

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*.

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