

Attachment to Precepts

November 14, 2012

One of the fetters that ties the mind down is something called, in Pali, *sīlabbata-parāmāsa*. Many times, you see it translated as “attachment to rites and rituals” or “attachment to precepts.” I know not a few people out there who say, “Well, that’s one fetter I’m not attached to. I’m not attached to rites, rituals, or precepts. I just do anything I want.” But that’s not what the Buddha’s talking about.

The word *sīla* in *sīlabbata-parāmāsa* can also be translated as “habit.” Everybody has habits, and we’re all attached to them. The question is: Exactly what is the problem here? There are some skillful habits that are very good to be attached to—attached in the sense of following them and sticking to them regardless of whether they’re easy or difficult. An example is the set of five precepts—the same word, *sīla*—and those are part of the practice.

The Buddha’s not recommending that you stick to the precepts sometimes and not at other times. There are a lot of important lessons you can learn about the mind by sticking to a precept both when it’s easy and when it’s hard. It makes you more sensitive to your actions and more sensitive to the excuses the mind makes for itself when it wants to break the precept. It gives you good practice in setting a firm intention and then sticking with it, which is very much a skill you’re going to need when you meditate. And it does give you practice in how to deal with the times when you slip from that intention, try to get back on board, and manage to do it with a minimum of self-recrimination, but also a maximum of efficiency and effectiveness.

In other words, you don’t just keep dithering around, saying, “Well, I’m learning important lessons about what it’s like to break a precept.” The important lessons are learned when you really, sincerely try to keep to the precept. And when you happen to slip, then you say, “Okay, what can I do so I don’t slip again? What’s the proper attitude?” You recognize that there was a mistake and that it did cause harm one way or another, in spite of what the mind might have told you about how “This is a case of compassion” or “This is a case where there are special exemptions” or whatever.

The precepts are designed to be clear-cut. You notice a difference in people’s attitudes in the way they describe this point. If someone says, “hard and fast,” they usually say, “The precepts aren’t meant to be hard and fast,” as if hard and fast were something negative. The right word is “clear-cut.” They’re clear-cut because

you need clear-cut guidelines as to what's skillful and what's not. Just ask anyone who's raised a child. If the laws you lay down for the child are open to constant negotiation and pushing back and forth, the child may like it in the short term, but not in the long term. It gets very confusing. It's a lot easier to live by something that's clear-cut and not open to negotiation.

You learn important principles about how to live with a clear-cut rule like that and how to get better and better at holding to it. This is a necessary skill because having some clear-cut rules in your life makes it a lot easier to figure out, when something's going wrong in your meditation, why it's going wrong. It's like being a scientist. You try to minimize the variables that the things you're studying are subject to so you can focus on where the real problem is.

The precepts close off a lot of unskillful variables in your life so that you can focus on the actions happening in the mind right here, right now, without having to deal with the added problems of remorse over a slip in the precepts or remorse over a time when you've harmed somebody.

So when the Buddha's talking about letting go of your attachment to precepts, what's he talking about? There's a passage in the Canon where he says that you still hold to the precepts, but you don't "make" yourself around them. You don't "fashion" yourself around them. In other words, they don't become part of your pride and identity in the sense that, "I'm proud because I can hold to this precept, but other people around here can't." That kind of comparison is where the precept becomes a problem. But the precept itself is not the problem; it's your attitude toward the precept, or the attitude toward the fact that you can hold to it, and other people can't. That's the problem.

There's that famous story about Ajaan Maha Boowa and Ajaan Mun, where Ajaan Maha Boowa was taking on various ascetic practices. Ajaan Mun could see there was some pride in him on this issue. One of the practices that Ajaan Maha Boowa was holding to was of not accepting any food that came after the alms round. And so, maybe once or twice during the rains retreat, Ajaan Mun would pass by Ajaan Maha Boowa's bowl and then suddenly slip something into the bowl. Of course, if anybody else had done that, Ajaan Maha Boowa would have yelled at them. But here it was Ajaan Mun, so he had to accept it and reflect on the fact that, yes, he was getting a little prideful around the practice that he'd taken on.

Now we can misread that and make it an excuse for being lax or easygoing about the precepts or about whatever special practices you take on to control your defilements. But no, Ajaan Mun is not saying to be lax. He's saying to look at the pride and realize that the pride itself is a problem. The practice itself is not. This

realization teaches you lots of good things. The ascetic practices are very good for showing up your defilements so that you can deal with them directly. In fact, nowadays, the pride tends to be on the other side. People say, “Well, I’m above precepts. I’m above practices. I’m above Sunday-school rules.” There’s a lot of pride in that.

A while back I read a piece by a supposed Dharma teacher who has a reputation for having had adulterous affairs, and he was saying, “These monks in the Thai forest tradition are horrible, the way they treat women. They don’t touch them, and it’s really bad for the women not to be touched” —somehow. Here’s a person blatantly breaking the precepts, proud of the fact that he’s breaking the precepts, and looking down on people who hold to them. That’s where our society’s gotten these days. That’s where the pride now lies.

So we really need to take the precepts seriously as means for controlling all kinds of unskillful attitudes. The pride that comes from learning how to do that is a much less vicious, much less destructive problem than the problems caused by breaking the precepts. And even if it’s, say, one of the ascetic practices where if you break it, you’re not harming anybody, still there’s that question about the dialogue in your own mind. Why did that particular practice get dropped? What was the reason, and what was the excuse? What was the rationalization? Was it a matter of defilement or not? Having taken on that practice throws a lot of these things into sharp relief. The pride is the problem, not the precept.

The other case where the attachment is bad is when you think that simply by following the precepts, that in and of itself makes you a better person or accomplishes the goal. Again, the precepts are a part of the path, but not the only part, and they’re certainly not the goal.

When you reach the deathless, you realize that holding the precepts was very helpful, but you also needed to use your own discernment to get there, and the goal itself is something else entirely. That’s why the Buddha gave that riddle when the farmer offered his daughter to him. After the Buddha rejected the daughter, the farmer asked him, “What is this goal you’re practicing that’s better than my daughter?” And the Buddha said, “It’s not defined in terms of precepts or knowledge, but it can’t be attained without precepts or knowledge.” Now, the way he stated it in Pali was a play on words in the different cases of the nouns. The way he said that it wasn’t *defined by* precepts or knowledge can also mean not attained *by means of* the precepts or knowledge. But then he went on to say clearly, using another case of the nouns involved, that you can’t attain the goal without precepts and knowledge. So the farmer misunderstood him and said it sounded like nonsense.

But the point the Buddha was making was that this goal is not defined as a particular precept or a particular habit. The habits get you there, but once you've gotten there, then the goal itself goes beyond them. The idea that somehow the precepts constitute the goal has to be abandoned. In fact, that's one of the fetters abandoned at stream entry.

So the problem is not with the precepts. They're actually extremely helpful.

And as I said, the issue of pride around the precepts nowadays has very little to do with the fact that you can hold to them. It's more around the idea that you're above them; you don't need to stoop to those things. Well, it's a really good lesson in humility to learn to place your actions under the structure of the precepts. And not just in humility: You learn a lot about your own defilements that you wouldn't have noticed otherwise.

So as the Buddha said, when you get beyond skillful habits, it's not that you start engaging in unskillful habits. Getting beyond the skillful habits means that you've seen something that goes beyond them. But you still stick to them. In fact, you're even more firm in sticking to them because you've seen how harmful it is to break the precepts and how helpful it is to maintain them. It's simply that you don't define yourself around them.

That's the issue we want to work on: this tendency to define ourselves around them, thinking either that we're above the precepts or that we're better than other people because of the precepts we hold to.

One good way to think about the practice of the precepts is to remind yourself that it's like taking medicine. You're in a hospital. You're taking your medicine; the person in the bed next to you is not taking his medicine. The fact that you're a dutiful patient doesn't make you better than the other person. The fact that he's not taking his medicine doesn't mean he's better than you. It's not an issue of who's better than the other person. The fact is that you're taking the medicine and making it more likely that you're going to be healed. Any comparison with the other person is totally irrelevant.

So when you look at the precepts and the other ascetic practices as a form of medicine, that minimizes the danger around them. You're taking them not because you want to show off to other people, or that you want to pride yourself on how much better you are. It's simply a matter you realize you've got some diseases in the mind—the defilements—and they have sneaky ways of insinuating themselves into your behavior. You want to be able to ferret them out so that you don't get fooled by them.

The precepts help draw some lines. That way, you know that when the mind steps over the lines, there's a problem. The precepts alert you that something

needs to be done. And when you take that attitude toward the precepts, there's no problem with them at all.