Beauty of Sila

Dhamma talk to the monastic community of Wat Pah Nanachat by Ajahn Jayasaro

Ajahn Chah taught us to constantly bear in mind that we are "samanas"(1); we have left behind the household life for an existence single-minded devoted to peace and awakening. He would say that now we must die to our old worldly habits, behaviour and values, and surrender to a new higher standard. But how exactly do we follow the way of the samana? In the "Ovada Patimokkha" (2) the Buddha laid down the most basic and important guidelines for the samana's path, and there we find that harmlessness is the principle he most emphasized. Through our way of life as samanas we offer the gift of harmlessness to the world. People may be inspired by how we live our lives, they may be indifferent, or they may even be contemptuous of us, but whatever the various reactions to a Buddhist monk people might have, fear is highly unlikely to count amongst them. People see a Buddhist monk and they know that he is not dangerous to them. Animals see a Buddhist monk and they sense that he is no threat to them. This is a singular thing.

It's very unusual, isn't it, to be so scrupulous and so caring for even the smallest kind of creature — not just human beings, not just the cuddly lovable kinds of creatures like Shetland ponies and fluffy cats, but even poisonous centipedes, geckos and biting ants. You find that after you've been keeping the Vinaya precepts sincerely for a while the idea of

depriving even a venomous snake or a small poisonous insect of its life becomes almost inconceivable. With the cultivation of sila (virtuous, ethical conduct) and metta-bhavana (the development of loving kindness) it's just no longer an option. Through our practice as samanas we are able to observe how closely the devotion to moral precepts is connected to being truly benevolent and altruistic. If we continue to harm other beings by body and speech, our expressions of metta remain hollow and cannot lead us to peace. At the same time, if we attempt to uphold a strict level of sila without a spirit of goodwill and compassion, without a kind and forgiving heart, then we can easily fall into the traps of self righteousness, a false sense of superiority, and contempt for the unvirtuous. This is what is called losing the plot.

Our practice of sila and metta starts to mature when we don't consider that our life and our comfort have any more ultimate significance than that of even a housefly or a mosquito. Why should our life be any more valuable than that of a malarial mosquito? I can't think of any logical reason myself. The Buddha said that as all living beings desire to be happy and fear pain just as we do, then we should abstain from all actions that deprive beings of happiness or increase their pain. Sila is an offering of dana (generosity), a gift of fearlessness and protection to all sentient beings. To live our lives within the boundaries defined by the precepts, mindfulness of our commitment has to be constantly maintained; sensitivity and skill are continually called for. With wisdom and understanding of the law of kamma, we abstain from killing, harming, and hurting any sentient being through our actions and speech. Gradually, our good intentions unbetrayed by our actions, we are able to tame our unruly minds.

‘Not-doing’ or refraining, is a kind of creativity. This morning I was speaking to a group of art students. I mentioned to them how much I admire Chinese brush paintings. In these works of art only a very small portion of the canvas is painted on; the effect and the power of the picture is conveyed by the relationship between the painted form or the painted area, and that which is not painted. In fact the large blank area of the white canvas is what gives the black brush strokes their power and beauty. So if you were to say to a Chinese landscape painter, ‘what a waste of good paper, there’s a big white area there that you haven’t painted on at all’, he would probably snort with derision. But in terms of human behaviour, sometimes we don’t see that. I think it’s rarely appreciated that certain things that we do have weight, beauty, integrity, nobility, precisely because of other things that we don’t do. And that skilful abstention from actions, from certain kinds of speech, or from certain kinds of proliferation or imagination — this is the creativity.

Artists and writers mention this often. They tend to agree that the art lies in the editing — in what is left out. Many writers will say that it is much more difficult to write in a simple style, than in an ornate, complicated one. Simplicity is a skill to be learned; it does not come easily. And this is another aspect of our life, isn’t it, making simplicity a standard to return to. We must seek not only to refrain from the immoral but also from the needlessly disturbing. We can measure our practice by how simple our life is. We can ask ourselves: Is my life getting more complicated? If it is then maybe we need to re-establish our attention on the basics. Pictures need frames. We need wise limits for our actions. Otherwise our lives become cluttered and our energies dissipated.

Appreciating the austere beauty of the simple, taking joy in simplicity leads the mind to peace. What could be more simple than the samatha object in meditation? Whether it is the breathing process or the word Buddho, the experience of unifying the mind in meditation goes against the whole tendency for mental and emotional proliferation (papanca). Through meditation we acquire the taste for simplicity in every aspect of our lives. In the external sphere, in our relationships with others and the physical world we rely on certain abiding principles that support the simplicity we seek. The most important of these is non-oppression towards oneself and others.

As samanas we seek to imbue our actions with a reverence for life, a spirit of kindheartedness, benevolence and altruism. And we learn to make that reverence for life unqualified. The sanctity of life, and the potential of all beings for awakening forms the basis for the 227 precepts of the Buddhist monastic code. When Ajahn Chah asked Ajahn Mun about the discipline and voiced his fears that there were just too many rules to make it a practical guide for conduct, Ajahn Mun pointed to hiri (a sense of shame regarding unwholesome actions) and ottappa (an intelligent fear of the consequences of unwholesome actions as the heart of monastic discipline). Develop these two things he said and your practice of the Vinaya (the monks rules and discipline) will be impeccable. The commentaries state that these two dhammas are based respectively on respect for self and respect for others. Respect for life, our own and others, is the foundation of noble conduct. So we train to strengthen our devotion to harmlessness — harmlessness to others, harmlessness of oneself — to bear the welfare of self and others always in mind. The more you open up to the pervasive nature of suffering the more compassion arises, the more care you take about the quality of

your actions. You realize that whenever you are not part of the solution, then you're bound to be part of the problem.

In fact the welfare of self and others is complementary. If we truly understand what our own welfare is, then we don't neglect the welfare of others, because in helping others we grow in virtue. If we really understand what the welfare of others is we don't neglect our own welfare, because the more peaceful and wise we are the more we are able to truly benefit others. When there seems to be a conflict between our welfare and that of others, it is usually a sign of confusion about the nature of welfare.

A second fundamental principle underlying our lives as samanas is that of contentment. We are taught to cultivate gratitude and appreciation for the robes, almsfood, lodgings and medicines that we receive, whatever their quality. We go against the worldly desire for the biggest, the finest and best. We're willing to make do with second best or third best. We find we can be happy with the worst, the things that nobody else wants. That is a wonderful discovery. Whatever we are given, we remind ourselves, is good enough. 'Beggars should not be choosers.' Even the coarsest requisites that we use have been offered freely with faith, and have been purified by the benevolence of the donor. It is our responsibility to make use of the requisites that are given to us with mindfulness and wisdom. The Buddha said that the merit gained by the donor is directly affected by the purity of mind by which we receive and make use of their gift. Our life, even in solitude, is thus always being affected and affecting others.

To be content means that we don't waste our time scheming about

getting things that we don't have or don't have a right to. It frees the body for more wholesome activities and frees the mind for more wholesome thoughts. As samanas we do not covet the requisites of other monks with narrow beady eyes. We don't even touch the possessions of others unless we have been invited to.

The Vinaya lays down many detailed rules concerning our behaviour towards the material world. In the forest tradition we're taught that the second expulsion offence can be incurred by theft of even the smallest object, something the value of one baht (about three US cents). In the formal announcements in the ordination ceremony, the preceptor teaches the new monk to take nothing whatsoever that does not belong to him, even as much as a blade of grass. To take on that standard — a single blade of grass — is the essence of 'leaving home'. It entails a radical shift of perspective from lay attitudes. Such a standard differs not only from that of criminals and thieves but also that of most 'law-abiding' citizens. There are few people who would not take advantage of some kind of little loophole in the law if they were absolutely sure they could get away with it. 'Everyone does it, I'd be a fool not to.' Moral rectitude is not unknown outside the walls of monasteries of course — I'm not by any means suggesting we have the monopoly on honesty — but for a whole community to abide by such principles scrupulously is extremely rare.

The essence of our daily life as samanas consists of putting forth effort to abandon defilements and develop wholesome qualities through meditation practice. We spend hours a day sitting cross-legged and walking on our walking meditation paths. Even if we may not always be so satisfied with the results of our efforts we can at least take heart from

the fact that we've done something practical to purify our minds. By comparison the training in sila seems nondescript and its effects intangible.

To maintain our devotion to precepts and "korwat" (the monastic etiquette) we need to remember that spiritual life is not just about doing, it's also about not doing. Abstaining from things is neither immediately inspiring nor dramatic. We don't see sudden progress in non-harming or in non-acquisitiveness, or in not coveting things which are not ours, in the same way that we might from a good sit or a good retreat. But there is movement, even if it is like that of the hour hand of a clock. And sila is a treasure. It is merit, it is parami (spiritual potential). How wonderful it is that by living this life sincerely sila is steadily accumulating and maturing in our heart. The Buddha said that sila is the most beautiful adornment for a human being, it's the only fragrance that is all-pervasive. But the skill is to remember it, to recollect the beauty of virtue, bringing it up to refresh and give joy to your heart and mind.

The third principle underlying the life of a samana deals with integrity, restraint and chasteness in matters related to the sexual instincts of the body. That a group of young men — most of you young, Ajahn Vipassi and I are getting on a bit — are able to lead a completely celibate life, this is almost unbelievable to many people in the world. They assume that we have some kind of sexual release, that we must have homosexual relationships or else that we masturbate. They don't think it's possible to live this way. People these days can hardly credit the idea that a community of men can live in a completely chaste way, and not be utterly screwed-up, repressed or misogynist. Maybe we are! — if we

were repressed we wouldn't realize it would we? But I don't think so. I think our community is living the 'Holy Life' in a resolute but intelligent way. And though it's not difficult all the time, for almost everyone there are periods when it is definitely challenging. It's a struggle, and it is fitting to feel a sense of wholesome pride in the fact that you can do it.

It's only through taking this impeccable standard that we can begin to understand the whole nature of sexuality. We begin to see its conditioned nature, how it arises and passes away. We begin to see the suffering inherent in any attachment to it, how impersonal it is, what feeds it, what gives power to it, whether it be physical conditions, food, lack of sense restraint or indulgence in imagination. We begin to see it as a conditioned phenomenon. But we can only have a distance from it, be able to reflect on it and see it for what it is by refraining from its physical and verbal expressions.

There is an important point about defilements here: that we have to pin them down on the mental level before we can let go of them. And the way we pin something down on the mental plane is that we refrain consciously, or endure through the intention to express it physically or verbally. This is where the relationship between virtuous conduct, meditation and wisdom becomes very clear. As long as we're still expressing sexual feelings physically, or indulging in lascivious or careless speech about sexual matters, then we can never isolate it. It's moving, it's still receiving energy. We're still keeping it in motion, we're still feeding the flames. So we seek to counter the stream of craving. And to do that successfully we must aspire to transcend sexuality altogether. It is that aspiration, as much as the actual restraint, that distinguishes the samana from the layperson.

So as celibate monks we take a whole new stance toward our sexual feelings, towards women — half of the human race. We practise looking on women who are older than us as mothers, if they're just a few years older than us as older sisters, if a few years younger than us as younger sisters. We substitute wholesome perceptions of women for the sensual. This is a beautiful gift that we can give women. An attractive woman comes into the monastery, and we refrain from indulging in sexual perceptions, sexual thoughts about that woman and substitute it with wholesome reflections, whether it is consciously trying to perceive the woman as a sister, or wishing that person freedom from suffering. Practising metta we reflect, 'may they be well'.

We offer women the gift of a wholesome response to them as human beings rather than following the instinctive attraction or obsession with their body or some aspect of their physical appearance. Through that intention we experience an immediate elevation from the blind instinctual level of our being to the uniquely human. It is a movement from the coarse to the refined. Indeed, the Pali word brahmacariya, which we translate into English as celibacy, literally means 'the way of the gods'. In other words, within the human realm, a chaste life led voluntarily and with contentment is the most refined, sublime and happy form of existence.

As a fourth principle in the Dhamma, we have a love of truth. We endeavour to uphold integrity and honesty in every aspect of our life. Honesty includes here non-deceit, non-trickiness, non-hypocrisy, not trying to appear in a way that is not a true reflection of how we are. This includes not trying to hide our faults, or to exaggerate our good points.

The goal is to develop clarity and straightness. This may also be seen as a two-way process. The more honest we are with ourselves about what we're feeling and thinking, then the easier we find it to be honest with other people. Similarly, the more we train ourselves to be honest in our external dealings, the easier it becomes to be honest about what's going on within us.

An important obstacle to honesty is the sense of self. We often attach to an idea of how we are or how we would like to be. We find it difficult, we feel resistance to owning up to those things that don't fit the picture of ourselves that we identify with. We feel embarrassed, ashamed, we find good reasons to dissemble. Everybody likes to be liked and respected. Nobody likes to lose face. Integrity demands courage. An unflinching gaze and a devotion to truth — these are powers, strengths to be developed.

I read something in a book about the Jatakas the other day that really struck me. In the Jatakas, the bodhisatta, the Buddha-to-be, through his countless number of lives throughout the myriad realms and different kinds of birth, broke every kind of precept except for one. The Buddha-to-be never told a lie or spoke a mistruth. There is no Jataka story, as far as I am aware, where you find the bodhisatta misrepresenting the truth. Sometimes he may kill, on some occasions he steals, commits adultery, and gets drunk, but nowhere throughout the Jatakas does the bodhisatta consciously lie. Truth is power. In many lifetimes the bodhisatta harnesses the power of his speech through an adhitthana, a resolute determination:

'I have never in my life done this or done that. By the power of these

words may such and such happen.' And it happens. In some profound inexplicable way the truth exerts a tangible impact on the physical world. It can affect events in the most marvellous kind of way. When one has built up that power of truth, one can draw on that power of integrity with a sincere, solemn declaration.

So in the path of awakening we take a joy and wholesome pride in caring for the truth. We contemplate a word the Buddha would use, "saccanurak", having fidelity to the truth, loving the truth, being devoted to truth, and being careful to be honest about what we really know; it means having the clarity when you speak, to only utter words that we know to be accurate; being open to receiving others viewpoints and not thinking that what we presently know is timeless absolute truth; learning to distinguish between what we know, what we believe, what we think, and what we perceive — not confusing them. Often when people say they know something they mean they believe it. Religious people may often consider their strong faith to be direct knowledge. The Buddha said that we care for the truth by being very scrupulous in distinguishing what we know as a direct experience from what we believe to be the truth.

Lastly, the fifth principle and the fifth precept is devotion to sobriety. The word 'sobriety' doesn't have such a pleasant ring to it. In my mind it used to bring up an image of thin pinched people in tight clothes sitting on the edge of chairs in rooms with flowered wallpaper, sipping tea and talking about the weather. Carlos Castaneda's use of the word rescued it for me. Now I've come to like its hard edges. Here I am using sobriety to signify that clarity and sharpness of mind that is so infinitely superior to confused, dull or altered states of consciousness.

After my travels and adventures in the East as a layman, on my way back to England, I stopped off to visit a friend in the mountains in Austria. She was away for a while and I was in her house by myself. Flicking through some of her books, I came across a pamphlet Questions and Answers with Lama Govinda, a transcript of a session he'd had with some Westerners in Darjeeling. I was particularly taken by one of his replies. Somebody asked Lama Govinda, "What do you think of mind-expanding drugs?" and he said, "Well, if you've got an ignorant mind all you get is expanded ignorance". That was it for me: game, set and match to sobriety.

Mind-expanding, mind-altering drugs and altered states of consciousness are all still within the sphere of darkness. It's still playing around with different modes of ignorance. Even if someone experiences different dimensions of reality, without the wisdom and discernment of panya you can't benefit from it. You may transcend one particular room of ignorance, but you're still in the same building of unknowing. When you're not out of the building, you're still in the prison.

So this sobriety means turning away from the whole razzmatazz of abnormal experiences, visions and physiological and mental states that are available through liquids, fumes, powders and pills. It means grounding yourself in the simple down to earth clarity of awareness — of the eyes seeing forms, ears hearing sounds, nose contacting odours, the tongue tasting flavours, the body experiencing sensations and the mind cognizing ideas. Seeing the true nature of these things. Being with these things as they are. And taking joy in that. Coming more and more to focus on the one who knows, the knower and the knowing. This is the

great mystery of our life. We don't want to fuzz and confuse that. We want to clarify it. As we start to clear away all the garbage of the mind, the sense of knowing becomes clearer and sharper.

Luang Por Tate, one of Luang Por Mun's senior disciples stresses the sense of knowing. He talks about the jit and the jai. By jai he means the sense of equanimity, the clarity of knowing; jit refers to thinking, feeling, perceiving. This is his way of talking. And he gives a very simple means of understanding what he's talking about. He says to hold your breath for a few moments. Your thinking stops. That's jai.

Start breathing again — and as the thinking reappears, that's jit. And he talks about getting more and more in contact with jai, as the mind becomes calm in meditation. He doesn't talk about a Samadhi nimitta (vision) or a mental counterpart to the breath, he talks about turning towards the one who knows the breath. So as the breath becomes more and more refined, then the sense of knowing the breath becomes more and more prominent. He says then to turn away from the breath and go into the one who knows the breath. That will take you to the highest levels of meditation (appana-samadhi).

So it's sharpening this sense of knowing. Knowing the one who knows. And that's what will take you to peace. But this ability — to go from the obsession with the content of experience back to the state of experiencing and that which is experiencing — is simplifying, bringing the mind more and more together. The mind becomes more and more composed and more and more one-pointed.

So this evening I invite you to contemplate these principles which give

grace, beauty and meaning to life. Recognize the extent to which they are already a part of your life, and continue to consciously cultivate them: principles of harmlessness, honesty, integrity, chastity, love of and devotion to truth, devotion to truth, sobriety, and above all the constant clarification and sharpening of the sense of knowing.