



THE FIVE PRECEPTS

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The Purpose Of Buddhist Moral Precepts

There are three fundamental modes of training in Buddhist practice: morality, mental culture, and wisdom. The English word morality is used to translate the Pali term *sīla*, although the Buddhist term contains its own particular connotations. The word *sīla* denotes a state of normalcy, a condition which is basically unqualified and unadulterated. When one practices *sīla*, one returns to one's own basic goodness, the original state of normalcy, unperturbed and unmodified. Killing a human being, for instance, is not basically human nature; if it were, human beings would have ceased to exist a long time ago. A person commits an act of killing because he or she is blinded by greed, rage or hatred. Such negative qualities as anger, hatred, greed, ill will, and jealousy are factors that alter people's nature and make them into something other than their true self. To practice *sīla* is thus to train in preserving one's true nature, not allowing it to be modified or overpowered by negative forces.

This definition points to the objective of Buddhist morality rather than to the practice itself, but it does give us an idea of the underlying philosophy behind the training, as well as how the Buddhist moral precepts should be followed. These precepts are a means to an end, they are observed for a specific objective.

On the personal level, the observance of precepts serves as the preliminary groundwork for the cultivation of higher virtues or mental development. *Sīla* is the most important step on the spiritual path. Without morality, right concentration cannot be attained, and without right concentration, wisdom cannot be fully perfected. Thus, morality not only enhances people's ethical values and fulfills their noble status as human beings, but it is crucial to their efforts toward the highest religious goal of *Nibbána*.

On the social level, *sīla* contributes to harmonious and peaceful coexistence among community members and consequently helps to promote social growth and development. In a society where morality prevails and members are conscious of their roles, there will be general security, mutual trust, and close cooperation, these in turn leading to greater progress and prosperity. Without morality there will be corruption and disturbance, and all members of society are adversely affected. Most of the problems that society experiences today are connected, directly or indirectly, with a lack of good morality.

Questions of morality always concern the issues of right and wrong, good and evil. For a moral life to be meaningful these issues must not remain mere theoretical principles, but translated into practice. Good must be performed evil must be given up. It is not enough to know what is good or evil, we also need to take proper action with respect to them. We need concrete guidelines to follow, and these are provided by the Buddhist moral precepts. Even the oft-quoted Buddhist ideals of abstention from evil, implementation of what is good, and perfect mental purification can be initially actualized through a consistent practice of moral precepts. The precepts help us to live those ideals; they teach us to do the right things and to avoid the wrong.

Buddhist moral precepts provide a wholesome foundation for personal and social growth. They are practical principles for a good life and the cultivation of virtues. If we understand the objectives of sīla and realize its benefits, we will see moral precepts as an integral part of life rather than as a burden that we are compelled to shoulder. Buddhist moral precepts are not commandments imposed by force; they are a course of training willingly undertaken in order to achieve a desired objective. We do not practice to please a supreme being, but for our own good and the good of society. As individuals, we need to train in morality to lead a good and noble life. On the social level, we need to help maintain peace and harmony in society and facilitate the progress of the common good. The practice of moral precepts is essential in this regard.

Distinguishing Good And Evil

The problems of good and evil, right and wrong have been dealt with in the discussion on kamma. Here it may suffice to give a brief summary on the subject.

To determine whether an action is good or evil, right or wrong, Buddhist ethics takes into account three components involved in a kammic action. The first is the intention that motivates the action, the second is the effect the doer experiences consequent to the action, and the third is the effect that others experience as a result of that action. If the intention is good, rooted in positive mental qualities such as love, compassion, and wisdom, if the result to the doer is wholesome (for instance, it helps him or her to become more compassionate and unselfish), and if those to whom the action is directed also experience a positive result thereof, then that action is good, wholesome, or skillful (kusala). If, on the other hand, the action is rooted in negative mental qualities such as hatred and selfishness, if the outcome experienced by the doer is negative and unpleasant, and if the recipients of the action also experience undesirable effects from the action or become more hateful and selfish, then that action is unwholesome or unskillful (akusala).

It is quite probable that on the empirical level an action may appear to be a mixture of good and bad elements, in spite of the intention and the way it is

performed. Thus, an action committed with the best of intentions may not bring the desired result for either the doer or the recipient. Sometimes an action based on negative intentions may produce seemingly positive results (as stealing can produce wealth). Due to lack of knowledge and understanding, people may confuse one set of actions with an unrelated set of results and make wrong conclusions, or simply misjudge them on account of social values and conventions. This can lead to misconceptions about the law of kamma and loss of moral consciousness. This is why precepts are necessary in the practice of moral discipline: they provide definite guidelines and help to avoid some of the confusion that empirical observation and social conventions may entail.

Buddhist moral precepts are based on the Dhamma, and they reflect such eternal values as compassion, respect, self-restraint, honesty, and wisdom. These are values that are cherished by all civilizations, and their significance is universally recognized. Moral precepts that are based on such values or directed toward their realization will always be relevant to human society, no matter to what extent it has developed. Moreover, their validity can be empirically tested on the basis of one's own sensitivity and conscience, which are beyond factors of time and place. Killing, for instance, is objectionable when considered from the perspective of oneself being the victim of the action (although when other lives are subjected to the same act, its undesirability may not be felt as strongly). The same is true with regard to stealing, lying, and sexual misconduct. Because Buddhist moral precepts are grounded on these factors, their practicality remains intact even today, and their usefulness is beyond question.

Precepts For Lay Buddhists

Observance of the five precepts constitutes the minimum moral obligation of a practicing lay Buddhist. These five precepts enjoin against killing living beings, taking what is not given (or stealing), sexual misconduct, false speech, and use of intoxicating drink or drugs.

The practice of Buddhist moral precepts deeply affects one's personal and social life. The fact that they represent a course of training, which one willingly undertakes rather than a set of commandments willfully imposed by a God or supreme being is likely to have a positive bearing upon one's conscience and awareness. On the personal level, the precepts help one to lead a moral life and to advance further on the spiritual path. Moreover, popular Buddhism believes that the practice of morality contributes to the accumulation of merits that both support one in the present life and ensure happiness and prosperity in the next. On the social level, observing the five precepts helps to promote peaceful coexistence, mutual trust, a cooperative spirit, and general peace and harmony in society. It also helps to maintain an atmosphere, which is conducive to social

progress and development, as we can see from the practical implications of each precept.

The first precept admonishes against the destruction of life. This is based on the principle of goodwill and respect for the right to life of all living beings. By observing this precept one learns to cultivate loving kindness and compassion. One sees others' suffering as one's own and endeavors to do what one can to help alleviate their problems. Personally, one cultivates love and compassion; socially, one develops an altruistic spirit for the welfare of others.

The second precept, not to take things, which are not given, signifies respect for others' rights to possess wealth and property. Observing the second precept, one refrains from earning one's livelihood through wrongful means, such as by stealing or cheating. This precept also implies the cultivation of generosity, which on a personal level helps to free one from attachment and selfishness, and on a social level contributes to friendly cooperation in the community.

The third precept, not to indulge in sexual misconduct, includes rape, adultery, sexual promiscuity and all forms of sexual aberration. This precept teaches one to respect one's own spouse as well as those of others, and encourages the practice of self-restraint, which is of utmost importance in spiritual training. It is also interpreted by some scholars to mean the abstention from misuse of senses and includes, by extension, non-transgression on things that are dear to others, or abstention from intentionally hurting other's feelings. For example, a young boy may practice this particular precept by refraining from intentionally damaging his sister's dolls. If he does, he may be said to have committed a breach of morality. This precept is intended to instill in us a degree of self-restraint and a sense of social propriety, with particular emphasis on sexuality and sexual behavior.

The fourth precept, not to tell lies or resort to falsehood, is an important factor in social life and dealings. It concerns respect for truth. A respect for truth is a strong deterrent to inclinations or temptation to commit wrongful actions, while disregard for the same will only serve to encourage evil deeds. The Buddha has said: "There are few evil deeds that a liar is incapable of committing." The practice of the fourth precept, therefore, helps to preserve one's credibility, trustworthiness, and honor.

The last of the five Buddhist moral precepts enjoins against the use of intoxicants. On the personal level, abstention from intoxicants helps to maintain sobriety and a sense of responsibility. Socially, it helps to prevent accidents, such as car accidents, that can easily take place under the influence of intoxicating drink or drugs. Many crimes in society are committed under the influence of these harmful substances. The negative effects they have on spiritual practice are too obvious to require any explanation.

The Five Precepts

Theravada Buddhism preserves the Buddha's teachings and conducts religious ceremonies mainly in the original Pali language. The five precepts are also recited in Pali, and their meanings are generally known to most Buddhists. In the following the original Pali text is given in italics, and the corresponding English translation is given side by side:

1. *Panatipata veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami*: I observe the precept of abstaining from the destruction of life.
2. *Adinnadana veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami*: I observe the precept of abstaining from taking that, which is not given.
3. *Kamesu micchacara veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami*: I observe the precept of abstaining from sexual misconduct.
4. *Musavada veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami*: I observe the precept of abstaining from falsehood.
5. *Suramerayamajjapamadatthana veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami*: I observe the precept of abstaining from intoxicants that cloud the mind and cause carelessness.

The refrain "I observe the precept of abstaining from..." which begins every precept clearly shows that these are not commandments. They are, indeed, moral codes of conduct that lay Buddhists willingly undertake out of clear understanding and conviction that they are good for both themselves and for society.

Practical Application Of The Five Precepts

Training is based on the axiomatic assumption that human beings have the potential for development. In order that this development may be realized, a concrete standard is needed by which people may train themselves. The five precepts are meant to fulfill this need.

For example, compassion is a spiritual quality that we all possess to some degree. However, without a conscious and persistent effort to develop it, this important quality may remain rudimentary and weak. By consciously practicing the first precept, we bring this compassion to a higher level of development and come a step closer to the realization of the Dhamma. In the process, our conduct becomes more refined and our mind becomes more sensitive to the problems and suffering of others. By practicing the second precept we not only purify our livelihood but train in generosity and non-attachment. The third precept has a direct connection

with the training in sense restraint, which is an essential feature in higher spiritual development. In fact, enlightenment is not possible without mastery over the senses. The fourth precept deals with training in truthfulness and virtuous speech. The objective of this precept is not only the cultivation of respect for truth, but a way of life that is sincere and free from falsehood in every respect. Even the fifth precept, which enjoins against the use of intoxicants, is not merely negative, for the resultant effects that take place in the mind in terms of mental strength and moral integrity are very positive. The observance of this precept is also a natural precursor to the cultivation of mindfulness and wisdom, which are the essence of insight meditation. Each and every precept increases our awareness of how we may skillfully conduct ourselves in body and speech and helps us to see more clearly whether we are improving in this process of self-discipline.

We may summarize the five precepts in relation to the spiritual qualities that they are likely to produce and promote as follows. The first precept helps to promote goodwill, compassion, and kindness. The second can be instrumental in developing generosity, service, altruism, non-attachment, contentment, honesty, and right livelihood. The third precept helps to cultivate self-restraint, mastery over the emotions and senses, renunciation, and control of sensual desire. The fourth precept leads to the development of honesty, reliability, and moral integrity. The fifth precept helps to promote mindfulness, clarity of mind, and wisdom.

Self-reliance and responsibility are important features of the practice of Buddhist morality. Because these precepts are meant to be a course of training, it can hardly be expected that each and every practitioner will be able to follow them without committing the slightest error, any more than it can be expected of a music student not to make a single mistake in the course of his lessons. For people with certain temperaments or occupations, some precepts may appear more difficult to follow than the rest, but that should not be an obstacle to making an attempt to keep the precepts. If one is discouraged from practicing, one need simply consider that these precepts are a course of training; and training, by definition, implies imperfection and a gradual process of development.

However, for those who are new to Buddhism, it may be a good idea to begin with greater emphasis on those precepts that are easier to follow, bearing the others in mind for later development. For instance, the second and the third precepts obviously need to be practiced by virtue of necessity, for they are supported by laws and are in perfect harmony with customs and conventions in all civilized societies. There is, therefore, hardly an excuse for not practicing them. Having dealt with these two precepts in this way, the remaining three present much lighter and less daunting a task. In fact, if we understand the contents and meaning of the five precepts correctly, we may come to feel that it is more natural to observe them than not to.

Moral Precepts And Livelihood

It is not true to say that fishermen, farmers, or hunters cannot observe the first precept. Like people in other trades and occupations, they may not be able to observe all the precepts all the time or in all circumstances, given their family obligations and livelihood, but they can certainly practice them on special occasions, like holy days, or when they are not actually engaged in their professions. In fact, there may be more opportunities to practice than at first seems possible. We observe the precepts in accordance with our abilities, training by degrees until we are able to make the precepts part and parcel of our lives.

In the time of the Buddha there were people engaged in occupations that involved killing, such as hunters or fishermen. Farmers, too, were not free from killing, although the intention involved might not be as direct. For all of these people the precepts were there to be practiced, and some were better able to do so than others. Each person has the opportunity to practice to the best of his or her abilities until they become more mature and are spiritually ready to give up occupations or trades that involve unwholesome kamma.

One difficulty for some people is the use of alcoholic drinks: some feel discouraged from keeping the fifth precept because some of their friends drink or because they have business dealings with people who drink. Peer pressure and business objectives may be an obstacle to the observance of this precept, but this is by no means insurmountable. Most people are reasonable and do understand religious conscience. Sometimes, citing physicians' opinions may add weight to an excuse not to drink, but it is always best to be honest. In any case, a serious Dhamma practitioner should not allow trivial things like this to prevent him or her from trying to keep the precepts. There is always an opportunity to exert oneself if one is earnest in the practice.

Moral Precepts And Passivity

If one carefully studies the foregoing discussion on the five precepts, one will see that, although the Pali texts are worded in the negative "... abstaining from ...", there is the positive commitment "I undertake to observe the precept ..." in all of them. Negative expressions do not necessarily represent negative or passive attitudes of mind. Of course, misunderstandings may result from misinterpretations of the Buddhist moral precepts (as they arise in regard to other Pali technical terms like Nibbána, dukkha, santutthi, and anattá).

From the practical perspective Buddhist moral precepts do contain both positive and negative aspects. However, from the psychological point of view it is important for practitioners to first recognize that which is bad or wrong and

which should be abstained from. Abstention from wrong or evil deeds is the most significant step toward real development in spirituality. Strangely enough, it often appears that people are so preoccupied with doing good, they forget the most important duty of refraining from evil. That is why even though one scientific accomplishment after another is being achieved, crime rates are soaring unchecked, and thinking people begin to question the benefits of those accomplishments. In religious circles, devotees passionately try to accumulate more and more merits without ever pausing to reflect whether there are things that should be cleansed from their minds. As long as this negative aspect is not attended to on a practical level, spiritual progress will not come about. On the other hand, consider a society in which people were determined not to do evil and who abstained from that which is bad and wrong; the result of such a 'negative' practice would indeed be most welcome. Even Nibbána is often negatively described as "the abandoning and destruction of desire and craving," and "the extinction of desire, the extinction of hatred, and the extinction of delusion," although it is positively the highest good.

Once wrong and evil deeds have been abandoned, it becomes more natural to do good. Since life means movement and action, any human expression, which rejects evil, is bound to be good and positive. If false speech is given up, whatever is spoken will naturally be truthful. Giving up of falsehood, which is a negative act, therefore constitutes in itself not only a negation, but a positive attitude and commitment. As the Buddha himself has admonished his followers:

"Abandoning false speech, one speaks the truth, becomes dependable, trustworthy, and reliable, and does not mislead the world. Abandoning malicious speech, one does not repeat there what has been heard here, nor does one repeat here what has been heard there, in order to sow the seeds of discord. One reconciles and unites those disunited and promotes closer bonds among friends. Unity is one's delight and joy, unity is one's love, it is the motive behind one's verbal expression. Abandoning harsh speech, one employs a speech, which is blameless, pleasant, acceptable, heart touching, civilized, and agreeable. Abandoning frivolous speech, one uses speech, which is appropriate to the occasion, correct, purposeful, and in accordance with the Dhamma-Vinaya. One utters words that are worthy, opportune, reasonable, meaningful, and straightforward."

One important reason why the Buddhist moral precepts are phrased in negative terms is because the negative mode of expression tends to convey clearer and more specific injunctions, which can be followed with ease. From a practical point of view, "Do not kill" carries stronger impact and a clearer definition than "Be kind to animals" and can be more conveniently practiced. From experience, however, we will see that anyone who consciously and constantly observes the first precept will naturally develop kindness toward people and animals. The second precept, which says, "Do not take what is not given," covers all forms of wrong livelihood,

whether by deception, fraud, bribery or theft. By earnestly observing this precept, one will naturally take a positive step in earning one's livelihood in a righteous way. Through constant awareness and direct control of greed and avarice, which motivate wrong livelihood, one learns to develop generosity, altruism, and selfless service. These and other positive virtues result from the so-called negative actions of observing the moral precepts, clearly demonstrating how the precepts laid down by the Buddha can bear positive results, despite their wording and expression.

Moral Dilemmas

The first of the five Buddhist moral precepts is based on the altruistic concept of universal love and compassion. It is not only a way of life and an exercise in personal morality, but also a part of the much larger scheme in spiritual discipline of which purity of body, speech, and mind are indispensable ingredients. As such it makes no exception in its practice, given the lofty ideal to which it is designed to lead. However, in real life situations, we may need a more practical attitude of mind to approach the problem in a more realistic manner.

First of all, we must recognize the fact that destruction of life is a negative act and the volition involved is an unwholesome one. By being honest with ourselves and by impartially contemplating the results that such acts bring, we can realize the wisdom of the first precept and consequently try to abstain from killing in any form. Perfection in the practice comes with spiritual maturity, and until perfection is attained, one needs to be aware of possible imperfections in the practice and try to improve oneself accordingly.

Because perfection in morality requires considerable effort and training, few can achieve it in the beginning. One need not, therefore, feel discouraged, but should learn how progress in the practice can be made through a systematized and graduated process of training. For instance, one may begin by resolving to abandon any killing that is not absolutely necessary. There are people who find pleasure in destroying other creatures, such as those who fish or hunt for sport. This type of killing is quite unnecessary and only demonstrates callousness. Others are engaged in sports which involve pain and suffering to animals and may even cost their lives, such as bull fights, cock fights, and fish fights -- all senseless practices designed to satisfy sadistic impulses. One who wishes to train in the Dhamma should avoid having anything to do with this kind of entertainment. One may also resolve to show kindness to other people and animals in an objective and concrete way whenever it is possible to do so. While circumstances may prevent absolute abstention from killing, this may help to refine the mind and develop more sensitivity to the suffering of other beings. Trying to look for an alternative livelihood that does not involve destruction of life is a further step to be considered.

Keeping one's home free of pests or bugs by not creating conditions for their infestation helps reduce the necessity for exterminating them. Ecologically, this is a very commendable practice, since the adverse effects of chemical insecticides on the environment are well known. Prevention is, indeed, better than cure even concerning bugs and beetles. Cleanliness of habitat makes killing in such cases unnecessary. Even in the field of agriculture, insecticide-free farming is becoming increasingly popular and commercially competitive. If people are so inclined and compassion prevails, killing can be greatly avoided even in the real life situations of an ordinary householder with full family obligations and concerns.

In the unlikely event that killing is absolutely inevitable, it may be advisable to note the obvious distinction between killing out of cruelty and killing out of necessity. A person who goes out fishing for pleasure is cruel. While he may love children or make big donations for charitable institutions, as far as spirituality is concerned his mind is not refined enough to be sensitive to the pain and suffering of the poor creatures living in the river. A man who hunts for a living does so because it is necessary to maintain himself and his family. It would seem quite understandable that in the latter case the unwholesome effects would likely be much lighter than the former. The same thing is true in the case of killing for self-defense. Killing dangerous animals, vermin, and insects accrues less kammically unwholesome consequences than killing a human being or an animal that serves man (such as a horse, a dog, or an elephant).

Buddhism, Capital Punishment And War

As a student of Buddhism, one may realize that each person practices Dhamma according to his or her ability and the opportunities that arise. A policeman on duty patrolling a crime-infested street or a soldier at a border outpost surveying suspicious movements inside hostile territory will experience totally different circumstances in spiritual endeavor from a monk sitting peacefully in his cloistered cell. Yet, what they do have in common is the opportunity to perform their duty. Each must therefore understand how the Dhamma can be best practiced, given the situation he is in. All of us are bounded up with certain duties, one way or another. Where policemen and soldiers are concerned, it would be naive to deny that their duties do include the possibility of killing.

It cannot be overemphasized, however, that destruction of life is, from a Buddhist standpoint, never justified. But in discussing the issue under question it is hardly appropriate not to distinguish between spiritual objectives and those of national security and administration. Capital punishment, for instance, is an instrument by which law and order may be effectively maintained for the common good of society, although Buddhism would not advocate that such a measure is conducive to the police officers' spiritual well being. The principles and purposes on which

the police and military institutions were established are as far apart from those on which Buddhist spiritual training was formulated as anything can be. Yet, Buddhism and those secular institutions do coexist now, as they did during the time of the Buddha. Important military chiefs and dignitaries are known to have been the Buddha's most devout followers. One does not, therefore, make the mistake of concluding that a person cannot be a Buddhist, or keep the Buddhist moral precepts for that matter, if he serves in the armed forces or police establishment. As has been said before there are more opportunities to practice the precepts than not to practice; this is true even where the above-mentioned professions are concerned.

Stealing From The Rich To Feed The Poor

Helping the poor is a commendable effort, but stealing from the rich to fulfill that commitment can hardly be justified. If this were made into a standard practice, society would be in turmoil. Rights of possession would be ignored, and stealing would become the accepted norm. Finally, the practice would defeat itself, and thievery would be recognized as a charitable act. This is hardly a desirable state of affairs; it is something not even remotely resembling a moral condition.

One of the distinct features of the Buddhist moral precepts is the universal character in which they may be practiced with benefit by all members of society. For instance, non-stealing (second precept) can be universally observed with desirable results, and the practice will help to promote coexistence, peace, and harmony in society. If this precept were reversed and stealing were made a moral principle, we can immediately see that there would be so much conflict and confusion that society would eventually cease to function. Thus, stealing can never be made a moral act, no matter how ideal and noble the motivation.

Extramarital Sex

This is a rather complex issue involving ramifications in emotional, social, and moral fields. The problem is a cause for concern in modern times, especially in the West where materialism has for so long been the philosophy of life.

The third moral precept advises against all forms of sexual misconduct, which include rape, adultery, promiscuity, and sexual perversions. Actually, the Buddhist commentary emphasizes adultery more than anything else, but if we take into account the purpose and intention of the precept, it is clear that the precept is intended to cover all improper behavior with regard to sex. The broadest interpretation even purports to mean abstention from the misuse of the senses. The expression "misuse of the senses" is somewhat vague. It could refer to any morally unwholesome action committed under the influence of sensual desire or to the inability to control one's own senses. In any case there is no doubt that the

third precept aims at promoting, among other things, proper sexual behavior and a sense of social decency in a human civilization where monogamy is commonly practiced and self-restraint is a cherished moral value.

For one reason or another, many young people in love are not able to enter into married life as early as they wish. While marriage is still some distance in the future, or even an uncertain quantity, these people enter into relationships, of which sex forms a significant part. This happens not only among adults, who must legally answer to their own conduct, but also among teenagers who are still immature, emotionally unstable, and tend to act in irresponsible ways. Peer pressure and altered moral values are an important contributing factor to the escalation of the problem. The trend toward extramarital sex has become so common that it is now virtually taken for granted. Contubernal arrangements are becoming increasingly popular, and marriage is relegated to a place of insignificance, jeopardizing in the process the sanctity of family life.

In the context of these developments, the third precept becomes all the more relevant and meaningful. Unlike killing, which certain circumstances seem to warrant, there is hardly any plausible excuse for sexual promiscuity, except human weaknesses and inability to restrain the sexual urge. However, there is a distinction between sexual promiscuity and sexual relationship based on mutual trust and commitment, even if the latter were a relationship between two single adults. Thus one may begin to practice the third precept by resolving not to be involved in sexual activities without an earnest intention and serious commitment of both parties. This means that sex should not be consummated merely for the sake of sexuality, but should be performed with full understanding within the people involved and with mutual responsibility for its consequences. A certain level of maturity and emotional stability is necessary to ensure a healthy and productive sexual relationship between two partners. With the realization that there is a better and more noble path to follow than promiscuity, one may see the wisdom of self-restraint and the benefit of establishing a more lasting and meaningful relationship which, rather than impeding one's spiritual progress, may enhance it.

Finally, if anything else fails to convince people of the danger and undesirability of sexual promiscuity, perhaps the phenomenal AIDS epidemic will. This may seem beside the point, since moral precepts and moral integrity are matters that concern inner strength, fortitude, and conscientious practice, not fear and trepidation based on extraneous factors. It is, nevertheless, worthwhile to consider the connection between promiscuous behavior and the AIDS epidemic and realize how strict observance of the third Buddhist moral precept could greatly reduce the risk of infection or spread of this deadly disease. Acceptance of this fact may also lead to an appreciation of the value of morality and moral precepts as laid down by the Buddha, consequently strengthening conviction in the Dhamma practice.

White Lies

The practice of the fourth precept aims at inculcating a respect for truth in the mind, implying both one's own obligations as well as the rights of other people to truth. This is one of the most important components in developing sound social relationships, and it makes all documents, contracts, agreements, deeds, and business dealings meaningful. When we resort to falsehood, we not only become dishonest but also show disrespect to the truth. People who tell lies discredit themselves and become untrustworthy.

It is true that sometimes telling lies may prove more profitable than truth, especially from the material point of view. Because such gains are unwholesome and may cause harm in the long run, and because material profits are likely to lead to more falsehood and fabrication, it is imperative that the practice of the fourth precept be duly emphasized. Where a person's reputation and feelings are concerned, discretion should be exercised. Of course, there are instances where silence is more appropriate than speech, and one may choose this as an alternative to prevarication and falsehood.

Motivation is an important element in determining if one is transgressing the fourth precept and whether a given verbal expression constitutes a kammically unwholesome act. For instance, when an event is fictionalized for literary purposes, this may not be regarded as falsehood as such for the intention of the work is obvious and there is no attempt at falsification involved. Another example is the case of an invective, where an abusive expression is used (such as angrily calling someone a dog). This is a case of vituperation rather than fabrication or falsification, although it is, nonetheless, a kammically unwholesome act. Also, there is a clear distinction between expressing untruth with a selfish intention and with a well-meaning motive, as when a concocted story is told for instructional purposes or a white lie is told in order to keep an innocent child out of danger.

These latter two instances are even accepted as illustrations of the employment of skillful means. A story is told of a mother who returns home to find her house on fire. Her little son is playing in the house, unaware that its burning roof could collapse at any moment. He is so engrossed that he pays no attention to his mother, who is now in great distress, being unable to get into the house herself. So she calls out to her child, "Come quickly, my little one, I have some wonderful toys for you. All the toys you ever wanted to have are here!" In this instance the mother is using a skillful means that eventually saves the boy's life. Under certain circumstances, this may be the only alternative, but indiscriminate use of such means may lead to undesirable results. One needs to be judicious, therefore, in the practice of the precepts.

Sometimes speaking the truth may cause more harm than good, especially if it is done with malicious intent. A vindictive neighbor who spreads the scandals about the family next door may be speaking the truth, but she is neither doing anyone a service, nor is she practicing the Dhamma. A spy who sells his nation's sensitive classified information to an enemy may be speaking the truth, but he could cause much harm to his nation's security and jeopardize many innocent lives. The Buddha says, therefore, that one should speak the truth, which is useful and conducive to the Dhamma, and should avoid that which is useless and is likely to cause unwholesome kamma to oneself and others.

Intoxicants

The fifth precept covers all intoxicants, including narcotics that alter the state of consciousness and are physiologically addictive. The danger and negative effects of narcotics, such as cocaine and heroin, are too well known to need any further elaboration. Today they represent a serious health and social problem around the world.

Drinking intoxicants is not part of the Buddhist culture, although it seems to have become a widespread phenomenon in modern society. It is true that alcoholic consumption was prevalent before and during the time of the Buddha, but he never approved of the practice. The fact that something is commonly practiced does not necessarily mean that it is good and wholesome. Those who advocate drinking as a factor for promoting friendship forget to take account of the reality that so many friendships have been drowned in those intoxicants. The brawls, strife and unruly behavior that often follow the consumption of alcoholic beverages represent an unequivocal testimony of the ignoble state to which human beings can be reduced to under the influence of intoxicants. Friendship founded on compassion and mutual understanding is much more desirable than that which is based on alcohol. Social drinking may produce a general euphoric atmosphere among drinkers (and probably a nuisance for nondrinkers), but it is never a necessary condition for interpersonal relationship. Often, people use this as an excuse to get drunk. The high rate of car accidents connected with drunk driving should serve as a strong reminder of the danger and undesirability of alcoholic consumption. On the other hand, it may be mentioned in passing that liquor does contain certain medicinal properties and can be used for medical purposes. Such use, if genuine and under qualified supervision, does not entail transgression of the fifth precept and is not considered a morally unwholesome act.

The most obvious danger of intoxicants is the fact that they tend to distort the sensibilities and deprive people of their self-control and powers of judgment. Under alcoholic influences, a person is likely to act rashly and without due consideration or forethought. Otherwise decent people may even commit murder

or rape under the influence of alcohol, or cause all kinds of damage (such as fire, accident, and vandalism) to people or property. The Buddha described addiction to intoxicants as one of the six causes of ruin. It brings about six main disadvantages: loss of wealth, quarrels and strife, a poor state of health (liability to diseases), a source of disgrace, shameless and indecent behavior, and weakened intelligence and mental faculties.

Other Precepts

Occasionally, lay Buddhists may take the opportunity to observe the eight precepts as a means of developing higher virtues and self-control. Of course, these can be practiced as often as one wishes, but the special occasions on which they are normally observed are the holy days, especially the more important ones, the three month period of rains retreat, and special events connected with one's life. Sometimes, a Buddhist may observe them even as a token of gratitude and respect to a deceased relative or on the occasion of a birth anniversary of a monk he reveres. Four of these eight precepts are identical with the five precepts mentioned above. In order, they are as follows:

1. To abstain from the destruction of life
2. To abstain from stealing or taking what is not given
3. To abstain from sexual intercourse (to practice celibacy)
4. To abstain from falsehood
5. To abstain from alcoholic drinks
6. To abstain from partaking of food from afternoon till the following daybreak
7. To abstain from singing and entertainments, from decorating oneself and use of perfumes
8. To abstain from the use of large and luxurious beds.



The Dharma Protector Bodhisattva



Transference of Merit

*May the Merits and Virtues accrued from
this work,
Adorn the Buddhas' Pure Lands,
Repaying the Four Kinds of Kindness
above,
And aiding those suffering in the paths
below.*

*May those who see and hear of this,
All bring forth the resolve of Bodhi,
And when this retribution body is over,
Be born together in Ultimate Bliss.*

