealth and luxuries) will the *Sīla* amount to *Pâramî Sīla*. For this reason, purity and straightforwardness of the mind is greatly needed for the *Sīla* to be called *Pâramî Sīla*. Logically, *Sīlapâramî* can only be built upon purity and straightforwardness of the mind. When one is pure and straightforward in mind, one is reasonably free from mental evils (*Manoduccaritas*) too.

According to 'Sabbe sattâ âhâramhitâ' of the *Pâli* text, all beings in the world are mainly concerned with means of supporting life (that is finding food). They commit evil physical misdeeds (*Kâyaduccaritas*) in connection with procuring food. They commit evil verbal deeds. There are, however, some who commit evil physical and verbal deeds unconnected with procuring food. They do so in seeking sensual pleasures without any restraint is the following the *Kâmasukkhallikanuyoga*

practice. On the other hand, forcible restraint of one's mind would amount of pursuing the 'Amtrakilamathānuyoga', self-afflicting practices.

### **How to attain peace**

Only when the surroundings are peaceful, one can have peace, because one is a part of the surroundings. For the surroundings to be peaceful: Duccaritas should decline and Sucaritas (good Dhammas) should gain strength. And for the Sucaritas to gain strength, people should strive to purify their moral conduct more and more. Purity of moral conduct is called nobleness. It is true that development is desirable but there are three kinds of it, viz. material development, mental development and moral development.

As far as material development is concerned, men are so advanced today that they are travelling into space, but the world has found no peace yet. In truth, if there is no peace, how can it be possible to have happiness? Therefore, it should be said that the world's happiness depends upon world peace. Besides, regarding mental development, there are admirable advanced both in the arts and science spheres? It is unpredictable to what extent they will go on progressing.

We wonder whether they will progress up to the point of extinction. As matters stand now, if it were asked whether the world had found peace, the answer would be 'no' in one voice. Who would be able to dispute the correctness of this answer?<sup>6</sup>

Happiness depends on peace but peace does not depend on material progress or on mental progress. The present state of the world bears testimony to this fact. In fact, the material and mental progress not only does not bring peace to the world but is also becoming a threat. Therefore, the Pimakas called the material progress as 'Labhataggamahatta' and the mental progress as 'Bahusacca-mahagga'. Both these kinds of progress are 'Āsavatthāniya', where demeritorious Dhammas of Lobha (greed) Dosa (anger or hatred) and Moha (ignorance) reside.

### **Observing Sīla till it become a Pāramī**

The home of peace is merely the progress of morality (Sikhā) and the progress of morality is the practice for the fulfillment of Sīlapāramī. The more one can fulfill Sīlapāramī, the more one can be free from Duccaritas (immoral Dhammas). The more one can free from oneself from Duccaritas, the more one is free from taking sides. When one does not take sides, one is no more affected by praise or threats. Then one has courage. Having courage is observing Sīla till it becomes a Pāramī.

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6. *A dictionary of Buddhist Terms*, Misistry of Religious Affairs, yangon, Myanmar, 2003.

### **(Footnotes)**

- <sup>1</sup> Ashin Janakabhivamsa, *Abhidhamma in Daily life*, Yangon, Myanmar: 1999, p. **173**.
- <sup>2</sup> *A dictionary of Buddhist Terms*, Misistry of Religious Affairs, yangon, Myanmar, 2003, p. **66**.
- <sup>3</sup> Dr. mehm Tin mon, *The essence of Buddha Abhidhamma*; Yangon, Myanmar, 1995, p.**398**.
- <sup>4</sup> *The Teaching of the Buddha, (higher Level) Volome I*, Department for the Promotion and Proagation of the Sasana, Yangon, Myanmar, 2001, p. **11**.
- <sup>5</sup> *Essential Themes of Buddhist Lectures* given by Ashin Thittila, Aggamahâpa Gita, Abhidhaja Mahâra mmhaguru, Abhidhaja Aggamahâ Saddhammajotika. Ministry of Religious Affairs, Yangon, Myanmar 1996.
- <sup>6</sup> *The Buddha, peerless benefactor of humanity* by U Shwe Aung, VamaAsakâ, Siromani, M.A (Sanskrit) Joint Director, Religious Affairs Dept. (Retired) Translated by U Lha Maung, B.A, B.L. Newspaper Editor, Retired. Yangon, Myanmar, May 1995.