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Religious Convention and Sila Practice

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Religious Convention and Sīla Practice

He who with trusting heart takes a Buddha as his guide, and the Truth, and the Order…When a man with trusting heart takes upon himself the precepts … that is a sacrifice better than open largesse, better than giving perpetual alms, better than the gift of dwelling places, better than accepting guidance. (Dīgha Nikāya V—145, 146)

I would like to say a few words about the uses of conventional religion. Of course, I am only speaking from my own experience as a Buddhist monk, although I would say that in this respect one can recognise the values of religious convention in whatever form.

Nowadays there is a tendency to think that religious convention and form are no longer necessary. There is a kind of hope that, if you can just be mindful and

know yourself, then that is all you need to do. Anyhow, that is how we would like it, isn't it? Just be mindful throughout the day, throughout the night, whatever you are doing; drinking your whisky, smoking your marijuana cigarette, picking a safe open, mugging someone you met in Soho— as long as it's done mindfully, it's all right.

There is a brilliant Buddhist philosopher in Thailand who is quite old now, but I went to stay at his monastery a few years ago. I was coming from Ajahn Chah's monastery, so I asked him about the *Vinaya*—the rules of the monastic order—and how important these were in the practice of meditation and enlightenment.

'Well,' he said, 'only mindfulness—that's all you need. Just be mindful, and everything is all right, you know. Don't worry about those other things.'

And I thought: 'That sounds great, but I wonder why Ajahn Chah emphasises all these rules?'

I had great respect for Ajahn Chah, so when I went back I told him what the philosopher-bhikkhu had told me. Ajahn Chah said, 'That's "true", but it's not "right." [1]

Now we are prone to having blind attachments, aren't we? For example, say you're locked up in a foul, stinking prison cell and the Buddha comes and says,

'Here's the key. All you have to do is take it and put it in the hole there underneath the door handle, turn it to the right, turn the handle, open the door, walk out, and you're free.'… But you might be so used to being locked up in prison that you didn't quite understand the directions and you say, 'Oh, the Lord has given me this key'—and you hang it on the wall and pray to it every day. It might make your stay in prison a little more happy; you might be able to endure all the hardships and the stench of your foul-smelling cell a little better, but you're still in the cell because you haven't understood that it wasn't the key in itself that was going to save you. Due to lack of intelligence and understanding, you just grasped the key blindly. That's what happens in all religion: we just grasp the key, to worship it, pray to it … but we don't actually learn to use it.

So then the next time the Buddha comes and says, 'Here's the key', you might be disillusioned and say, 'I don't believe any of this. I've been praying for years to that key and not a thing has happened! That Buddha is a liar!' And you take the key and throw it out of the window. That's the other extreme, isn't it? But you're still in the prison cell—so that hasn't solved the problem either.

Anyway, a few years later the Buddha comes again and says, 'Here's the key,' and this time you're a little

more wise and you recognise the possibility of using it effectively, so you listen a little more closely, do the right thing and get out.

The key is like religious convention, like Theravada Buddhism: it's only a key, only a form—it's not an end in itself. We have to consider, to contemplate how to use it. What is it for? We also have to expend the energy to get up, walk over to the door, insert the key into the lock, turn it in the right direction, turn the knob, open the door and walk out. The key is not going to do that for us; it's something we have to comprehend for ourselves. The convention itself cannot do it because it's not capable of making the effort; it doesn't have the vigour or anything of its own other than that which you put into it—just like the key can't do anything for itself. Its usefulness depends on your efforts and wisdom.

Some modern day religious leaders tend to say, 'Don't have anything to do with any religious convention. They're all like the walls of prison cells'—and they seem to think that maybe the way is to just get rid of the key. Now if you're already outside the cell, of course you don't need the key. But if you're still inside, then it does help a bit!

So I think you have to know whether you're in or out; then you'll know what to do. If you still find

you're full of doubt, uncertainty, fear, confusion—mainly doubt is the real sign—if you're unsure of where you are, what to do or how to do anything; if you're unsure of how to get out of the prison cell then the wisest thing to do, rather than throwing away keys, or just collecting them, is to take one key and figure out how to use it. That's what we mean by meditation practice. The practice of the Dhamma is learning to take a particular key and use it to open the door and walk out. Once you're out, then you know. There's no more doubt.

Now, we can start from the high kind of attitude that mindfulness is enough—but then what do we mean by that? What is mindfulness, really? Is it actually what we believe it to be? We see people who say, 'I'm being very mindful,' and they're doing something in a very methodical, meticulous way. They're taking in each bite of food and they're lifting, lifting, lifting; chewing, chewing, chewing; swallowing, swallowing, swallowing….

So you think, 'He eats very mindfully, doesn't he?', but he may not be mindful at all, actually. He's just doing it in a very concentrated way: he's concentrating on lifting, on touching, on chewing and on swallowing. We confuse mindfulness with concentration.

Like robbing a bank: we think, 'Well, if you rob a bank mindfully, it's all right. I'm very mindful when I rob banks, so there's no kamma. [2] You have to have good powers of concentration to be a good bank robber. You have to have mindfulness in the sense of fear conditions, of being aware of dangers and possibilities—a mind that's on the alert for any kind of movement or sign of danger or threat … and then concentrating your mind on breaking the safe open and so forth.

But in the Buddhist sense, mindfulness—sati—is always combined with wisdom—paññā. Sati-sampajaññā and sati-paññā: they use those two words together in Thailand. They mean, 'mindfulness and clear comprehension' and 'mindfulness-wisdom'. So I might have an impulse to rob a bank—'I need some money so I'll go rob the National Westminster Bank'—but the sati-paññā says, 'No, don't act on that impulse!' Paññā recognises the bad result if I acted on such an impulse, the kammic result; it confers the understanding that such a thing is wrong, not right to do.

So there's full comprehension of that impulse, knowing it as just an impulse and not-self, so that even though I might have the desire to rob a bank, I'm not going to make neurotic problems for myself out of worrying about those criminal tendencies. One

recognises that there is just an impulse in the mind that one refrains from acting upon. Then one has a standard of virtue— *sīla*—always as a conventional foundation for living in the human form in this society, with other beings, within this material world —a standard or guideline for both action and non-action.

The Five Precepts consist of not killing; not stealing; refraining from wrong kinds of sexual activities; not lying or indulging in false speech; and not taking drink or drugs that change consciousness. These are the guidelines for sīla.

Now, sīla in Buddhism isn't a rigid, inflexible kind of standard in which you're condemned to hell if you in any way modify anything whatsoever—as you have in that rigid, hard morality we all associate with Victorian times. We all fear the prudish, puritanical morality that used to exist, so that sometimes when you say the word 'morality' now everybody shudders and thinks, 'Ugh, Victorian prude! He's probably some terrible moralistic person who's afraid of life. We have to go out and experience life. We don't want morality—we want experience!'

So you see people going out and doing all kinds of things, thinking that experience in itself is all that's necessary. But there are some experiences which it's

actually better not to have—especially if they're against the ordinary interpretation of the Five Precepts.

For example, you might say, 'I really want to experience murdering someone because my education in life won't be complete until I have. My freedom to act spontaneously will be inhibited until I actually experience murder.'

Some people might believe that … well perhaps not so much for murder, because that's a really heavy one—but they do for other things. They do everything they desire to do and have no standard for saying 'No'.

'Don't ever say "no" to anything,' they say. 'Just say "yes"—go out and do it and be mindful of it, learn from it…. Experience everything!'

If you do that, you'll find yourself rather jaded, worn out, confused, miserable, and wretched, even at a very young age. When you see some of the pathetic cases I've seen—young people who went out and 'experienced everything'—and you say, 'How old are you? Forty?' And they say, 'No, actually, I'm twenty-one.'

It sounds good, doesn't it? 'Do everything you desire'—that's what we'd like to hear. I would. It would be nice to do everything I desire, never have to

say 'No'. But then in a few years you also begin to reflect that desires have no end. What you desire now, you want something more than that next time, and there's no end to it. You might be temporarily gratified, like when you eat too much food and can't stand to eat another bite; then you look at the most delicious gourmet preparations and you say, 'Oh, disgusting!' But it's only momentary revulsion and it doesn't take long before they start looking all right again.

In Thailand, Buddhism is an extremely tolerant kind of religion; moralistic attitudes have never really developed there. This is why people are sometimes upset when they go to Bangkok and hear horrendous stories of child prostitution and corruption and so on. Bangkok is the Sin City of the world these days. You say 'Bangkok', and everybody's eyes either light up or else they look terribly upset and say: 'How can a Buddhist country allow such terrible things to go on?'

But then, knowing Thailand, one recognises that, although they may be a bit lax and loose on some levels, at least there isn't the kind of militant cruelty there that you find in some other countries where they line all the prostitutes up and shoot them, and kill all the criminals in the name of their religion. In Thailand one begins to appreciate that morality really has to come from wisdom, not from fear.

So some Thai monks will teach morality on a less strict basis than others. In the matter of the first precept, non-killing, I know a monk who lives on the coast of the gulf of Thailand in an area where there are a lot of pirates and fishermen, who are a very rough, crude kind of people. Murder is quite common among them. So this monk just tries to encourage them not to kill each other. When these people come to the monastery, he doesn't go round raising non-killing to the level of 'You shouldn't kill anything—not even a mosquito larva' because they couldn't accept that. Their livelihood depends very much on fishing and the killing of animals.

What I'm presenting isn't morality on a rigid standard or that's too difficult to keep, but rather for you to reflect upon and use so that you begin to understand it, and understand how to live in a better way. If you start out taking too strict a position, you either become very moralistic, puritanical, and attached, or else you think you can't do it, so you don't bother—you have no standard at all.

Now the second precept is refraining from stealing. On the coarsest level, say, you just refrain from robbing banks, shop-lifting, and things like that. But then if you refine your sila more, you refrain from taking things which have not been given to you. As monks, we refrain even from touching things that are

not given to us. If we go into your home, we're not supposed to go around picking up and looking at things, even though we have no intention of taking them away with us. Even food has to be offered directly to us: if you set it down and say, 'This is for you,' if we stick to our rules, we're not supposed to eat it until you offer it directly to us. That's a refinement of the precept to not take anything that's not been given.

So there's the coarse aspect of just refraining from the grosser things, like theft or burglary; and a more refined training—a way of training yourself.

I find this a very helpful monastic rule, because I was quite heedless as a layman. Somebody would invite me to their home, and I'd be looking at this, looking at that, touching this; going into shops, I'd pick up this and that—I didn't even know that it was wrong or might annoy anybody. It was a habit. And then when I was ordained as a monk, I couldn't do that any more, and I'd sit there and feel this impulse to look at this and pick that up—but I'd have these precepts saying I couldn't do that…. And with food: somebody would put food down and I'd just grab it and start eating.

But through the monastic training you develop a much more graceful way of behaving. Then you sit

down, and after a while you don't feel the urge to pick up things or grab hold of them. You can wait. And then people can offer, which is much more beautiful way of relating to things around you and to other people than habitually grabbing, touching, eating and so on.

Then there's the third precept, about sexuality. The idea at the present time is that any old kind of sexuality is experience, so it's all right to do—just so long as you're mindful! And somehow, not having sexual relations is seen as some kind of terrible perversity.

On the coarsest level, this precept means refraining from adultery: from being unfaithful to your spouse. But then you can refine that within marriage to where you are becoming more considerate, less exploitive, less obsessed with sexuality, so you're no longer using it merely for bodily pleasure.

You can in fact, refine it right down to celibacy, to where you are living like a Buddhist monk and no kind of sexual activity is allowed. This is the range, you see, within the precepts.

A lot of people think that the celibate monastic life must be a terrible repression. But it's not, because sexual urges are fully accepted and understood as being natural urges, only they're not acted upon. You

can't help having sexual desires. You can't say, 'I wont have any more of that kind of desire. . . .' Well you can say it, but you still do! If you're a monk and you think you shouldn't have anything like that then you become a very frightened and repressed kind of monk.

I've heard some monks say: 'I'm just not worthy of the robe. People shouldn't give me alms food. I'll have to disrobe because I've got so many bad thoughts going through my mind.' The robe doesn't care about your thoughts! Don't make a problem out of it. We all have nasty thoughts going through our minds when we're in these robes just like everybody else. But we train ourselves not to speak or act upon them. When we've taken the Pātimokkha discipline, we accept those things, recognise them, are fully conscious of them, and let them go—and they cease. Then, after a while, one finds a great peacefulness in one's mind as a result of the celibate life.

Sexual life, on the other hand, is very exciting. If you're really upset, frightened, bored or restless, then your mind very easily goes into sexual fantasies. Violence is very exciting, too, so often sex and violence are put together, as in rape and things of that nature. People like to look at those things at the cinema. If they made a film about a celibate monk keeping the discipline, very few people would appreciate that! It would be a very boring film. But if they made a film

about a monk who breaks all the precepts, they'd make a fortune!

The fourth precept is on speech. On the coarsest level, if you're a big liar, say, just keep this precept by refraining from telling big lies. If you take that precept, then at least every time you tell a big lie you'd know it, wouldn't you? But if you don't take any precept, sometimes you can tell big lies and not even know you're doing it. It becomes a habit.

If you refine this from the coarse position, you learn to speak and use communication in a very careful and responsible way. You're not just chattering, babbling, gossiping, exaggerating; you're not being terribly clever or using speech to hurt or insult or disparage other people in any intentional way. You begin to recognise how very deeply we do affect one another with the things we say. We can ruin whole days for each other by saying unkind things.

The fifth precept is refraining from alcoholic drinks and drugs which change consciousness. Now that can be on the level of just refraining from drunkenness—that's what everybody likes to think it means! But then the sober side of you says maybe you shouldn't have a drink of any kind; not even a glass of wine with your dinner. It's a standard to reflect upon and use.

If you've committed yourself to these precepts, then

you know when you've broken them. So they're guidelines to being a little more alert, a little more awake and also more responsible about how you live. If we don't have standards, then we just tend to do what we feel like doing, or what someone else feels like doing.

I have a very natural kind of moral nature. I've never really liked being immoral. But when I lived in Berkeley, California, because the more clever, intelligent and experienced beings around me that I greatly admired seemed to fully commend immoralities, I thought: 'Well, maybe I should do that too!' Certainly, when you're looking up to somebody, you want to be like them. I got myself into a terrible mess, because people can be very convincing. They can make murder sound like a sacred act!

So *sila*is a guide, a way of anchoring yourself in refraining from unskillful actions with your body and speech, both in regard to yourself and to the other beings around you. It's not a kind of absolute standard. I'm not telling you that if you kill a worm in your garden you'll be reborn in the next 10,000 lifetimes as a worm in order to frighten you into not killing. There's no wisdom in that. If you're just conditioned, then you're just doing it because you're afraid you'll go to hell. You wouldn't really understand; you've not reflected and watched and

really used your wisdom to observe how things are.

If you're frightened of action and speech then you'll just become neurotic; but, on the other hand, if you're not frightened enough and think you can do anything, then you'll also become confused and neurotic!

Sigmund Freud had all kinds of people coming to him with terrible hang-ups and, as sexual repression was the ordinary thing in Europe and America at the time, he thought: 'Well, if we just stop repressing, then we won't have these problems any more. We'll become free, happy, well-integrated personalities.' But nowadays there's no restriction—and you still get hysterical, miserable, neurotic people! So it's obvious that these are two extremes springing from a lack of mindfulness in regard to the natural condition of sexuality.

We have to recognise both what's exciting and what's calming. Buddhist meditation—why is this so boring? Repetitions and chanting … why don't we sing arias? I could do it! I've always wanted to be an opera singer. But on the conventional level of propriety, or when I'm sitting on the teacher's high seat doing my duty, then I chant in monotone as best I can. If you really concentrate on monotone chanting, it's tranquillising.

One night, we were sitting in our forest monastery

in Thailand meditating, when I heard an American pop song that I really hated when I was a layman. It was being blasted out by one of those medicine sellers who go to all the villages in big vans with loudspeakers that play this kind of music in order to attract the villagers to come and buy their quacky medicines. The wind was blowing in the right direction and the sound of 'Tell Laura I Love Her' seemed right here in the meditation hall itself. I hadn't heard American pop music for so many years, so while this smarmy sentimental song was playing I was actually beginning to cry! And I began to recognise the tremendous emotional pull of that kind of music. If you don't really understand it, it grabs your heart and you get caught up in the excitement and emotion of it. This is the effect of music when you're not mindful.

So our chanting is in monotone, because if you concentrate on it it's not going to carry you away into sentimental feelings, into tears or ecstasy. Instead, you feel tranquil, peaceful, serene. *Ānāpānasati* [3] *also tranquillises, because it has a gentle rhythm— subtle, not exciting. And though the monastic life itself is boring in the sense of lacking romance, adventure and excitement, it is tranquillising, peaceful, calming….*

*Therefore, reflect in your life upon what excites and what calms, so that you begin to understand how to use Paññ*a: your wisdom faculty. As Buddhists, we do this so that

we know what's affecting us. We understand the forces of nature with which we have to co-exist. We can't control everything so that nothing violent or exciting ever happens around us—but we can understand it. We can put forward some effort towards understanding and learning from our lives as we live them.

Notes

1. That is to say, although the statement is quite correct, taken out of context it could be used—as this talk points out—to justify any action. Similarly, the meticulous 'mindfulness practice' described later can also be used unskilfully. Ajahn Sumedho is not criticising these views, but pointing to the danger of attaching to any view. [Back]
2. *Kamma*: action which comes from habitual impulse, volitions, or natural energies, leading to an inevitable reaction. [Back]
3. *'Ānāpānasati':* a widely used meditation technique. One composes the mind by focussing attention on the inhalation and exhalation of breath. [Back]

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