

2. The Five Precepts

(incorporates some material from Sangharakshita's lecture: right action)

Introduction

Having a set of ethical guidelines to live by is very helpful to most people. Without them we tend to get lost in a maze of self analysis about whether particular impulses are coming from a predominantly skilful or unskilful state of mind.

There are various different sets of ethical guidelines in the Buddhist tradition. Some guidelines do not seem applicable today, or may only be helpful to certain types of people in certain types of environment. Perhaps the best known set of precepts in Buddhism is the set of five recited after the third verse of the Monday evening ritual (puja). Each of these five precepts is discussed below.

1. Abstention from harming living beings/ cultivating love

This is sometimes rendered as not to kill, but literally it's abstention from harming living beings. This not only means abstain from killing, but also from harming others. In other words it conveys abstention from all forms of violence, oppression or manipulation. Violence is unskilful because in one way or another it is based in hatred. If we indulge in this then the unskilful mental state - hatred - becomes stronger.

Buddhism extends the golden rule of "do unto others what you would have them do to you" beyond the exclusive domain of humans. It also extends it beyond those who happen to be alive now. It therefore fits well with concern for the environment.

When we harm others we are not identifying with them as living beings who are like us. It means we are seeing them as something completely cut off from ourself.

In a sense all the other precepts are just expressions of this fundamental precept of not harming others. For example it is unskilful to steal, not just because it is based on selfish craving, but also because others don't want to be forcibly parted with their possessions.

The positive counterpart to abstention from violence is of course the practice of love or Metta.

If we genuinely experience Metta then of course we will naturally want to express it. If our impulse of goodwill is relatively weak we can encourage it by expressing what goodwill and kindness we do feel. We should use various means to just keep the feelings of goodwill and kindness alive. To give an ordinary rather familiar example, there's the case of the married couple who've been married for twenty or thirty years, and the man never bothers to bring his wife a bunch of flowers or a box of chocolates. If someone were to ask him why this was, he might say: 'Well, what's the need? Of course I love her, but she should know that after all these years'.

2. Abstention from taking the not given/generosity

This is not just abstention from theft. It is abstaining from any kind of misappropriation or exploitation. These things are expressions of unhealthy selfish craving.

The positive counterpart of this is generosity. And here again it's important to give expression to generosity – to actually give.

The practice of generosity can gradually change our fundamentally a self-centred orientation. [It is axiomatic for Buddhism that the self we guard so jealously is really no more than an idea.]

3. Abstention from sexual misconduct/ cultivating contentment

What constitutes sexual misconduct? In various passages in the suttas the Buddha makes it clear that for the purposes of the five precepts sexual misconduct comprises three things: rape, abduction and adultery. All three are unskilful because they're expressions simultaneously of craving and violence. In the case of adultery the violence is committed against the woman's or the man's spouse.

More broadly sexual misconduct is using sex neurotically, or in a way that harms someone. In a state of sexual arousal we may tend to see the person we desire as an object rather than as a human being like us. Although the sexual instinct is very strong, it is a mistake to put a disproportionate emphasis on it, to treat it as an end in itself.

Incidentally, in Buddhism marriage is a purely civil contract, not a sacrament. Monogamy is not

compulsory from a religious point of view, and in some Buddhist communities they practise polygamy. This is not considered as being sexual misconduct. Nor is homosexuality.

The positive counterpart of abstention from sexual misconduct is contentment. Contentment in this context is not just a passive acceptance of the *status quo*, but a positive state of freedom from being dominated by the sexual urge.

4. Abstention from false speech/ honesty

In large part human culture is made up of an interwoven fabric of human communication. For communication to be meaningful it must be factually true. If we cannot have faith in the truth of what is being communicated, then society rapidly breaks down. Lying is also an act of violence against the particular individuals we mislead.

False speech is rooted in craving or hatred or fear. If you tell a lie either it's because you crave something, or because you want to harm somebody, or because you're afraid of telling the truth.

The positive counterpart of this precept is honesty.

5. Abstention from drinks and drugs that result in loss of awareness

There's a certain amount of disagreement about the interpretation of this precept. In some Buddhist countries it's interpreted as requiring strict teetotalism. But in other Buddhist countries it's interpreted as requiring moderation in the use of alcohol and other substances which may result in intoxication if taken in excess. One is free to choose between the two interpretations. In principle this precept extends not only to drink and drugs, but to any type of intoxicant, such as too much television. Some intoxicants may not only dull the mind but also be addictive, and therefore encourage craving.

The positive counterpart of this precept is mindfulness (*sati*). Mental clarity is one of the qualities most prized in Buddhism. Only with clarity can we penetrate the fog of delusion which is the source of suffering.

The positive form for the five precepts, as recited in the puja

1. With deeds of loving kindness, I purify my body.
2. With open-handed generosity, I purify my body.
3. With stillness, simplicity, and contentment, I purify my body.
4. With truthful communication, I purify my speech.
5. With mindfulness clear and radiant, I purify my mind.