Four Virtues

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The word sila can mean “precept,” “virtue,” or “habit.” And I’ve heard a number of the ajahns in Thailand play with those different meanings. There was one ajahn who liked to shock his listeners by saying that laypeople have five sila, where monks have only four. And what he was referring to was the four different kinds of virtue, or four different aspects of virtue. And it turns out, it’s not just the monks. Everybody should practice these things. For the monks, the four are the virtues of the bodhimokkha. That, of course, covers all the precepts in the Vinaya. The second is restraint in the senses. The third is purity of livelihood. And the fourth is reflection on the requisites as you use them. And all four of these provide a really important foundation for the meditation. As the Buddha says, one of the foods for mindfulness is having these four precepts, or having solid virtue. Because the ability to keep something in mind, the ability to remember something, requires that we not keep doing the kinds of things that we like to deny to ourselves. Because that’s how we put up walls to our ability to remember. Things we want to forget, we tend to forget. And that makes mindfulness harder. So you want to make sure that your precepts, your virtues, are all in order. As you sit down to meditate and your mind tends to cast over the day, it doesn’t run into walls around the things you want to deny having done. You want all your actions to be open. It’s when things are covered that they get moldy, as the Buddha said. It’s when they’re open that they can dry out. So you look at your precepts. That’s the first virtue for the laypeople. This is the five and the eight precepts for the monks. It’s the 227 precepts of the Bodhimoka and all the other precepts, all the other training rules in the Vinaya. You want to make sure that you hold them as consistently as possible. There’s nothing that you’ve done in the course of the day that’s harmed yourself or harmed other people or that’s shown carelessness. A lot of the more minor precepts have to do precisely with this. You don’t want to be careless. You want to think about the implications of your actions. This enforces mindfulness and alertness as you go through the day, which of course makes it easier to develop mindfulness and alertness as you sit down and focus on the breath. The same with restraint of the senses. The formula is that you don’t focus on any themes in what you see or hear or smell or taste or touch or think about that will give rise to unskillful states. Now, themes here can mean any aspect of these things, the things you focus on. Because you find often it’s not so much the sights or sounds or smells or whatever that provoke unskillful states in the mind. There’s the part of the mind that goes out and looks for trouble, wants to have its lust stirred up a little bit, wants to have its anger stirred up a little bit. And so you have to be very careful about this. Because if you’re going to be practicing any kind of meditation while you’re sitting with your eyes closed, any kind of control over the mind, you have to exert it throughout the day. If you’re loose with the mind for twenty-three hours of the day and really struck with it only for one hour of meditation, you can figure out which side is going to win. So you have to be really on top of your motivation. Why are you looking at this? Why are you listening to that? Again, this develops your mindfulness and alertness as you go through the day. And it has to develop a lot of honesty as well. Because sometimes we look at things and we think, “Well, that’s just a minor strain. It doesn’t really matter. It doesn’t seem to have any impact on the mind.” But over time, it does. You can’t get complacent about this. For one thing, it really does damage your momentum in the practice. Because the more continual you can make the practice, the more the momentum builds up. And Chan Phuong has that comment on how we tend to divide our days up into times. There’s time to eat, there’s time to do this, there’s time to do that, and there’s very little time to meditate. There’s very little time for the meditation to get any kind of momentum. But if you think of it as all time to meditate, then while you’re eating and while you’re doing these other things, there should be that part of the mind in the background that has the same vigilance that you would have while you’re meditating that asks, “Why are you looking at this? Why are you listening to that?” And so on down the line. “Why are you thinking about this? What kind of trouble are you looking for?” And if you can keep that vigilance going, it gains strength and prevents little habits from building up into big ones. It’s that passage where the Buddha says the way you’re thinking tends to become an inclination of the mind. You might think of it as ruts that you develop in the mind. And even though you might not think of it as a kind of training, you really are training yourself. If you’re training your mind in terms of lust, well, that’s a kind of training. You’re trained in terms of anger. The mind doesn’t need much training in these things, but all you have to do is give it a little push and it’s ready to go. So you have to be very careful about that. Purity of livelihood. For laypeople, this basically means that you’re not going to do anything dishonest. You’re not going to engage in a trade that’s harmful. And even if you’re engaging in a good trade or a good occupation, you want to make sure you do it in an honest way. For the monks, it means that you have to be very careful about where you can and cannot ask for things. No hints, as I said, no hinting, no scheming, no belittling. Scheming means trying to figure out some way that you’re going to get other people to want to give to you. Belittling is when someone says they don’t want to give something, and you say, “Well, I don’t think you’re really capable of that,” so you hope that they’ll give more. Or just the hinting. Or, as they say, pursuing gain with gain. In other words, giving little tokens to people who give donations. We can extend this nowadays. The hinting to, of course, the wish list that sometimes appears on monastery websites. The explanation is, “Well, people want to know what to give.” Well, if people really want to know what to give, they can come and look, or they can make an offer. Here you aren’t displaying your greed for anybody who comes by the website. If people say, “Okay, please let me know anything that you need,” then you can ask. And Jon Fuehn was always careful about this, even with people who often made the offer. He said there were two kinds of things he’d ask for. One would be medicine, the other would be dharma books. So you have to be very careful about the extent to which you show your desires and your wants, to make sure you’re really clean in your livelihood. And finally, there’s reflection on the requisites. We have to remember why we’re wearing our clothing, why we’re eating, why we’re using shelter, why we’re using medicine. We want to keep our needs as basic as possible. Part of this is, if you go beyond your basic needs, you’re wasting a lot of money that could be used for much better purposes. Or as a monk, you’ll find yourself getting greedy for this and greedy for that, and it pulls you away from the meditation. You’re actually training your mind, learning the virtue of contentment. So in terms of clothing, it’s simply enough to keep you warm when it’s cold outside and sheltered from the sun when it’s hot, to cover the body. And that’s basically it. Food is the same way. It’s just enough to keep you alive and practicing. You don’t have to figure out the kind of diet that will keep you alive forever, because everybody’s going to die at some point. And all the arguments that people get into over food, I mean, it’s just food. After it comes into the stomach, it turns into shit and comes back out the other side. And it’s not worth all the squabbles about what this diet does and what that diet does. As monks, we’re supposed to simply look at what’s in the bowl that we can eat, and we should know from our own reactions to food what works for us and what doesn’t. All the diets out there are basically drawn up by people who don’t really know. It’s just guesswork. So learn to look at your own body’s reaction to these things. If there’s something you know that is bad for your body, well, you just learn how to deal with that. Skip over that food. And also learn the right amount to eat. We’re not eating in order to put on bulk. We’re eating in order to just be alive enough to practice. Same with shelter. Enough shelter to keep us cool in the summer, warm in the winter, and to provide the necessary protection from the pleasures of seclusion. There are four walls around you, so you have some sense of privacy. Keep out the inclemencies of the weather, and that’s basically all you need. Keep out the bugs. It’s all pretty basic. And same with medicine. Enough medicine just to deal with whatever diseases we have and to keep ourselves healthy. Keep our needs few so that we can practice that virtue of contentment, which is one of the traditions of the noble ones. At the same time, when you keep your needs few, that means if there’s any extra income left over, it can be used for good purposes. It’s not just dump down this bottomless pit of the needs of the body. So when you think of the word sila, it’s not just the precepts. It’s all these qualities. The precepts, of course, are one aspect of the four aspects of virtue, but there are these others as well. The virtue of how you look and listen, the virtue of how you keep your body going, how you make your livelihood, and the virtue of how you reflect on the requisites. So they don’t become a source of defilement as well. This way, the way you live is providing an appropriate environment for your practice. The environment here is not so much the things around you. You create your world by your actions. And so you want to make sure that you create a world which is a good world in which to meditate, in which to develop the good qualities of mind that will lead to release. Don’t be the sort of person that the Buddha mentions in his verses in the Dhammapada, the spider that gets caught in its own web, caught in your own cravings. All the other openings for release are there, but you’ve got yourself all tied up in your own net, in your own web. That would be a real shame. Make sure that you take advantage of what are opportunities for release that are there.

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