# IMB Course Week 4 – The Precepts

## Recap 3mins

Last week we jointly invented an ethical system, which expresses our joint intuitions, and which I think is universal. This corresponded very well with the fundamental Buddhist principles of kindness, generosity, non-craving, authenticity, and awareness. This week we’re going to explore this a bit further, and put some flesh on the bones of what Buddhism has to say about this.

So to put it another way, we are going to be talking about Buddhist ethics, the principles of how we should behave in a way that will have positive results for us and others.

We saw last week that Buddhist ethics are not about doing what we are told, they are about deciding who we want to be. They are not about giving up any real freedom, they are about freeing ourselves from slavery to our conditioning, habits, and old patterns.

**Skilful and unskilful, not right and wrong. 7mins**

Because Buddhism is not based on belief in a judging god, its ethics are not about pleasing some cosmic authority figure. So we don’t tend to talk about right and wrong, we talk about skilful and unskilful. When someone behaves unethically they are behaving in an unwise way, because they are behaving in ways that will harm themselves and others. They are being rather stupid, not evil.

Buddhist ethics are not about giving ourselves a hard time to please a ‘god’, they are about making ourselves more truly happy, by becoming more like the higher being that we could be.

Quote from the historical Buddha

**“ I say, abandon what is unskilful! If abandoning what is unskilful was going to make you unhappy, I would not ask you to abandon it. But as abandoning what is unskilful brings wellbeing and happiness, for this reason I say, abandon what is unskilful!**

**I say, cultivate the good! If cultivating the good was going to make you unhappy, I would not ask you to cultivate it. But as cultivating the good brings wellbeing and happiness, therefore I say, cultivate the good!**

So Buddhist ideas about wise ways of acting are about doing what is best for ourselves, what will make us truly happy, but based on quite a different idea of what makes for happiness from that held by society at large. These include the idea that what makes for true happiness comes from internal positive mental states rather than externals, and that we are interconnected with other beings and the world around us, so that narrow selfishness is self-defeating.

When we act skilfully:

* We make ourselves happier by acting in ways that develop positive mental states through the law of karma, which tells us that how we act now creates the person we will be in the future
* We act for the benefit of others, because the ways of acting that nourish positive tendencies in ourselves include kindness and generosity to others.

These two interact and reinforce each other. If we are in a good state we make others happier by our presence and influence. (Its not much fun to be around someone in a bad state.) Also, if we act for the benefit of others, they tend to reciprocate, we receive more kindness and generosity ourselves, and we experience deeper, warmer, and more satisfactory friendships and relationships, so we become happier ourselves.

Together these two improve the whole world: If we have a positive effect on others, this has a positive effect on the people THEY come into contact with. Every act of kindness and generosity sends out ripples that go on widening for ever. This is also true of every act of meanness or cruelty. Every one of us is a powerful agent in creating the world we all live in.

## The Five Precepts 2mins

Buddhist ideas about skilful action can be summed up in five great principles, that we have already touched on: kindness, generosity, non-craving, authenticity, and awareness. These principles are fleshed out in what are called the Five Precepts, five ethical guidelines that we can use to bring our actions into line with what will benefit ourselves and others.

Each of these ethical guidelines has a positive and a negative aspect: what we should do, and what we should avoid. For example the first precept tells us that we should try to act out of kindness, on the positive side, and that we should avoid acts that harm others, on the negative side.

## The Great Debate 5 mins per precept=33mins

To give you a better idea of these precepts we’re going to have a debate! We’re going to hear 5(?) people talk for 5 mins each about their favourite precept, and each is going to tell us why they think this is the most important one of the lot. Then we’re going to ask you to vote on which is in fact the most important.

[People need to talk about these in their own words. They need to both argue why their precept is the most important, and **more importantly** they need to cover the basics of what the positive and negative aspects imply. *Introducing Buddhism* might be helpful in knowing what needs to be covered, and we also have some ‘short talkettes on the precepts on the computer. Below I’ve tried to list the main points that need to be covered. **This needs to be given to the people giving talks**.]

## Kindness, not cruelty

**Positive: deeds of loving kindness**

* Expresses interconnectedness
* Need to act, not just feel good to others
* Starts with those closest, moves out from there

**Negative: I undertake the training principle of not harming living beings.**

* As far as possible not killing or causing suffering, physical or mental.
* Usually taken to rule out certain professions for Buddhists – fighting in armed forces, trading in arms, trading in meat products
* Also professions which cause more subtle harm, advertising, promotes unnecessary craving, and causes suffering
* Animals as well as humans.
* Vegetarianism

Generosity, not grabbiness

**Positive: with open-handed generosity**

* “The characteristic Buddhist virtue”
* Can start with very small gifts – a lot of this in the Sangha
* Includes giving time and energy
* At its highest an expression of an overall approach to life – to see what is important in life as being how we can make a contribution, rather than what we can grab for ourselves.

**Negative: I undertake the training principle of not taking the not-given**

* Includes stealing but goes beyond it
* Includes any way we get from others what they don’t freely want to give
* Could include using cunning, emotional manipulation, outwitting others, driving a hard bargain, exploiting others’ weakness
* Might rule out many business practices that are accepted as quite normal!
* Ultimately means avoiding a grasbbing mentality, always being about what we can get for ourselves.

## Contentment, not craving.

**Positive: with stillness, simplicity, and contentment**

* About freeing ourselves from ‘neurotic craving’
* Neurotic craving vs healthy desire: craving for things that cannot satisfy the need we are experiencing, vs healthy desire for things that are real needs, like water, enough food, friendship, meaning in life.
* Eg comfort eating because you don’t feel good about yourself – doesn’t satisfy the need, makes things worse
* Epitomised by drug addiction – getting what we want just increases the craving
* Treadmill analogy – the carrot can’t be caught, because happiness comes from inside
* Buddhism tells us to step off the treadmill: cultivate contentment, value a simpler life
* Often an attempt to fill an inner sense of emptiness, we experience unless our life is meaningful, and we are expressing our spiritual potential
* Craving fuels the consumer society; getting beyond it is the solution to our environmental problems

Negative: I undertake the training principle of abstaining from sexual misconduct.

* Sex is singled out because it is the strongest craving for many people, and affects others; but really is about all craving
* Buddhism is not judgemental about sexual activity, except insofar as it harms us or others
* Does not say sex is ‘bad’, or make judgements about masturbation, sex ‘out of wedlock’ or homosexuality
* But we should avoid harming **ourselves** by stoking up our sexual craving – will prevent us experiencing peace of mind; (sometimes said men think about sex every 2 mins (or so) – if this were true, men could never experience any contentment, stillness or peace of mind!)
* For this reason abstaining from sex can be a useful practice – permanently for monastics, or for periods of retreat for ‘lay’ Buddhists
* We should also avoid harming **others** by our sexual activity – for example by having sex with a member of a settled couple, or by entering into relationships where there are very unequal expectations (eg where you want casual sex and the other wants a life partner, or vice versa)
* The precept includes all forms of craving, not just sex; indulging neurotic craving for food, drink, drugs, tobacco, fashionable clothes, gadgets, consumer goodies, bigger houses or more glamorous cars.
* We need to free ourselves from a lifestyle of craving, of looking for satisfaction where it cannot be found, in external things; we need to see the beauty and value of a simple life; this is the solution to the worlds environmental crisis.

# Honesty, authenticity and straightforwardness, not concealment

**Positive: Truthful communication**

* If we watch our speech, we see that we often carry on a public relations campaign for ourselves; we are our own pr agent, spinning the facts to make us look good, or victimised or interesting, or right; and to avoid blame, or ever being in the wrong
* This forces us to wear a mask, which is stressful, and cuts us off from others; a lot of our unhappiness comes from the fact that we are not being genuine
* Dropping the mask is a great relief, and makes for deeper relationships – nobody can be friends with a mask, no matter how perfect!

**Negative: I undertake the training principle of abstaining from false speech**

* Not just about telling whoppers
* Includes all the exaggeration, distortion and spin we use as our own pr agent
* Main point not about ‘white lies’ – most of our distortion is just about our own ego
* Demands a lot of moment-to moment awareness – often our snap response is to avoid blame etc - so good starting point for 5th precept
* Sounds risky, but people respect and trust those who admit faults, have integrity, and can be trusted

# Awareness, not escapism

**Positive: With mindfulness clear and radiant**

* Mindfulness a Buddhist term for being present in our experience, present to the world – could just be called awareness
* Buddhism is about increasing awareness; without awareness we cannot be in the gap, we are on automatic pilot, not in charge of our own life
* We need awareness to practice any of the other precepts
* We cultivate awareness by meditation, by paying attention to our bodies, our minds, other people, and the world around us

**Negative: I undertake the training principle of abstaining from becoming intoxicated by drink and drugs that cloud the mind**

* If we want to cultivate awareness, we need to avoid the things that destroy awareness
* In the Buddhas time the main ways of destroying awareness were drink and drugs – now we have invented many more!
* So drink and drugs are singled out, but they are just part of it
* Buddhism does not necessarily demand complete abstinence, although many people take this as a practice
* But we need to accept that habitual use of drink or drugs will dull our awareness, and limit our progress
* Social drinking a big feature of our society, and the precept doesn’t mean that unless we become abstemious teetotallers right now we cannot practice the dharma – the precepts are not absolutist commandments, they are training principles, which we take at our own pace.
* The significance of the precept should extend to everything we use to escape from reality: it could include habitual mindless TV, internet surfing, and excessive input of all sorts

Tell Vajratara’s hermit/girl/goat/beer story? (Part of the oral tradition.)

## Joke vote 4mins

Which precept is most important? Who won the debate? (Someone will point out that they cannot really be separated.)

## Summary 1min

These are the five basic principles of Buddhist ethics. They are not a beginners practice – they can be practised at deeper and deeper levels, and to really live by them would mean a radical change in our approach to life. What would it mean to be perfectly generous, or perfectly aware?

Until we are enlightened we can only practice them imperfectly. But if we do this we will become happier, and we will make those around us happier. We will make the world a better place. If everyone tried to practice the five precepts most of the worlds problems would be solved – there would be no more wars, no famines (the world can easily grow enough food, but a few hog all the reources!) no corrupt governments, and no environmental crisis.

## Groups 15mins

Getting down from the abstract level, which precept is most important to YOU. You could ask yourself: which precept, if everybody else practiced it, would improve my life most; or, which precept, when I see other people breaking it, annoys or upsets me the most.

[Some people don’t get the distinction between the abstract and the personal very easily, but it is an important one, and I think we need to try to help people make it by being very clear about what we mean. Awareness and/or kindness are almost bound to be the most important in the abstract, but that doesn’t make them the most important immediate practice for every individual. Personal reactions are much more likely to reveal what the person could most usefully work on.]

## Homework 5mins

Take on one precept for one day – maybe just the basic negative form. Consider taking the precept you focussed on in the last exercise. [If something annoys us in others, we probably do it ourselves.]

Choose a suitable day **now**.

Give examples of how this might work. Eg

* Kindness – go vegetarian for the day
* Generosity – respond to every request, every charity collector; or do some generous act you would not normally do
* Contentment – cut out some addictive habit for the day
* Honesty – perhaps the most difficult! – watch you speech, try to be scrupulously truthful all day
* Awareness – avoid all forms of escapism for the day – drink, drugs, tv etc; instead pay attention to the simple things, go for a walk in the country, etc

## Total 70mins