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## **The Noble Eightfold Path: The Way to the End of Suffering**

By Bhikkhu Bodhi

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## Chapter IV - Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood (Samma Vaca, Samma Kammanta, Samma Ajiva)

The next three path factors — right speech, right action, and right livelihood — may be treated together, as collectively they make up the first of the three divisions of the path, the division of moral discipline (*silakkhandha*). Though the principles laid down in this section restrain immoral actions and promote good conduct, their ultimate purpose is not so much ethical as spiritual. They are not prescribed merely as guides to action, but primarily as aids to mental purification. As a necessary measure for human well-being, ethics has its own justification in the Buddha's teaching and its importance cannot be underrated. But in the special context of the Noble Eightfold Path ethical principles are subordinate to the path's governing goal, final deliverance from suffering. Thus for the moral training to become a proper part of the path, it has to be taken up under the tutelage of the first two factors, right view and right intention, and to lead beyond to the trainings in concentration and wisdom.

Though the training in moral discipline is listed first among the three groups of practices, it should not be regarded lightly. It is the foundation for the entire path, essential for the success of the other trainings. The Buddha himself frequently urged his disciples to adhere to the rules of discipline, "seeing danger in the slightest fault." One time, when a monk approached the Buddha and asked for the training in brief, the Buddha told him: "First establish yourself in the starting point of wholesome states, that is, in purified moral discipline and in right view. Then, when your moral discipline is purified and your view straight, you should practice the four foundations of mindfulness" (SN 47:3).

The Pali word we have been translating as "moral discipline," *sila*, appears in the texts with several overlapping meanings all connected with right conduct. In some contexts it means action conforming to moral principles, in others the principles themselves, in still others the virtuous qualities of character that result from the observance of moral principles. *Sila* in the sense of precepts or principles represents the formalistic side of the ethical training, *sila* as virtue the animating spirit, and *sila* as right conduct the expression of virtue in real-life situations. Often *sila* is formally defined as abstinence from unwholesome bodily and verbal action. This definition, with its stress on outer action, appears superficial. Other explanations, however, make up for the deficiency and reveal that there is more to *sila* than is evident at first glance. The Abhidhamma, for example, equates *sila* with the mental factors of abstinence (*viratiyo*) — right speech, right action, and right livelihood — an equation which makes it clear that what is really being cultivated through the observance of moral precepts is the mind. Thus while the training in *sila* brings the "public" benefit of inhibiting socially detrimental actions, it entails the personal benefit of mental purification, preventing the defilements from dictating to us what lines of conduct we should follow.

The English word "morality" and its derivatives suggest a sense of obligation and constraint quite foreign to the Buddhist conception of *sila*; this connotation probably enters from the theistic background to Western ethics. Buddhism, with its non-theistic framework, grounds its ethics, not on the notion of obedience, but on that of harmony. In fact, the commentaries explain the word *sila* by another word, *samadhana*, meaning "harmony" or "coordination."

When briefly defined, the factors of moral training are usually worded negatively, in terms of abstinence. But there is more to *sila* than refraining from what is wrong. Each principle embedded in the precepts, as we will see, actually has two aspects, both essential to the training as a whole. One is abstinence from the unwholesome, the other commitment to the wholesome; the former is called "avoidance" (*varitta*) and the latter "performance" (*caritta*). At the outset of training the Buddha stresses the aspect of avoidance. He does so, not because abstinence from the unwholesome is sufficient in itself, but to establish the steps of practice in proper sequence. The steps are set out in their natural order (more logical than temporal) in the famous dictum of the Dhammapada: "To abstain from all evil, to cultivate the good, and to purify one's mind — this is the teaching of the Buddhas" (v. 183). The other two steps — cultivating the good and purifying the mind — also receive their due, but to ensure their success, a resolve to avoid the unwholesome is a necessity. Without such a resolve the attempt to develop wholesome qualities is bound to issue in a warped and stunted pattern of growth.

The training in moral discipline governs the two principal channels of outer action, speech and body, as well as another area of vital concern — one's way of earning a living. Thus the training contains three factors: right speech, right action, and right livelihood. These we will now examine individually, following the order in which they are set forth in the usual exposition of the path.

### Right Speech (*samma vaca*)

The Buddha divides right speech into four components: abstaining from false speech, abstaining from slanderous speech, abstaining from harsh speech, and abstaining from idle chatter. Because the effects of speech are not as immediately evident as those of bodily action, its importance and potential is easily overlooked.

- (1) Abstaining from false speech (*musavada veramani*)
- (2) Abstaining from slanderous speech (*pisunaya vacaya veramani*)
- (3) Abstaining from harsh speech (*pharusaya vacaya veramani*).
- (4) Abstaining from idle chatter (*samphappalapa veramani*).

### Right Action (*samma kammanta*)

Right action means refraining from unwholesome deeds that occur with the body as their natural means of expression. The pivotal element in this path factor is the mental factor of abstinence, but because this abstinence applies to actions performed through the body, it is called "right action." The Buddha mentions three components of right action: abstaining from taking life, abstaining from taking what is not given, and abstaining from sexual misconduct. These we will briefly discuss in order.

- (1) Abstaining from the taking of life (*panatipata veramani*)

(2) Abstaining from taking what is not given (*adinnadana veramani*)

(1) *stealing*: taking the belongings of others secretly, as in housebreaking, pickpocketing, etc.;

(2) *robbery*: taking what belongs to others openly by force or threats;

(3) *snatching*: suddenly pulling away another's possession before he has time to resist;

(4) *fraudulence*: gaining possession of another's belongings by falsely claiming them as one's own;

(5) *deceitfulness*: using false weights and measures to cheat customers.

(3) Abstaining from sexual misconduct (*kamesu miccha-cara veramani*)

### **Right Livelihood (*samma ajiva*)**

Right livelihood is concerned with ensuring that one earns one's living in a righteous way. For a lay disciple the Buddha teaches that wealth should be gained in accordance with certain standards. One should acquire it only by legal means, not illegally; one should acquire it peacefully, without coercion or violence; one should acquire it honestly, not by trickery or deceit; and one should acquire it in ways which do not entail harm and suffering for others.