

Shoyo Sensei's Dharma Message:

Examination of Misunderstandings of Buddhism – 16 What is Buddhist ethics? – (2)

QUESTION:

Is Buddhist ethics similar to Western ethics, which deals with the issue of good and bad, and right and wrong?

ANSWER:

Buddhist ethics and traditional Western ethics are categorically different from each other. Buddhist ethics is not focused on defining good and bad or right and wrong actions as in western ethics. The central focus of Buddhist ethics is about the health and well being of the mind.

Question (1):

What we learned in an earlier session was the concept of *sila*, which means to refine action, behavior, and attitude. In the earlier session, it was said that what is essential in enlightenment is *sila*, not the ethical guidelines or precepts. Can you explain it more?

Answer (1):

There is no clear or 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 presents 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 *sikkhapadam*, then?

Question (3):

Sila is the area that directly represents the whole field of morality and ethics in Buddhism, while *sikkhapadam* 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 misuse.

Question (4):

How did such misuse of the two terms occur?

Answer (4):

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

Indeed, in one of the Theravada non-canonical texts, the *Milindapañha* (*Milinda's Questions*), the term *sila* is adopted in classifying *sikkhapadam*. 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 *sikkhapadam*.

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