

Sīla Pt 2, and Gods

Uncontrived, Dedicated Practitioners' Group

Graduated Discourse 3

August 30, 2022

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So we are in this series called the graduated discourse.

It's kind of a series of indeterminate length.

This graduated discourse or step-by-step teaching was this thing that the Buddha gives when a person is kind of poised for awakening.

And so he offers this particular stylized teaching of certain topics.

So the first one was generosity, which we already did.

And then the second one is virtue or ethics.

It's actually Sela, but I talked to more broadly about ethics as sort of kusala, skillful or wholesome.

And we didn't quite finish.

So we'll say a little bit more about that today, about this topic of virtue.

And then we'll move on to the third topic of the graduated discourse.

So last time I talked about how in Buddhism, there's this whole ecosystem, if you will, that's being cultivated over time that includes the whole Eightfold Path, which is our views, our behavior, our meditative development.

And ethics is kind of an integrated component to this whole process.

The five precepts that we hear about for laypeople don't really carry the weight of something that is fully integrated into the path, because they don't include, for example, meditation.

And they can also be done without particular wisdom.

You could just apply them as abstract principles.

So I don't think the precepts really cover what the Buddha meant by ethics.

So nonetheless, so that means actually that I prefer to relabel this step of the graduated discourse as ethics and use kusala and talk about it more broadly, kusala, skillful or wholesome.

But it's true that when you read the Pali, it says that he talks about Sela in a second.

So this word kusala is intimately tied to practice.

Skillfulness implies that we're developing a skill, we're practicing something, and it has many different levels, of course.

And what we talked about last time was that one is skillful and one interaction might not be skillful in a different interaction, right?

It's very dependent on the particular conditions.

So here in the West, we often get, as a teacher, I often get questions about how to handle other people's ethics, which I find very interesting.

A lot of people have questions about how to deal with other people's poor ethics.

And there are some teachings on that.

There are some recommendations for that.

But I read a verse from the Dhammapada that I'll read again that I think is a very good place for us to start.

Do not consider the faults of others or what they have or have not done.

Consider, rather, what you yourself have or have not done.

It's pretty straightforward.

That's DHP 50.

So that's what we left off last time.

So going forward, when we are certain about what we have and have not done, then we can begin to understand a kind of happiness that's called the bliss of blamelessness, which is a topic that I didn't want to leave off of a discussion of ethics.

So if we haven't looked carefully at our own actions, how are we going to be certain about what it means to be blameless and what it is to be to have this bliss of blamelessness?

So I know that for myself, I originally thought that the bliss of blamelessness meant was going to be something that I would achieve after purifying my actions for a long time.

And then eventually I would come to feel blameless.

But I had an interesting experience recently where I was encouraging someone else to be skillful in a subtle way.

So here's an answer to a question about how do I deal with other people's ethics.

And through it, I had an insight kind of into this quality that's called the bliss of blamelessness.

So I thought I would share a little bit about that because it gave me a different perspective as not as being something that gets achieved after a long period of purification.

Although I don't know, maybe I've had that after 20 years of practice.

But the insight I had was that the bliss of blamelessness is something that occurs in the moment.

So I was talking with someone and there were two topics at hand in our conversation.

So we might call them issue A and issue B.

And issue A was related to another person, a third party relative to the two of us.

And issue B was related to me.

And so I said at the beginning, let's set aside issue A and just talk about issue B.

And so it started that way.

But then at some point in the conversation, the other person drifted into issue B.

And they were using unwise speech about this third party.

I felt that they were saying things that I didn't think they would probably say if that person were there.

So and so I just sat there calmly realizing, oops, I know we've sort of drifted into this other territory.

And I didn't have it really sort of an easy way to point that out in the conversation that we were having or say something explicitly.

So at some point, I just kind of let that go by.

At some point, I redirected the conversation.

And then on reflection afterward, I sort of thought about how did that go?

And what was happening there?

I realized that I was actually totally blameless for their wrong speech.

Now, to be clear, we are always blameless for other people's speech in a sense, because it's their karma.

We're not, we're not responsible for what they say.

But it's true also that our actions or our inactions could create conditions for other people to speak unwise.

So we have to be a little bit careful about saying everything they say is up to them, everything I say is up to me.

No, we're interactive themes, right?

But nonetheless, I really felt as I reflected on this that I was blameless because I had actively tried to create a safety wall.

I had said at the beginning, we have these two issues, let's put this one aside and only talk about this one that's between you and me.

And they went right, they initially did that and then somehow forgot and went over the little safety wall that I created, they barreled right over it into the other territory.

And I realized, nope, I set up the conditions as well as I could.

And that's on them.

So I had an understanding that it's not that the bliss of blamelessness is something that we sort of accumulate over time.

I don't know that I literally believe this, but you know, it's like you have a ledger sheet and after you've got enough of them, then you can say, okay, you know, I've moved into the territory where mostly my behavior is blameless.

It's really in the moment, it's not about that more macroscopic idea.

So then that got me thinking a little bit, sort of got me attuned to this idea that some teachings may sound like they're about something that occurs over time, but they're actually about something in the moment.

And with that lens, I came across another Suta that I think has that quality also.

So I wanted to read that.

This is also from the Dhamm-Pada.

The toxins multiply for the insolent and negligent who reject what they should do and do instead what they should not.

But the toxins come to an end for those who are mindful and alert, who are constantly well engaged with mindfulness of the body, who don't resort to what they should not do, but persist in doing what they should.

So you could read this as, it's fairly moralistic, sorry about that, but you could read this as something to be done over time.

The toxins multiply.

So that's like something that happens over time for those who reject what they should do and do what they should not.

And it says also later, those who are constantly well engaged with mindfulness of the body, but persist in doing what they should do.

It could give a sense of this is a practice that we do over and over and over over time.

And I think that's an adequate reading of that.

But what if we read it as in the moment mindfulness, like at this very moment, there's at every moment a kind of a choice point, right?

You could go wholesome, you could go unwholesome, some things are in your troll, but a lot of times we could go wholesome or unwholesome.

And just being mindful and alert in the moment, we will at that moment make the right choice.

And, you know, if we persist in doing that, there's a little bit of persistence, like we have to pay attention, we have to persist in paying attention in order that we don't drift into this unwholesome side like the person I was with did in that conversation.

So it seems like it's not just sort of larger acts that we can think about ahead of time.

Instead, what happens is we fall into habit when we're not mindful and alert, as the teacher says.

So then karma takes over, habitual actions take over.

We can see this as we commit kind of minor acts of hostility or greed, not major ones that we've plotted out and done for a long time and thought about and planned.

But just like in the moment, we see, oops, my mind flipped over into a little moment of irritation, a little barb in something I said to this person right there in that moment.

So they sort of pile up in our karmic flow.

So I encourage you in the area of ethics to maybe read the sutras, not as a sense of like ethics is something that we work on over weeks and months and years, although we should do that, but also that they're little moment by moment choices.

And the sutra could be speaking directly to that.

Steve, your hand is up.

Yeah, is it okay that we ask questions in this class?

I can't remember.

If I don't want it at that moment, I'll just go on or say, please wait.

Thank you then for taking this.

Are you two things?

Are you defining blamelessness as being something, a situation without karmic obligation?

I'm defining blamelessness as pretty similar to wholesomeness, pretty similar to non something that could not be criticized by the wise, you know, in the column of sutra where it

says things that are praised by the wise or things that are centered by the wise or in the metasuita, it says the same thing.

So I think blamelessness is things that would be not centered by the wise.

So the second thing, your insight feels counterintuitive to me.

Okay.

Because it feels like, yes, you set the bar, somebody jumped over the bar, nobody else said anything.

You could have said something.

So I don't think you're saying it would be wrong to have intervened and said something.

No, there just wasn't an easy moment in the conversation.

Yeah, the way the conditions were unfolding.

So that means we should not prevent someone from breaking a precept unless conditions are right for it, is that what you're saying?

Well, there are sutras that say that we should encourage others to keep the precepts, it says in fact that a person who is more than superior is one who not only keeps the precepts themselves, but also encourages others to.

So in general, yes, we should encourage others.

And in general, if we can say something to help them or support them, that's fine.

But the conditions in this conversation where the other person is also a longtime practitioner.

And I felt that in that case, it was really within their realm, if they could, it wasn't like a child or a non-practitioner or someone or a student, it was actually someone else, it was another longtime practitioner.

And there wasn't an easy way to say all of that.

So I decided it was up to them.

And according to the conditions, the feeling of blamelessness was very pure in myself, based on all of those conditions, maybe it helps that I filled in some more of it for you there.

Did that help?

Yeah, I did.

Okay.

Yeah, these things always depend on the specifics.

Ethics in Buddhism is clear and yet also conditional.

Heidi, you are unmuting.

Yes, thank you.

I'm wondering about actions to basically clean up the mess to restore the bliss of blamelessness.

Because sometimes I think that being a very bumbling human who makes a lot of mistakes, somehow, sometimes I need to re, to make the situation right by apology, and doing whatever I can to make it right.

Because there's definitely not a feeling of bliss of blamelessness.

If there's something that's knowing on my conscience that I shouldn't have done that, I shouldn't have said that.

Right.

Yeah.

Apologies, a big part of it.

Sure.

It's critical for relationship.

And there are teachings about that also.

They say essentially that we should feel the remorse about that temporarily.

Their guilt is not included in Buddhism, but we should feel that remorse and then make an intention to not repeat that particular mistake and do some kind of restorative action of some kind that, of course, again, has to be very specific to the situation.

So the Buddha was clear about providing a pathway.

But what's important, and this is the part that Americans tend to forget, I don't know about, maybe all Westerners, is that we do those things.

And then what you're supposed to do is that's it.

That cleans it up.

And it's not guilt.

It's not ongoing, you know, whacking ourselves with the whip.

And the past is gone.

And if we've done something about it, done our best, then that's it.

You're done.

And you're clean.

You start fresh.

And it's very hard.

It seems for some people to start fresh in that way.

And of course, it depends on what the action was.

It's all very personal.

But the, yeah, I saw, I didn't listen to the talk, but I saw the title of the talk recently given by a friend of mine, and it was "No Fidelity to the Past Moment."

And I thought, that's a good lesson.

You know, can we have no fidelity to our mistakes of the past?

It's a provocative phrase to consider.

Very loyal to our suffering sometimes.

So I think these kinds of reflections are good.

And they encourage us to ask questions like, what is truly non-harming?

What is that?

And that might be, that might have different answers at different times, different answers with different people.

And also what happens for me when I commit to do no harm, you know, is that like, how do I do that?

How do I skillfully make that commitment?

If I make the commitment from now forward, I will never do any harm.

I'm definitely going to fail at that.

But neither should I say, well, I'm going to try my best, but you know, not worry about it too much.

It's like, no, wait a minute, you should pay attention to every moment of harm.

Be careful about that.

But there has to be the right balance in the mind of compassion.

And also ethics, seeing how to do that skillfully.

So when we combine the wish for non-harm with wisdom, then we have what's called, but then we have right view, we have the right view of karma, that actions that are coming from the unwholesome roots will lead to suffering and pain, actions coming from the wholesome roots will lead to some kind of happiness.

So when we have clarity on that, then we are able to act well and do what needs to be done.

And when we combine the wish for non-harm with compassion, then we understand non-harming in terms of suffering in our own experience.

And we understand our own suffering.

And so we would not want to act in ways that we're bringing that about for others.

I put in the part about the wisdom and the compassion because virtue is one of the parames also.

And the parames are said to be the perfections of character.

And those are said to come to fruition when we combine them with wisdom and compassion.

So that's part of the deal also.

So it does seem that if we were committed to not doing any action that leads to harm or suffering, if we could really actually achieve that, I think that would be the same as enlightenment.

Because non-greed, non-hatred, non-delusion, if we couldn't do any kind of unwholesome action, that would be an arahant.

So you look skeptical, Heidi.

Yeah, if we were kamatos, we wouldn't be an arahant.

I think that there's just a negative of not doing any harm.

I think that that's not enough.

Yeah, you're exactly right.

Someone once said that to the Buddha.

They said, is it good enough not to do any, I think they said not to do any actions that have negative karmic consequences or something like that.

And he said no, because then a baby lying there without any sense of, like so young, they don't really have a sense of self.

They don't really have a sense of greed or hatred.

So that person would be enlightened and babies are not enlightened.

So you do have to do some kind of positive development of the mind also.

But I think I was assuming that if we're starting from here where we are already adults and we have some sense of what practice is, if we could relieve at this point, create a condition of complete non-harming in the mind, that would be the equivalent to walking the whole path.

So it's said in the graduated discourse that when a cloth is stained, it doesn't take dye evenly.

And when it's clean and bright, it will take the dye evenly and look pure in color after you've dyed it.

So I think similarly, when our mind is stained quote unquote with various unwholesome qualities, then it doesn't take the Dharma very well.

We have distorted views of the Dharma or we don't absorb the teachings as well.

And so it's helpful to purify the mind through ethics simply so we can learn the Dharma better.

Okay, so we've talked about generosity and now we've talked about virtue also.

So this mysterious next quality in the graduated discourse is the devas, that is gods.

Sometimes it's translated as heaven.

What is that?

So it says that when the Buddha's giving this graduated discourse, he first enlivens their mind with talk on generosity and virtue, and then further enlivens them and elevates them by talking about the gods.

So we might wonder, what does that mean?

So I think it's meant to show that the benefits of wholesomeness extend far beyond what we can cognitively understand.

So, you know, generosity and virtue clearly have rewards in this life.

And we can, you know, we can see those in our own life when we behave those ways.

But the Buddha emphasizes in this discourse that we are also assured of a better rebirth if we undertake these actions.

And then he proceeds to explain how the pleasures of heaven are far more refined and amazing than we could understand.

So it's sort of beyond what we could even imagine.

So for example, devas or gods, they live for eons in comparative bliss, like way better than the sensual bliss that we have.

And you can imagine that for somebody living in a feudal society in the Iron Age, this was very appealing.

I mean, it would be like, it's the equivalent of millions of years of living in a realm where you don't have bodily pain and where everything is beautiful and always desirable and, you know, all the very refined kinds of pleasures like we would have even better than we could have here.

So before we feel too amused, though, actually, we don't even to this day, there are practitioners for whom the idea of a better rebirth is a serious motivation for practice.

And sometimes even there are unfortunately sometimes the belief that awakening is no longer possible and better rebirth is the best that we can have.

That is sometimes believed in some Asian societies today.

But, you know, there is also a sense of aiming for a higher rebirth next time through making merit, or doing good actions of generosity and virtue.

And there is, I think, actually some skillfulness there.

I really reflected on this today about, you know, why would the Buddha offer this?

Is it just as he's sort of talking down to the people?

Is he like why and why would he tempt people with like better pleasures they can get here when he doesn't like the pursuit of pleasure anyway?

So I decided, well, maybe there's a couple things going on.

So the Buddha, he does want people to be happy.

The Buddha really wants people to be happy and have good lives.

And he also wants them to see that their good actions have beneficial results, because that's part of wisdom.

So there is some wisdom in aiming for a heavenly rebirth.

It indicates that we have bought into the idea that beneficial actions, good karma, do indeed lead to better results than we have now.

So that's mundane right view of karma.

So if people were to aim for a better rebirth by being virtuous, the Buddha would be happy about that.

It's like, great, you have a good belief system there that will serve you well in life and beyond.

And then also, I think it is meant to expand our mind beyond just our little life, to take our awareness to a bigger scale.

It's so easy in human life to just get caught up in our little day to day.

Especially if you live in a feudal society, how am I going to get enough food this month?

Do I have enough to store over the winter when the crops aren't growing?

What about marrying my daughter off?

And am I going to... all kinds of things that just can consume one's day.

It's no different now, right?

We could easily consume our entire day with just getting enough food and work and exercise and whatever.

And that's it, tunnel vision on that family, etc.

So it's important though for spiritual growth to see beyond our day to day life, not just thinking about me and my life or me and even me and my relatives.

So it provides meaning to think about, oh, what I'm doing may serve in the future to really create a better situation for me next time around.

It's a little bit reduces the focus on little me.

So, you know, different religions do this in different ways.

And we don't have in Buddhism a permanent heaven that you go to and it's eternal.

That's not how it is.

The heaven realms are one more cycle of rebirth.

You can go there for a while, but then they end.

But nonetheless, going there is better than being here.

And if getting there is about being generous and virtuous, then great.

So I don't know.

I thought I'd pause.

Oh, Molly, you have a question first.

Yeah, go ahead.

Can you practice Dhamma when you are in heaven or in the Davis world or whatever?

Because if you go there and you can't practice, then it's kind of a shame.

You don't make any progress.

Well, it's a good point.

In the teachings of the human realm is considered the best for practice because we have the right combination of happiness and suffering here.

And there isn't quite as much suffering there.

But it isn't quite true that you can't practice at all because the Buddha did teach the Davis.

There are many suttas where Davis come down and visit him and he gives them teachings.

Usually they come in the middle of the night because they don't like humans.

So they wait till we're all asleep and then they show up.

And also there are cases where the Buddha went up to the heaven realms and taught.

In fact, the whole Abhidhamma is said to have been taught in the in the Davis realms because humans are for the most part not smart enough to understand all of that complexity except for a very advanced one.

So he taught that one to the Davis.

But you're right in general that the practice conditions are not as good there.

And deep repulsion of practitioners would not be aiming for heaven realms.

But many ordinary people would love to be reborn in heaven realms.

So you've partly answered the question I was going to ask next.

You've answered the question for you, which is, is this motivating for you?

Do you think if the Buddha were to tell you about a way better realm where through virtue you would gain exquisite pleasures that would last for a very long time?

Is that interesting to you?

Michael, your hand is up.

Heidi is shaking your head.

Well, you can take Heidi because I have a question pertaining to what Molly asked.

So I can go.

Okay.

Do you want to comment Heidi on why you're shaking your head?

No, no, okay.

You're just clear on that because you're a vipassana practitioner.

Okay, go ahead, Michael.

Yeah.

Which realm can the bonabit attain?

In you, Dave?

Let me let me think about that.

Definitely the human realm and the almost all of the Deva realms, but not quite all of them.

I'm trying to remember if it can be achieved.

I don't think it can be achieved from the lower realms.

So the human realm and some of the Deva realms.

Okay.

Thank you.

Yeah.

And in fact, you know, a little bit countering Molly also, if one is, for example, a non-returner, but not an arhant, the next birth will be a heavenly rebirth from which one attains our arhant ship.

So it's, it's a matter of course that if one develops the mind, as far as non-returning, I don't know, I'm not there, but I would not come back to the earthly realm, the sense realm, but would be reborn in a heavenly realm with enough momentum to get to Nipana from there.

Steve, your hand is up.

I can't remember the name of the monk, but the one who was promised 500 virgins.

Oh yeah, the pink nymphs.

That was Nanda.

Yeah, the red-footed nymphs.

So maybe, maybe the same kind of thing, something like that.

Yeah.

I mean, this is motivating for some and maybe, yeah, I don't know.

So I think it's, you know, just meant to put the human world situated within the bigger cosmos and, you know, the heaven realms, I don't know, there's a little snarkiness, I feel sometimes about the heaven realms among practitioners, and we should be careful that Davis got there by being more virtuous than us.

And you also get there through jhana practice.

Those are the rebirth realms for those who have mastered the jhanas.

There's a relationship between one state of consciousness and the heaven realms and the higher states of consciousness, the states of absorption correspond to the kind of pure mind that one has in the Deva realms.

Those are very, they're very meritorious.

Mikaela, your hand is up.

You're muted still.

I guess we're having questions now, right?

Yeah, we can transition into that.

This was the last topic I wanted to cover this evening.

I wanted to go back to the ethics discussion because I had an experience last week that was very satisfying for me.

I have a very bad habit of sharing confidential information without realizing that I may be stepping on toes or, you know, harming some people.

And my children and my family just always are reeling against me about it, you know, like I told somebody something that somebody told me.

And I just want to share, you know, I'm a sharer and I like to share.

So it's very innocent, but it's not good.

And I'm trying to work on it.

So I had this experience where I have one good Dharma friend who is revealing to me things that are happening in a book group that she's in with some other Dharma friends that I'm not in.

And she's telling me, you know, a lot about it, which is probably she shouldn't have been, but she did.

And then I had a communication with one of those people that she had been telling me about and got a lot of very interesting information about what was going on for her.

So I was carrying, you know, two things.

And I immediately wanted to share this email that the second person sent me with my first friend, who I thought would clarify some things for her and be helpful, you know, helpful.

And something touched me and said, wait a minute, you better check with this person before you share this email.

And I did, it was fantastic.

She said, I would prefer if you did it.

She said, I don't mind this or that, but I don't want, you know, this kind of thing.

She was very clear.

And I just felt exuberant.

I felt exalt.

It was a triumph.

And I realized now that's going to be the model in my mind to remember, this is confidential.

These people are telling you things from their heart.

They don't want everybody else to know that.

And they're not like you.

They don't want everybody to know all about them.

So I think that was a good question for a good experience for us.

I talked about ethics.

That's great.

Yeah.

Beautiful.

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