

Shoyo Sensei's Dharma Message:

Examination of Misunderstandings of Buddhism – 15 What is *Sila*? What is *Sikkhapada*? – (1)

QUESTION: “Many think that *Sila* is a ‘Precept.’ “*Panca Sila*,” therefore, means “The Five Precepts.” Is this correct?

ANSWER: “No, *Sila* does not mean ‘precept’ or ‘rule.’ *Sila* means a refined and cultivated action, behavior and attitude. *Sila* cannot be counted as one, ten or hundred. The term ‘*Panca Sila*’ is, indeed, a wrong usage of word. It should correctly be called ‘*Panca Sikkhapada*.’”

Question (1):

In the earlier sessions, you said that what is essential in enlightenment is *Sila*, not the ethical guidelines or precepts. Can you explain it more?

Answer (1):

There is not a clear and standard definition of the term *Sila* among many Buddhologists. One of the most common interpretations of *Sila* is “precept.” Richard F. Gombrich, for example, straightforwardly states that “*Sila* means the Five Precepts.” In a prologue to *Buddhist Ethics and Modern Society* (1991), Kosho Mizutani displays another common interpretation of the term. He says: (1) the original meaning of *sila* is a habitual action, but in Buddhism, it means virtue or an ethical norm; (2) *sila* also means the ethical rules; (3) among many ethical rules (*Sila*), rules for the monastic order are specifically called the vinaya; (4) “*Sila-Vinaya*” constitutes “Buddhist discipline.” Charles Wei-hsun Fu also uses the term “*sila-vinaya*,” meaning “disciplinary restraints” and “disciplinary rules.” Venerable Sheng-Yen also uses the term “*sila*” as meaning the same thing as Vinaya, “precepts.” He also defines the “precepts (Vinaya)” as the “basis of Buddhist ethics.” Sheng-Yen further says that it is the kind, the number and the severity of “precepts (Vinaya)” that distinguish Buddhists’ levels. But none of these notions are unsupportable in the Buddhist texts.

Question (2):

In our Dharma School service book, isn't *Sila* translated as “Precepts”?

Answer (2):

Yes. In the book, it is translated as “the Five Precepts.” But the term “*Sila*” does not have the meaning of “precepts” or “ethical rules.”

Question (3):

What is the difference between *Sila* and *Sikkhapada*, then?

Question (3):

Sila is the area that directly represents the whole field of morality and ethics in Buddhism, while *Sikkhapada* means the ethical guidelines, such as the five ethical guidelines or the eight ethical guidelines. The current expression “*Pañca-Sila*” signifying “the five ethical guidelines” is apparently a misusage.

Question (4):

How did such misusage of the two terms occur?

Answer (4):

Madawala Seelawimala conjectures that the misuse of *Sila* for *Sikkhapada* must have occurred among the Sinhalese after the writing of the Buddhist Nikaya texts, with the common and casual Sinhalese usage of *Sila* for *Sikkhapada*.

Indeed, in one of the Theravada non-canonical texts, the *Milindapañha* (*Milinda's Questions*), the term "*Sila*" is adopted in classifying *Sikkhapadas*. Since it was probably composed around the first century A.D., one may safely assume that by that time, the term "*Sila*" had lost its original meaning and was being used in the sense of *Sikkhapada*.

Namu Amida Butsu
Shaku Shoyo