

The Concept of *Sīla* in Theravada Buddhist Ethics

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Abstract

Sīla is one among many other terms that the Buddha adopts from pre-Buddhist usage giving his own new meanings to them. The Buddha removes the term from the ritualistic associations in its pre-Buddhist usage, not connected to a wholesome transformation of the conduct of a person, and conceives it as practice that conduces to the establishment of the foundation necessary for the complete ethical transformation of the individual leading ultimately to liberation from suffering. The focus is mainly on the transformation of verbal and bodily conduct through the exercise of restraint and the cultivation of more positive modes of behaviour. *Sīla* is considered as the foundation on which the ultimate goal of destruction of all taints that lead to suffering is to be achieved. It is conceived as the first step in the path of liberation leading progressively to mental composure (*samādhi*) and insight (*paññā*). However, contrary to the view sometimes expressed that in the Buddhist teaching *sīla* is merely a means to an end, and something to be finally transcended, the point of view expressed here is that according to the Buddha, it is something to be perfected and preserved as an end in itself. It is in recognition of a causal necessity of a psychological nature that the Buddha considers *sīla* as the foundation for his path of liberation. He also sees a mutually supportive relationship between *sīla* (wholesome conduct) and *paññā* (insight).

Keywords: *Sīla*, Insights (*Paññā*), Composure (*samādhi*), Buddhism, Non-maleficence, Beneficence

Introduction

Sīla is one of the most frequently used ethical terms in Theravāda Buddhist discourse. In the background of the use of ethical language during the time of the Buddha, *sīla* happened to be in common usage for a kind of regular commitment of a person in a behavior transforming kind of practice. It is a term which is often rendered into English as morality or virtue. The Pali Text Society Dictionary gives the meanings ‘nature’, ‘character’ ‘habit’ and ‘behavior’ to *sīla*. When it is called ‘nature’ it really stands for the nature that has been deliberately and consciously nurtured. In many Indian religious traditions of the Buddha’s time the term was used in the sense of

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the approved style of behavior within a particular system that the followers of the system were expected to cultivate. In Buddhism too, the term came to be used in this sense whereby a positive and commendatory ethical meaning came to be attached to it even when used without any other prefixes that indicated its commendatory meaning. Buddhism used it also in an ethically neutral sense leaving room for ethical approval or disapproval depending on the mode of *sīla* that was referred to by the use of the term. The compound form used by conjoining *vata* to *sīla*, as *sīlabbata* came to be applied in the Buddha's language to refer to certain practices adopted by people in the religious life. If such practices and modes of nurturing one's conduct or behavior were conducive to the long-term wellbeing of the persons who adopted them the Buddha too valued them. However, he cautioned people against taking them as ends in themselves and clinging to them without recognizing their real function in the ethical life.

Concept of *Sīla*

When used in the context of the Buddha's ethical teachings in a positive sense *sīla* indicates a kind of nurturing of the person in wholesome ways as a foundation for the achievement of the highest goal of the teaching. In certain instances, Buddhism referred to *sīla* along with the other term *vata*, which was conjoined with it to refer to certain types of self-imposed practices by contemporaries of the Buddha among both the ascetic groups and the orthodox Brahmanical groups who were inclined to place a high value on certain ritualistic practices. The Buddha refers to practices involving the adoption of the vow of living like cattle or dogs by certain ascetics of that time believing that such practices were conducive to their future well-being.ⁱ They are referred to as *kukkurasīla*, *gosīla*, *kukkuravata* and *govata*. In the Buddha's teaching clinging to such practices (*sīlabbataparāmāsa*) was considered as a major hindrance to any genuine ethical progress and it was considered as a fetter to be broken at the initial point of 'stream-entry', (*sotāpatti*) in the Buddhist path of ethical perfection. Like in the case of *ditthi* grasping of *sīla* too was considered as an impediment even if the *sīla* is wholesome. In some contexts, the negative aspect of *sīla* is conveyed by the terms *dussīla* meaning conformity to what is contrary to wholesome ways of conducting oneself, and *akusalasīla* meaning following practices that have harmful and unwholesome consequences. Three items referred to as wholesome bodily action (*kusalam kāyakammam*), wholesome verbal action (*kusalam vacīkammam*) and purity of livelihood (*ājīvapārisuddhi*) which can easily be identified with three factors of the Noble Eightfold Path, are stated as falling within what the Buddha described as *kusalasīla*.ⁱⁱ The Buddha's use of the term *sīla* suggests that it is valued in Buddhist ethics as an initial stage in the effort a person makes in the progressive commitment to

the attainment of perfect ethical purity. The emphasis relating to *sīla* is on the restraining effect it has on a person's conduct. In the same context where the Buddha speaks of *kusalasīla* he points out that there comes a stage in which one reaches the cessation of it (*kusalasīlānam nirodho*). When this stage is reached the externally imposed restraints become unnecessary because a person has now acquired the disposition to the wholesome way of conducting oneself without imposing externally as it were, the required discipline. The Buddha says here that one conducts oneself as a person in possession of *sīla*, but without being directed or controlled by *sīla* (*idha bhikkhu sālavā hoti na ca sīlamayo*).

The Buddha did not absolutely and unconditionally reject all practices and vows as useless or harmful. In the Suttanipāta is found reference to the adoption of what the Buddha referred to as *sīla* and *vata* in several instances where various religious people claimed purity by virtue of adhering to them. A feeling of being self-righteous due to strict adherence to such practices was common among the ascetics of the time, and the Buddha appears to have been very critical about it. In the Suttanipāta the Buddha points out that if a person, even without being questioned, boasts about one's adherence to rituals and vows it should be considered as going counter to ethically noble behavior.ⁱⁱⁱ A really tranquil and calm person with one's inner self completely appeased does not speak about one's virtue with a sense of pride and conceit.^{iv} The Buddha points out that he does not claim purity solely on the grounds of *sīla* and *vata* nor in the absence of them. What is implied in this context is that where it is useful, he uses them but does not passionately cling to them making such practices themselves hindrances to one's own wellbeing. In the Atthkavagga of the Suttanipāta, he repeatedly shows the harmfulness of developing a sense of pride and conceit based on one's accomplished *sīla*. There is less emphasis on the adoption of vows in the early teachings although in the commentarial period elaborate descriptions of certain Buddhist vows are mentioned particularly in the life of the Buddhist monks as an effective practice for quick progress in reaching the final goal.^v More attention appears to have been paid in the early teachings on the cultivation of what the Buddha considered as the training in higher *sīla* (*adhisīlasikkhā*), especially with reference to the conduct of the monks. *Sīla* in the form of observance of certain precepts voluntarily adopted by the lay persons also happens to play an important part in the layperson's ethics of Buddhism and it is to be distinguished from the higher *sīla* (*adhisīla*) recommended for the monks.

A large part of what is perceived under the ethical teachings of the Buddha concerning both the life of the layperson as well as the renouncer of lay life

having a serious sense of commitment to the Buddha's way may be said to be contained within the concept of *sīla*. It is to be noted that in the graduated discourse (*ānupubbīkathā*) of the Buddha to those lay persons whom he encountered for the first time, discourse on *sīla* is presented as the second in the order of progression as indicated by *dānakatham sīlakatham saggakatham kāmānam ādīnavam okāram samkilesam nekkhamme ānisamsam* (discourse on liberality, wholesome nurture (*sīla*), heavenly realms, the harmful consequences of sense desires, their delusive appearance, defiling nature, and the benefits of renunciation). The foremost call of the Buddha to those who were convinced about the benefits of his teaching and wanted to lead the higher life under him as renouncers of the lay life was to practice *sīla*. The Buddha called upon such persons to begin with *sīla* as indicated in the following words: "Come monk, be a person who fulfills the requirements of *sīla* (*ehi tvam bhikkhu, sīlavā hohi*)". In the very first discourse of the Buddha, Brahmajāla Sutta, included in the first of the divisions of the Suttapitaka, it is said that if someone were to praise the Buddha, the not so important fact that he is endowed with *sīla* (*appamattakam sīlamattakam*) is a sufficient ground for praise. The entire scheme of training consists of three progressive stages beginning with *sīla* as the first step. In the final days of the Buddha's life, prior to his passing away he emphasized that mental composure which is fully cultivated through *sīla* is of great benefit, the insight that is fully cultivated through mental composure is of great benefit, and the mind which is fully cultivated through insight gets properly released from all the taints.^{vi} The significance attached to *sīla* is also reflected by the fact that the first section of the first collection of the Suttapitaka, the Dīghanikāya, is named the section on the body of *sīla* (*sīlakkhandhavagga*).

As reflected in a number of instances in the Suttapitaka, the Buddha considered *sīla* as the firm and steady foundation for a person who aspires to achieve progress in the ethical path taught by him. This becomes evident from the words attributed to him as a response to a deity who is supposed to have come to him and posed the question: "People are tangled within and tangled without. They are (totally) tangled. Who would disentangle this tangle?" Here the Buddha's response was that it is by establishing oneself in *sīla* that one would disentangle the tangle.^{vii} The Buddha states that just as all activity that people engage in requiring physical strength to perform, are performed supported by the earth and resting on the earth, one cultivates the Noble Eightfold Path supported by *sīla* and resting on *sīla*.^{viii} On one occasion a monk disciple of the Buddha asks him to teach in brief the way to accomplish the goal of his teaching. Thereupon the Buddha requests the monk to purify the very starting point or foundation of all wholesome

qualities (*tasmātiha tvam bhikkhu ādimeva visodhehi kusalesu dhammesu*). Here the Buddha points out that the foundation is purity of *sīla* and upright view (*sīlañca suvisuddhamm ditthica ujukā*). Once this initial transformation is taken care of one ought to be supported by *sīla* and established in *sīla*, and then, cultivate the four types of establishment of mindfulness (*sīlañca nissāya sīle patitthāya cattāro satipatthāne bhāveyyātha*)^{ix} This advice of the Buddha is quite in conformity with the order of the Noble Eightfold Path which he prescribed giving priority to right view, right intentions, right speech, right actions, and right livelihood.

The Buddha states that numerous aspirations of a person who has adopted the principles of an ethical life become possible to be fulfilled through the perfection of *sīla*. In the Ākankheyya Sutta of the Majjhimanikāya a whole series of attainments culminating in reaching the taintless state of liberation is mentioned as consequences of the perfection of *sīla*.^x The Rathavinīta Sutta places *sīla* as the first lap in a kind of relay involving the step by step movement of a person committed to the goal of the total appeasement of all unwholesome traits (*anupādāparinibbāna*).^{xi} In the Ganakamoggallāna Sutta the Buddha points out that in the path of liberation he laid down there is a gradual path of progress like in many other human enterprises which require a systematic procedure in achieving success. He says that there is a gradual training, gradual way of action, gradual path in his teaching and discipline (*anupubbasicchā anupubbakiriyā anupubbapattipadā*) with *sīla* as the starting point.^{xii} In the Bhaddāli Sutta too, the Buddha points to the gradual nature of the ethical training a person should undergo for perfect ethical transformation comparing the whole process to the training of a thoroughbred horse.^{xiii} The Niddesa, a later text in the canonical tradition, reemphasizes the role of *sīla* saying that it is the foundation, the initial practice, self-control and restraint, the first, the foremost among wholesome phenomena (*sīlam patitthā ādicaranam samyamo samvaro mukham pamukham kusalānam dhammānam*).^{xiv}

The Role of *Sīla* in the Ethical Life

At this point it is pertinent to examine the role of *sīla* in the ethical life as envisioned by the Buddha. We have drawn attention above to the Buddha's recognition of the fact that *sīla* is a significant basis and a starting point in the ethical transformation of a person. We will now examine reasons for considering it as performing this preliminary role in the ethical life. There obviously were important psychological considerations for the Buddha for placing it as the first step in a person's ethical transformation. An examination of the content of *sīla* according to the teaching of the Buddha shows that it is concerned primarily with the restraint of bodily and verbal

action aimed at producing a lasting effect upon the psychological sources of the outward behavior of the individual. In the Pali canon where the Buddha introduces a new disciple into the life of higher faring (*brahmacariya*), he invariably requests the latter to be a person possessed of *sīla*, and restrained through the observance of the restraints of the code of discipline laid down for the higher community as seen in *ehi tvam bhikkhu sīlavā hohi, pātimokkhasamvuto viharāhi*. The Buddha himself elaborated the notion of *sīla* by laying down as a requisite condition the regulation of a person's conduct in terms of a specific body of precepts. It is this body of precepts that came to be known as the training in higher *sīla* (*adhisīla sikkhā*) for those who opted to enter the life of renunciation. The body of precepts to be voluntarily observed by those who joined the community of Buddhist renouncers (*bhikkhusangha*) later came to be established as a disciplinary code having a legal status involving the enforcement of penalties for those who violated the rules promulgated under the code. This explains why in the Suttas that deal with *sīla* the Buddha calls upon the disciples to be endowed with *sīla* as well as to live under the restraints of the code of discipline (*ehi tvam bhikkhu sīlavā hohi pātimokkhasamvarasamvuto viharāhi*) that came to be formulated under the body of canonical literature known as *Vinaya*. In the commentarial period of Buddhism the canonical concept of *sīla* meant for those who opted to live the life of a monk is expressed in such a way that the basic training of the bodily and verbal conduct of the monk up to the point of his commitment to a serious involvement in dealing with the next stage of training concerning composure of the mind or concentration (*samādhi*) was systematized into four categories of *sīla* as (1) *pātimokkhasamvarasīla* (restraints in accordance with the rules of discipline), (2) *ājīvapārisuddhisīla* (purity of livelihood), (3) *indriyasaūvarasīla* (restraint of the sense faculties) and (4) *paccayasannissitasīla* (proper conduct relating to the use of daily material requisites).^{xv}

It becomes clear from observations made by the Buddha himself about the role of *sīla* that he took into recognition a certain order of psychological causation in laying down a gradual scheme of ethical purification. He considered it psychologically and causally difficult for a person to deal with the subtleties of the sources of ethical misconduct without an initial conscious transformation of a person's conduct at the gross level of verbal and bodily behavior. Observable behavior of a person occurs at the level of bodily and verbal conduct. Such behavior was considered by the Buddha as an expression of latent psychological tendencies and dispositions. The interaction between habitual patterns of behavior and the latent tendencies and dispositions has gone on according to the Buddha from an unknown past. At the psychological level they have become petrified as deep-rooted

psychological tendencies. Transforming those tendencies at that deep-rooted level is no easy task. Any attempt in that direction has to follow a systematic procedure with psychological understanding. Every verbal and bodily action which is an expression of an unwholesome psychological tendency has the consequence of strengthening that tendency itself, increasing the potential of it to give expression to similar conduct in the future. The conscious and deliberate exercise of restraint gradually weakens the unwholesome tendencies, and produces a preliminary stage of calmness of body and mind that facilitates a deeper engagement with the deep-rooted psychological sources of ethical misconduct. The psychological effect of *sīla* is mentioned in descriptions of the progressive stages of mental culture pointing out that fulfilment of the requirement of restraints through *sīla* brings about a clear conscience in a person leading to what is described as an inner sense of happiness resulting from the conviction that one does no wrong (*ajjhattam anavajjasukham patisamvedeti*).^{xvi} The restraint of the senses as a further progression of *sīla* is said to ensure a sense of wellbeing in the person described as *avyāsekasukha*, the happiness resulting from permitting no pollutions to flow into the mind through unguarded senses.^{xvii} The effect of *sīla* upon the mind is also expressed by the Buddhist idea of ridding the mind of a sense of moral remorse (*vippatisāra*), which is also recognized as a very important element in the psychological ethics of Buddhism. When a sense of moral remorse is removed from the mind there arises gladness and joy (*pāmojja* and *pīti*) leading to calmness or tranquility within the entire person (*passaddhakāyo*) resulting finally in a sense of ease (*sukha*) on the basis of which one composes the mind (*cittam samādhīyati*) in order to see the reality insightfully (*samāhito yathābhūtam passati*).

The Relationship between *Sīla* and *Paññā*

Although it is generally presented as what precedes insight (*paññā*) when considered in terms of the most perfect insight aimed at in the Buddhist practice, the relationship between the two is said to be one of mutual feedback. The Buddha agreeing with the existing Brahmanical view about the mutual relationship between *sīla* and *paññā*, approves of Brahmin Sonadanda's view that where there is *sīla*, there is *paññā*, and where there is *paññā*, there is *sīla*, and that *sīla* is purified by *paññā*, and *paññā* is purified by *sīla*. It is compared to the way one uses one hand to clean the other and one foot to clean the other.^{xviii} However, immediately after approving Sonadanda's statement, the Buddha describes what, according to his teaching, *sīla* constitutes. The mutual relationship to which the Buddha draws attention here, shows the rationale behind placing right view (*sammāditthi*) and right thought or intention (*sammāsankappa*) prior to the factors of the eightfold path that represent the required restraints pertaining

to verbal and bodily conduct, consisting of right speech (*sammāvācā*), right action (*sammākammanta*) and right livelihood (*sammājīva*). It should also be noted that in presenting the ten qualities perfected by a monk concerning which no further training is needed, right knowledge (*sammāñāa*) and right liberation (*sammāvimutti*) are mentioned. In the Buddhist doctrinal tradition right view is usually associated with insight (*paññā*) at whatever level the view is conceived to be right. This also explains the intention of the Buddha in his response to the deity's question when he mentioned at the beginning 'an insightful man' (*naro sapañño*) and in the next line 'developing insight' (*paññañca bhāvayam*). This indicates that the mutually supportive character of insight and understanding works from the beginning to the end of the path implying that the highest level of insight is that which totally liberates the person from all manner of conflicts.

Apart from emphasizing the role of *sīla* as the foundation for the attainment of the final goal of liberation from suffering and attaining *Nibbāna* in this life itself, it is assigned a role in other pursuits as well. In the political sphere for instance, Buddhism recognizes it as one of the principles to be followed by the rulers. It occurs as the second item in a list of ten principles of good governance (*dasarājadhamma*) to be adopted by a ruler. It is also considered as the second of the seven items of noble wealth (*satta-ariyadhana*) indicating that people's economic life ought to be based on morality. It also enters into the list of perfections of a Bodhisatta as the second one to be fulfilled (*sīlapāramitā*) when the ideal of *paramitā* developed in later Buddhism. It becomes the second of the ten grounds for the performance of acts of wholesome kammic consequence (*dasapuññakiriyavatthu*).

Principles of Non-Maleficence and Beneficence

The most relevant scriptural source for determining the content of *sīla* as applied at the highest level of the pursuit of the Buddha's path of liberation is the *Sīlakkhandhavagga* of the *Dīghanikāya*. Many Suttas included in this section of the Pali canon enumerate in detail the items of *sīla* that monks and nuns are supposed to observe as part of their preliminary training in morality. These items represent forms of conduct that subscribe to the ethical principle of non-maleficence related to a person's bodily and verbal actions identifying those patterns of verbal and bodily behavior that could amount to a violation of that principle. They are presented on the one hand as abstentions to be practiced in such a way that one refrains from doing any harm to others, and on the other hand, cultivating an attitude that is conducive to action that may become positively beneficial to other beings conforming to the ethical principle of beneficence. Thus, the list of *sīla*

represent the two important principles in ethics recognized as the principle of non-malevolence and the principle of beneficence.

The first *sīla* to be observed is abstention from depriving the life of any living being and laying aside all weapons that might be used to cause injury and death to them, and living with a sense of shame in resorting to acts of cruelty against any form of life, being possessed of compassionate and sympathetic concern for all living beings (*pānātipātā pahāya pānātipātā pativirato hoti nihitadando nihitasattho lajjī dayāpanno sabbapānabhūtahitānukampī viharati*). It involves not only abstaining from harm but also cultivating a benevolent attitude towards living beings. It is noteworthy that in cultivating such *sīla*, no distinction is to be made between human life and the life of other beings. Restraint should apply in connection with the life of all sentient beings. The second *sīla* concerns abstention from theft of possessions of others, taking only what is given and expecting only what is given, cultivating a non-deceitful attitude lacking in thievish intention, and consisting of purity of heart (*adinnādānam pahāya adinnādānā pativirato hoti dinnādāyī dinnapātikankhī athenena sucibhūtena attanā viharati*). As monks and nuns were expected to move away from sensuous desire, in the cultivation of their *sīla* they were expected to live celibate lives not indulging in sexual pleasures differentiating themselves from the common people (*abrahmacariyam pahāya brahmacārī hoti ārācārī virato methunā gāmadhammā*). It is to be noted here that the Buddha expected a difference in the level of practice for certain important reasons between his disciples who were monks and nuns on the one hand and lay persons on the other. The first three are meant for restraint in bodily conduct. The fourth is for abstention from false speech and maintenance of reliable, truthful and trustworthy speech (*musāvādam pahāya musāvādā pativirato hoti saccavādī saccasandho theto paccayiko avisamvādako lokassa*). The fifth is to abstain from malicious or slanderous speech which involves the creation of divisions among those who are living in harmony, but use speech that brings about the unity of those who have fallen apart and enhances the unity or harmony of those who are already living united, delighting in, liking and enjoying unity (*pisunāvācam pahāya pisunāya vācāya pativirato hoti ito sutvā na amutra akkhātā imesam bheddāya amutra vā sutvā na imesam akkhātā amūsam bhedāya iti bhinnānam vā sandhātā sahitānam vā anuppadātā samaggārāmo samaggarato samagganandī samaggakaranim vācam bhāsītā*). The sixth is to abstain from harsh speech and cultivating speech which is mild, pleasant to the ear, endearing, appealing to the heart of the hearer, delightful to the many, and liked by many (*pharusāvācam pahāya pharusāya vācāya pativirato hoti yā sā vācā nelā kannasukhā pemaṇīyā hadayamgamā porī bahujanakantā*

bahujanamanāpā). The seventh is to abstain from frivolous speech and speak words at the proper time, speak about what is real, speak what is meaningful, related to *dhamma* related to discipline, words worthy of being treasured, timely, relevant, precise and conducive to wellbeing (*samphappalāpam pahāya samphappalāpā paṭivirato hoti kālavādī bhūtavādī atthavādī dhammavādī vinayavādī nidhānavatim vācam bhāsītā kālena sāpadesa pariyantavati atthasahita*).

***Sīla* and the Higher Life of Monks and Nuns**

Followed by the above-mentioned preliminary restraints which are in a lesser degree of strictness to be adopted even by the lay persons under the practice of *sīla*, the Suttas usually introduce a long list of other items which are really meant to be restraints to be adopted by those who have chosen to live the higher life of monks and nuns. An examination of those items show that they were meant to make a clear distinction between the lifestyle of lay persons who have no intention of a complete break with sensuous enjoyments in life and the lifestyle of monks and nuns who have voluntarily chosen a simple way of living, which is free of distractions and hindrances that are encountered in the busy and sensuously engaged lifestyle of the former. These include abstention from destroying whatever biological species that has the potential to growth such as seeds and eggs, restraint in the consumption of food, abstention from adornment and beautification of the body, using luxurious seats and bedding, and other pursuits of the lay people such as owning various animals for farming, having servants, women, owning land and fields etc. Abstentions relating to all kinds of deceitful and cruel pursuits that ordinary people resort to in order to pursue what the Buddha considered as wrong means of livelihood are mentioned in this context. Thus, persons who opted to live the higher life were expected to abstain from forgery with regard to trade and transactions in which layperson's get involved in the context of their way of living.^{xix} The fact that they are described as wrong means of livelihood shows that such ethical characterization applies even to the life of the lay Buddhist. This section in the scripture presents elaborate details of what people who renounced lay life were expected to abstain from as part of their conduct related to *sīla*. It suggests that there were, at that time, people who depended on the charitable donations of the lay persons and received their daily requisites from them such as food etc., but did not really seriously devote themselves to the higher spiritual life. Instead they engaged themselves in what the Buddha described as profane arts (*tiracchānavijjā*) as a means of livelihood. Accordingly, among the profane arts are mentioned certain arts such as soothsaying, sorcery, astrology, medicine etc. Certain modes of behavior permissible for the lay persons such as engaging in sports, seeking entertainment by

watching or listening to musical performances, dancing etc. are also mentioned as unbecoming of a monk's training in *sīla*.

There are several clarifications that need to be made on the early Buddhist account of *sīla* as part of Buddhist ethical discourse outlined above. One implication of this account is that Buddhism raises to a superior level the moral status of persons who commit themselves to the highest perfection in morality that is usually described as the 'taintless freedom of mind and freedom through insight' (*anāsavam cetovimuttim paññāvimuttim*). It is for this reason that according to early Buddhism the higher life (*brahmacariya*) is distinguished from the ordinary lay life which is not really cut off from the desire for sensuous gratification, and hence is qualified as the life of *gihī kāmabhogino* (the lay people who enjoy sense gratification). In the Buddhist tradition a highly reverential relationship developed from the earliest period between the renunciant community and the lay community which has continued to this day in Buddhist societies. Members of the renunciant community are considered as those deserving the veneration of the lay persons. When a person belonging to the former community leaves it and reverts to lay life, it is referred to in the Buddhist canonical tradition as an instance of "giving up the training (connected with the higher life) and reverting to an inferior status" (*sikkham paccakkhāya hīnāyāvattati*). A considerable part of the layperson's ethics described in the canonical sources appear to be related to the kind of reverential attitude expected to be exhibited by laypeople towards the renunciant community committed to a higher level of ethical perfection.

Another point to be noted here is that although *sīla* is usually rendered into English as morality, within the context of the Buddha's teaching it cannot be considered as consisting of the entire morality or ethical development of the person that the Buddha had in mind. It definitely includes a large part of the ethical transformation of the person. Yet it is conceived as merely a matter of exercising external restraints but not a matter of being spontaneously ethical. It is only after the latent unwholesome tendencies are totally removed that the highest form of ethical purification occurs. This makes the ethical enterprise in the Buddha's teachings not just a means but also an end in itself. Ethics involves not only restraints but also cultivation or development (*bhāvanā*). This shows the relevance of the next two factors in the Buddhist scheme of threefold training, namely composure of the mind (*samādhi*) and insight or wisdom (*paññā*) and the last three items of the Noble Eightfold Path, right effort (*sammāvāyāma*) right mindfulness (*sammāsati*) and right composure of the mind (*sammāsamādhi*). This point applies equally to the ethical life of the layperson as well. Therefore, to

understand the Buddhist concept of *sīla* as being synonymous with ethics or morality is a mistake. It is due to such misunderstanding that the ultimate goal of Buddhism is sometimes supposed to be to go beyond or to transcend morality.

The Buddha did not anticipate the kind of total commitment to the goal of ethical perfection on the part of the layperson. The Buddha's intention in forming a separate order or community seriously committed to the speedy attainment of the goal was due to his realization that with the encumbrances confronting the life of a layperson it is difficult for someone to fulfill effectively the requirements for perfect moral purity. This idea is often expressed by lay persons who listened to the Buddha's teaching and developed the interest in walking diligently the Buddha's path to liberation by their remark: 'It is not easy while living in the household to live the higher life in its full purity' (*na yidam sukaram agāram ajjhāvasatā accantaparipunnam accantaparisuddham sankhalikhitam brahmacariyam caritum*). However, the Buddha did not rule out the possibility for lay persons also to progress in the path of ethical transformation provided they set themselves rightly to the practice of the path.^{xx} There are a few instances mentioned in the canonical sources of laypersons attaining the highest perfection although not much information is found regarding such persons continuing to live as laypersons after their attainment. The possibility of attaining what the Buddha described as the fruits of the path such as stream entry (*sotāpatti*), once returner (*sakadāgāmi*) and non-returner (*anāgāmi*) is quite evidently admitted and several canonical instances can be found where the actual attainment by laypersons both male and female of such progress has been mentioned. These could also be viewed as progressive stages of achieving the goal of ethical perfection. In the description of the characteristics of those attainments it is the ethical aspect that seems to be mostly highlighted. It is evident in this context too, that *sīla* does not consist of the entire sphere of Buddhist morality or ethics even in the lay life.

One becomes a member of the Buddhist lay community through the expression of one's acceptance of the Buddha, his teaching and the community of persons who have chosen to live the higher life as members of the *bhikkhu/bhikkhunī saṅgha* as the refuges. Observance of *sīla* plays a very important role in the ethics of the layperson's life as well. The minimum requirement for living in accordance with the Buddha's ethical teachings meant for laypersons is the observance of the five *sīla* (*pañcasīla*). They emphasize restraint in bodily and verbal conduct following the order of priority that applies in the case of the first four *sīla* mentioned in relation to the higher community. In the case of lay persons, a lesser degree of

stringency is recognized with regard to the third item and abstention from taking intoxicating substances is introduced as the fifth. Accordingly, in the regular practice of the layperson the practice of the observance of the five precepts referred to also as the five bases of training (*sikkhāpada*) is undertaken, administered by a member of the higher community (*bhikkhusangha*) in ritualistic fashion on every occasion of religious significance. In the day to day practical ethical life of the layperson one regularly commits oneself to live in conformity with these five precepts. It is seen as an essential personal commitment to be undertaken, immediately followed by going to the three refuges, the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. Therefore, in the layperson's *sīla* it is verbally affirmed or mentally reflected upon indicating a serious commitment to the Buddhist ethical life. The order of the five lay *sīla* as expressed by lay persons who make a personal commitment to the practice of it is as follows: (1) I take upon myself the base of training relating to abstention from destruction of life (*pānātipātā veramanī sikkhāpadam samādiyāmi*); (2) I take upon myself the base of training relating to abstention from taking what is not given or stealing (*adinnādānā veramanī sikkhāpadam samādiyāmi*); (3) I take upon myself the base of training relating to the abstention from wrong conduct concerning sense pleasures (*kāmesu micchācārā veramanī sikkhāpadam samādiyāmi*); (4) I take upon myself the base of training relating to the abstention from uttering falsehoods (*musāvādā veramanī sikkhāpadam samādiyāmi*); (5) I take upon myself the base of training related to the abstention from taking liquor resulting in intoxication and negligent conduct (*surāmerayamajjapamādatthānā veramanī sikkhāpadam samādiyāmi*). All the *sīla* mentioned above form an important part of the ethical discipline recommended for the lay persons. Within the Buddhist practice they do not function as legally enforced rules for the lay community although within the community of the higher order of *bhikkhusangha* established under the Buddha such morality was brought under special rules of training (*sikkhāpada*) established as the code of rules of restraint of the *Pātimokkha*, the violation of which involved penalties in terms of the *Vinaya*. According to the order of the day the state too recognized at least the first four *sīla* of the lay persons as items to be recognized under its legal code, and punishments were enforced on persons who violated those norms irrespective of the religious affiliation of those who did so.

Established Theravāda Traditions Regarding Observance of Sīla

An aspect of *sīla* that appears to have been recognized from very early times and possibly originating from the Buddha's ethical teachings themselves is the layperson's *sīla* observed specially on days of religious significance. The early origin of the practice is suggested by the attribution to the Buddha

in the Dhammika Sutta of the Suttanipāta a reference to the observance of eight precepts on such days. In this case the five precepts which are recommended for the daily Buddhist ethical practice of the layperson are expanded into eight precepts with some extension of the practice of the third of the five precepts to signify celibacy which is recommended in the life of the higher Buddhist community. To this day the laypersons who are more seriously committed to the Buddhist way of life regularly observe the eight precepts on the full-moon day of the month usually withdrawing from their household environment to a monastic environment, which they believe is more conducive to the practice. The eight precepts referred to as *atthangasīla* consist of the following:

- (1&2) Same as the first two among the five *sīla* (*pañcasīla*)
- (3) I take upon myself the base of training of abstention from non-celibate living (*abrahmacariyā veramanī sikkhāpadam samādiyāmi*).
- (4&5) Same as the four and five among the five *sīla*
- (6) I take upon myself the base of training of abstention from taking untimely meals^{xxi} (*vikālabhojanā veramanī sikkhāpadam samādiyāmi*).
- (7) I take upon myself the base of training of abstention from dancing, singing, music, shows, wearing garlands, using perfume and beautifying with cosmetics. (*Nacca-gīta-vādita-visūkadassana-mālā-gandha-vilepana-dhārana-mandana-vibhūsanatthānā veramanī sikkhāpadam samādiyāmi*).
- (8) I take the base of training of abstention from using high and luxurious seats. (*Uccā-sayana-mahā-sayanā veramanī sikkhāpadam samādiyāmi*).

At some time in the Theravāda Buddhist tradition a difference has come into being regarding the observance of *sīla* giving rise to the establishment of ten precepts for the novice monks and nuns. The novice monks and nuns are not expected to commit themselves to all the variety of *sīlas* mentioned in the *Sīlakkhandhavagga* of the *Dīghanikāya*. The minimum requirement for them is to observe ten precepts consisting of:

- (1-6) Same as in the list of eight precepts
- (7) I take upon myself the base of training of abstention from dancing, singing, music, and shows (*Nacca-gīta-vādita-visūkadassanā veramanī sikkhāpadam samādiyāmi*).
- (8) I take upon myself the base of training of abstention from wearing garlands, using perfume and beautifying with

cosmetics (*mālā-gandha-vilepana-dhārana-mandana-vhibhūsanathhānā veramanī sikkhāpadam samādiyāmi*).

- (7&8) Actually result from the separation of (7) in the eightfold list into two
- (9) Same as eight in the eightfold list.
- (10) I take upon myself the base of training of abstention from accepting gold and silver, usually understood as money.
(*jātarūparajatapatiggahanā veramanī sikkhāpadam samādiyāmi*).

Conclusion

The above discussion of *sīla* draws attention to the point that the Buddha, like some of his predecessors recognized the value of adopting certain principles of restraint as the foundation for achieving a superior goal of perfection in the ethical life. He pointed out the futility of adopting certain practices that have no direct experientially tested beneficial consequence in respect of their conduciveness to such perfection. Using the very concept of *sīla* that was recognized in the ethical sphere of life he was selective in determining those items of *sīla* which he found to be most conducive to the promotion of a sound basis for ethical progress and recommended them at the various levels of the Buddhist practice. This accounts for the difference in the number of items of *sīla* and the content of *sīla* described above. In terms of the Buddha's progressive path of ethical development *sīla* was considered only as an effective practical device, if insightfully chosen as a sound basis for the anticipated ethical perfection. The importance of *sīla* lies in its restraining effect on the person resulting in a higher degree of a settled and composed personality where there is little room for the further nourishment of unwholesome tendencies of mind. A further refinement of the psychological sources of all ethically unwholesome tendencies occurs at the next stage of the practice recommended by the Buddha, i.e. the stage of mental composure (*samādhi*) paving the way for directing the tranquil mind which becomes free of all unwholesome emotions with firmly established mindfulness and unshaken equanimity to penetrate into the realities of existence. According to the Buddha's teaching, it is such penetration that absolutely delivers the person from all sources of unwholesome ethical conduct. Depending on the level at which one opts to practice the Buddhist way, the Buddha identified certain modes of training oneself as the *sīla* that applies to the relevant practice. They were to serve as guidelines for practice and each of them involved patterns of verbal and bodily behavior, which could occur in a whole spectrum of ethical situations in life. The items of *sīla* laid down by the Buddha were not meant to function as a set of commands or rules governed by a kind of deontological approach to our judgments in the

sphere of ethics but as practical guidelines in terms of which certain ethical intuitions or attitudes could be cultivated so that one could, in the practical day to day life respond appropriately to the demands of ethical living.

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- ⁱ These practices were adopted mainly by those who followed certain ritualistic forms of ascetic penances. An encounter of the Buddha with two persons who followed the canine and the bovine practice respectively is mentioned in *Majjhimanikāya* (Pali Text Society, London) Vol.I, p. 387f.
- ⁱⁱ *Majjhimanikāya* Vol. II, p. 27.
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Yo attano sālavatāni jantu anānuputtho 'va sayam eva pāvā
Anariyadhammam kusalā tam āhu yo ātumānam sayam eva pāvā*
(Verse 786)
- ^{iv} *Santo ca bhikkhu abhinibbutatto itihanti sālesu akatthamāno
Tamariyadhammam kusalā vadanti yassussadā natthi kuhlīnci loke.*
(Verse 78 7)
- ^v See *Dhutanganiddesa of Visuddhimagga* of Buddhaghosa Ed. C.A.F. Rhys Davids (Pali Text Society 1975)
- ^{vi} *Sīlaparibhāvito samādhi mahapphalo hoti mahānisamsa
samādhiparibhāvitā paññā mahapphalā hoti mahānisamsā
paññāparibhāvitam cittam sammadeva āsavehi vimuccati seyyathīdam
kāmāsavā bhavāsavā avijjāsavā.*
- ^{vii} The question asked was: *anto jatā bahi jatā – jatāya jatitā pajā
tam tam gotama pucchāmi ko imam vijataye jatam*
The response of the Buddha was: *Sīle patitthāya naro sapañño cittam
paññam ca bhāvayam atāpī nipako bhikkhu so imam vijataye jatam.*
- ^{viii} *Seyyathāpi bhikkhave ye keci balakaranīyā kammantā karīyanti sabbe te
pathavim nissāya pathaviyam patitthāya evameva te balakaranīyā
kammantā karīyanti evameva kho bhikkhave bhikkhu sīlam nissāya sīle
patitthāya ariyam atthargikam maggam bhāveti.* *Samyuttanikāya* (P.T.S.)
Vol. V, p. 45-46.
- ^{ix} S.N. Vol. V, p. 143.
- ^x *Majjhimanikāya* (P.T.S.) Vol. I, p. 33f.
- ^{xi} M.N. Vol. I, pp. 147-150.
- ^{xii} M.N. Vol. III, p. 2
- ^{xiii} M.N. Vol. I, p. 446f.

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- ^{xiv} Niddesa (P.T.S.) Vol. I, p. 39.
- ^{xv} See Visuddhimagga
- ^{xvi} Dīghanikāya (P.T.S.) Vol. I, p. 70.
- ^{xvii} Ibid.
- ^{xviii} *Seyyathāpi...hatthena vā hattham dhopeyya pādena vā pādam dhopeyya evameva sīlaparidhotā. paññā paññā paridhotam sīlam. Yattha sīlam tattha paññā yattha paññā tattha sīlam sīlavato paññā paññāvato sālam. Ibid. p. 124.*
- ^{xix} Ibid. p. 64f.
- ^{xx} *Gihino vāham pabbajitassa vā sammāpatipannassa aññārāghanam vadāmi.*
- ^{xxi} By untimely meals was understood taking any solid meals after noontime of the day has passed. This happens to be a disciplinary rule expected to be observed by the higher Saṅgha in their daily life as prescribed by the rules of the Vinaya.