

## *Virtue Without Attachment*

*Sila*—a term that can be translated as “virtue,” “precept,” or “habit”—is the first of the three trainings that lead to the end of suffering. The other two are concentration and discernment. In the noble eightfold path, *sila* covers three factors: right speech, right action, and right livelihood. Right speech involves abstaining from telling lies, from speaking divisively, from speaking harshly, and from engaging in idle chatter. Right action involves abstaining from killing, from stealing, and from engaging in illicit sex. Right livelihood involves abstaining from harmful or dishonest ways of making a living.

However, attachment to *sila* and *vata*—which means “practice” or “protocol”—is one of the three fetters abandoned when all the factors of the noble eightfold path come together in a fully mature way and yield a first glimpse of awakening. And the path leading from the first glimpse of awakening to full awakening also contains the factors of right speech, right action, and right livelihood. This means that the path requires practicing *sila* in a way that at the same time frees you from attachment to *sila*.

So how is that done? If you picture the path as a trail through a sandstone wilderness, this is a section where the path follows a narrow ledge. On the one side is a pile of boulders that block your progress; on the other is a sheer drop-off into a chasm. The boulders represent attachment; the chasm, a practice without the protection offered by the three *sila* factors of the path. If you don’t negotiate this section carefully, you won’t get safely beyond it.

I’ve encountered three different answers to the question of how to practice *sila* without being attached to *sila*, and their differences hinge on two issues. The first issue concerns what, in the practice of *sila*, can act as a fetter. This, in turn, depends on the second issue: what the word *sila* means in the name of the fetter, “attachment to *sila* and *vata*.”

Two popular answers to the question of how to practice *sila* without attachment both treat *sila* in the name of the fetter as meaning “precept,” but they differ in their interpretation of what in the practice of the precepts can act as a fetter. The first interpretation holds that the precepts can often be too narrow and one-dimensional in the guidance they provide: If you follow them too strictly, you limit your ability to respond to any given situation in a wise and compassionate way. This interpretation often cites examples where it claims that a wise or compassionate response would involve breaking a precept derived from the *sila* factors of the noble eightfold path, such as killing termites that threaten to destroy a home, killing an individual who threatens to kill many other people, lying to authorities who plan to torture a person sequestered in your attic, or stealing a loaf of bread from a wealthy family to feed a starving child. In this interpretation, practicing *sila* without attachment to *sila* means weighing the precepts against the principles of wisdom and compassion, and being willing to break a precept when it runs counter to those principles.

The second interpretation agrees that the precepts can often be too narrow a guide to compassionate action, but it also sees another danger in the practice of the precepts: the judgmental pride that can develop around adhering strictly to

the precepts. According to this interpretation, pride in your precepts creates a strong sense of self that makes you harsh in judging others. It also stands in the way of the total letting go that leads to awakening. The way to avoid this fetter, it says, is consciously and deliberately to break the precepts in a way that removes all pride around your behavior. This, from the second interpretation's point of view, is what practicing without attachment to sila means.

However, the Buddha's own answer to this question, as recorded in the Pali Canon, differs radically from both of these interpretations. To begin with, the context that surrounds his primary discussion of this issue (in MN 78) shows that *sila* in sila-and-vata doesn't mean precept or virtue. It means *habit*, for the passage discusses both skillful sila and unskillful sila. In other words, the fetter abandoned at the first glimpse of awakening deals with attachment not only to the good, virtuous habits of the precepts, but also to bad habits that break the precepts. And this makes sense. Why would attachment to bad habits be any less of a fetter than attachment to good?

Secondly, the Buddha states that the danger of being fettered to a habit occurs on two levels. One, if the habit is unskillful, the habit itself poses dangers to the person following it. When you act unskillfully, you harm both yourself and the living beings around you. Two, regardless of whether the habit is skillful or unskillful, your *attitude* toward the habit can fetter you as well. In particular, the Buddha points to two dangerous attitudes: (a) seeing the habit as the essence and goal of your practice (Sn 4:9); and (b) fashioning a sense of identity around the habit, using it to define who you are (MN 78) or to exalt yourself over others (Sn 4:5).

The Buddha's solution to both levels of attachment is terse: to be endowed with the virtues of the precepts, but not to be fashioned of those habits. In other words, you follow the precepts strictly but don't create a sense of self around them.

The implications of this explanation are worth teasing out, for they help you see not only how deft the Buddha's solution is, but also how deficient the other two interpretations are. His answer leads you across the narrow ledge; theirs takes you off the cliff.

To ensure that you don't expose yourself to the first danger of attachment to habits—i.e., attachment to unskillful habits—the Buddha notes that all awakened people consistently behave in line with the basic precepts of the path. This, in fact, is one of the defining characteristics of the awakened ones: that they would never intentionally break those precepts. AN 3:87 states that awakened ones might break some of the minor rules of the monastic discipline, but as for the precepts basic to the holy life, their virtue is pure. And in Ud 5:5, the Buddha praises the monks who are willing to hold to their precepts even when it might cost them their life.

So the precepts of the noble eightfold path are not simply a temporary standard of behavior to be dropped when reaching awakening. They're a training in how awakened people behave and encourage others to behave as well.

By encouraging this standard of behavior, the Buddha is providing you with safety both on external and on internal levels. On the external level, if you follow his encouragement, you gain a share of the universal safety that comes when you give safety universally to all beings: safety in terms of their lives, their

possessions, their spouses and children, their access to the truth, and from the careless things you might do when intoxicated. In this way, you avoid creating the negative karma that would create needless harm around you, placing needless difficulties in your path. This also protects you from the regrets or denial that would eventually develop if you intentionally broke the precepts simply to prove to yourself that you weren't attached to them.

On the internal level, the practice of holding strictly to the precepts creates the conditions for the right mindfulness and right concentration that lead to liberating discernment. If you have no reason to feel hounded by remorse over having harmed yourself or others, it's easier to be mindful at all times. If you have no reason to engage in denial—because none of your actions have caused harm—it's easier for discernment to use the clarity and stability of concentration to penetrate the walls of ignorance in the mind.

The practice of holding strictly to the precepts with full conviction fosters discernment in two main ways. To begin with, the conviction that these precepts are the standards of awakened behavior forces you to confront the attitude that would otherwise look forward to awakening as an opportunity to do whatever you—the unawakened you—would want to do. If you believe that non-attachment to precepts means being able to break them, you foster the belief that when awakening arrives, you'll be free to break the precepts as you like. Practice in the meantime becomes simply a matter of biding your time. The underlying dishonesty of this attitude makes it impossible to take the precepts seriously, or to allow them to genuinely challenge your unskillful tendencies.

At the same time, the practice of holding strictly to the precepts even when your mind tells you that it has compassionate motives for breaking them brings to the surface all the mind's unskillful tendencies that would go against the precepts. Knowing that you can't give in to the rationalizations of compassion allows you to see those rationalizations for what they are: defilements that cloud your understanding of what's going on in your mind. You're forced to acknowledge the lust, aversion, or delusion that lurk behind those rationalizations. While the simple fact of confronting these unskillful tendencies may not always be enough to keep you from falling for them, it's an important first step in helping to protect you from them—i.e., in protecting yourself from yourself.

This point is in sharp contrast to the first of the two alternative approaches to practicing sila without attachment: breaking a precept when you feel that compassion requires you to do so. Unlike the Buddha's approach, the simple fact that this alternative allows for other considerations to override the precepts means that it provides ample room for dishonest intentions to slip into a motive that on the surface presents itself as a wise and compassionate approach to an exceptional situation.

Human history is littered with examples of unskillful behavior that justified itself as an exceptional response to an exceptional situation—even though a quick look back further in history would have shown that the situation was not exceptional at all. Most wars, for instance, are proposed as a wise and compassionate strategy to prevent a potentially destructive group from causing even more destruction. Yet the outcome is that those who present themselves as wise and compassionate end up causing as much or more destruction themselves. So why did they refuse to take that quick look back into the past

before causing harm? Historians have shown repeatedly that what passed as “wise and compassionate” in the original motivation often masked motives that were far less noble.

So it’s not the case that holding to the precepts fetters compassion; it fetters the defilements of greed, aversion, and delusion. Only when people are intent on following the precepts strictly are they forced to turn around and question their own motives, looking for their own defilements and taking responsibility for their own actions before trying to take on the defilements and actions of others.

The practice of holding to the precepts also encourages the discernment of ingenuity. The first interpretation may claim that the precepts are narrow, but actually they force you to expand your sense of the range of responses available in a given situation. If you stick to your promise not to kill, lie, or steal, then when faced with a person who threatens to kill others, you have to see if there’s a way to stop him without killing him. If evil authorities want to search your attic, you have to see if there’s a way to dissuade them that doesn’t involve lying. If a child is starving, you have to find a way to feed her that doesn’t involve stealing. The ways are there, but only if you take responsibility for the integrity of your actions will you feel the necessity to look for them. If the human race had taken the ingenuity used in developing weapons and had devoted it instead to finding ways to survive *without* killing one another, we’d be living in a much more humane human world.

Following the precepts strictly also forces you to expand the range of time you consider when weighing the potential results of your actions. The Buddha formulated the precepts as he did because he saw that, over the long term, actions that go against the precepts eventually end up doing more harm than good. In following the precepts, you align your actions with the conviction that the immediate benefits that might come from breaking the precepts shouldn’t blind you to the harm that such actions will create over a very long term: the course of many lifetimes. Killing a potential killer might bring a short respite from his unskillful actions, but it will set in motion a string of consequences that will ultimately do more harm. This is why it’s wisest to exercise your ingenuity in preventing unskillful behavior in ways that don’t require your being unskillful, too.

So it’s clear that there’s nothing narrow about adopting the precepts as standards of behavior. By expanding your understanding of your actions and their results, the precepts help you avoid the dangers that come from lower or looser standards of behavior. They also promote positive benefits, such as the inner safety of sharpened discernment into the workings of your own mind, and the opportunity to provide a much-needed example for the rest of the world.

As for the second level of danger that comes from attachment to habits—concerning your *attitude* toward your habits—the Buddha’s approach tackles both types of unskillful attitudes at once. In other words, he confronts both the attitude that your habits are an end in themselves and the pride that can develop around skillful habits. He does this through his constant reminders that there is much more to the path than skillful habits, and the primary value of the precepts is in the way they foster the path’s higher factors. As he says, the happiness fostered by the precepts is only a small fraction of the happiness fostered by meditation (Iti 27). So rather than contenting yourself with the precepts, you

should focus on the qualities of mind engendered by following the precepts that can be devoted to the meditative development of concentration and discernment.

For concentration, these qualities are three: the *ardency* that makes the effort to stick with the precepts, the *mindfulness* that remembers your commitment to the precepts even in difficult situations, and the *alertness* that keeps watch over your actions so that they actually conform to the precepts. In focusing on these qualities and applying them to the practice of mindful concentration, you have no time to exalt yourself over your precepts—or to view them as ends in themselves—for you realize how much stronger you need to make these three qualities if your concentration is to advance.

At the same time, as the practice of following the precepts forces you to confront the unskillful motivations lurking in the mind, you realize the need to develop much more discernment to become totally free from them. This realization, too, keeps you from contenting yourself with your precepts.

Ultimately, when you develop the discernment that sees the deathless, unconditioned dimension at the first level of awakening, you realize that although the precepts are helpful in allowing you to gain that discernment, they are by no means the entire path and nowhere near constituting the goal. Because the goal is unconditioned, whereas the practice of the precepts is conditioned, there's no way you could ever define yourself around the precepts ever again.

This is how the first glimpse of awakening cuts through the fetter of attachment to habits and protocols for good.

The Buddha's approach to solving the dangers of attachment to habits may not be easy, but it is elegant and effective. You hold to the precepts to protect yourself from unskillful habits, and you focus on taking the mental skills developed by following the precepts and using them to make the path complete. Because those skills are nothing other than the discernment and concentration factors of the path—right view and right resolve in the case of discernment; and right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration in the case of concentration—this underlines a simple but often overlooked point: The practice of *sila* without attachment to *sila* doesn't require looking outside of the noble eightfold path for guidance. All you have to do is practice *sila* fully and strictly in the context of the *entire* path, and attachment to *sila* will not be a problem. In that way you provide a gift not only to yourself but also to the world at large in terms both of the harmlessness of your behavior and of the nobility of the example you set.

When we compare the Buddha's approach to that of the other two interpretations—advising you to break the precepts when you feel your motivation for doing so is compassionate, and advising you to break precepts to undercut any pride over your behavior—we can see clearly how inferior those interpretations are. By focusing on the dangers that come from being attached to the precepts, they leave you exposed to both levels of danger that can come from attachment to habits in general. On the one hand, both interpretations recommend exposing yourself to the needless bad karma that comes from breaking the precepts. This harms not only you, but also the world at large in terms of the direct results of your actions and in the compromised example you set. On the other hand, the two interpretations leave you exposed to the pride that can come from regarding yourself as above the precepts. This is a form of pride much harder to abandon than pride over holding to the precepts, for when

you try to let it go, you're faced with the harm you've caused to others by breaking the precepts. A sense of pride over causing no harm is easier to shed than a sense of pride that involved causing harm, because the act of dropping the first sort of pride leaves you safe from remorse and denial, while the act of dropping the second sort of pride leaves you with no defense.

So when you face the narrow ledge of practicing sila without attachment to sila, remember that not every trail guide is reliable. The Buddha's instructions—to follow the precepts strictly and to focus on devoting the inner qualities they foster to furthering your meditation—is the guidance that can get you safely across.