

## **Renunciation, Boundaries, *Sīla***

For some of us, the idea of a boundary seems obvious: don't drink, don't use, don't visit a certain kind of website. But even there, the question turns out to be more complex than it first appears. Where is the actual boundary?

Take alcohol as an example. Is it the act itself, the drink passing the lips? Lingering in the beer aisle, or entering a liquor store? Sitting at a bar? What about the ritual that used to precede the act, the familiar sequence of a Friday evening? The planning, when the mind starts arranging circumstances and finding justifications? The fantasy, the quiet nostalgia for times that memory has made kinder than they were? The deal-making about exceptions to the rule?

There is a spectrum here, running from memory all the way to the act itself. Somewhere along that spectrum our conditioning takes over and the mind doing the reasoning is no longer the mind we want making decisions.

For process addictions this question is even more pressing, because the act itself is harder to locate. We cannot abstain fully from food, the internet, relationships, or spending money. The line has to be drawn somewhere specific, far enough upstream that there is still room to choose when we reach it.

Some questions that can help locate that place:

Where does the behavior shift from neutral or pleasant to producing suffering, in ourselves or in others? Where does it start requiring concealment? Where does it activate the feeling of craving rather than the satisfaction of it? Where does it begin to compromise our commitments to our practice, our relationships, our values?

These questions don't have universal answers. The boundary lives at the edge of where the three poisons take over, and that edge lands in a different place for each of us. What the questions share is that they point upstream, toward the place where the window is still open.

Buddhist teachings place *sīla*, ethical conduct, first among the three trainings. This is practical, not merely moral. A mind actively generating harmful conduct through

speech, action, or livelihood cannot settle. The waters stay too choppy for practice to establish itself. A personal boundary is a form of *sīla* you build for yourself, not restriction imposed from outside, but the container that gives practice somewhere stable to grow from. Boundaries are *cetanā* set in advance, intentional conduct committed to from a clearer mind, before the moment of craving arrives.

The precepts are exactly this kind of pre-committed boundary, Buddhism's collective answer for where the mind reliably goes wrong, established before the moment of temptation arrives. They do the deciding in advance, precisely because we know that *moha*, delusion, will be doing the deciding in the moment if we let it.

Effective boundaries are rules with mindfulness. Without mindfulness a rule is just a wall, something you either stay behind or crash through. With mindfulness we can see that the boundary is wider than a simple yes or no. We can catch the feeling tones that precede the craving, notice the *papañca*, the mind's tendency to spin stories, beginning to build its justifications. We can see ourselves approaching the line with enough lead time to make a real choice.

In the beginning the window is narrow and the boundary does most of the work. Over time, as practice deepens, the window widens. The boundary becomes less like a wall and more like a landmark, something visible from a distance. Both are always needed, but their relationship shifts as practice matures.

Finding the right boundaries takes exploration. For substances, strict abstinence is usually the right starting point. For process addictions, locating the boundary is part of the practice itself. Bringing that work into the open, sharing the quiet parts out loud within sangha, is good insurance against the mind reasoning its way to exceptions.

The boundary is not the practice, and it certainly isn't recovery. But without it, recovery has no stable ground to take root.