

# **BASIC BUDDHIST MORALITY: THE FIVE PRECEPTS**

Morality is a necessary basis for social stability. Therefore, social and political organizations have given great emphasis on morality from the beginning of civilization. Many governments have gone further than that: they have declared that moral codes come directly from a creator-god and that obedience is imperative. In The Five Precepts, undertaking the observance of moral codes was purely voluntary. Pre-Buddhist societies had moral codes of their own. Buddha never repudiated what was good in his times. He incorporated what was good in his own teachings 'for the greater good of humanity'. In Buddhism, morality is a means to an end. Socially, the Five Precepts encouraged a conflict-free stable basis for its survival. Personally, they provided a basic groundwork for mental development. Morality [sīla] is an essential component of progress along the Noble Eightfold Path.

Let us examine each one of the Five Precepts. The non-taking of life [pānātipātā] is vital for the very existence of a society. If there is indiscriminate violence in any society, that will not last long. Buddhism goes further in its pursuit of mental development. It discourages trades that involves taking of life not only of human beings but also of all living beings. Non-violence is one of the most notable features of Buddhism.

Non-taking of what is not given voluntarily; [adinnādānā] is the second Precept. Imagine a society where each one forcibly takes properties that belong to the other! It is true that we are motivated by our greed and our cravings. If we are to live harmonious lives in society, we have to be responsible for our own behaviour. We must see that we respect the rights of others, if we are to preserve our own rights. We cannot make any progress in mental development if our lifestyles are not harmonious with the needs of society [sammā ājīva].

Infidelity in our relationships [kāmēsumiccācārā] is another major cause of social conflict. Friction arises when there is no harmony in intimate personal relationships. Buddhism goes further and discourages relationships with the spouses of others, with one's own stewards, including convicts, with those betrothed to others and with minors. Imagine the harm one does to oneself and others involved, by being unfaithful or forcing one's affections on an unwilling person! It is true that sex is a primary instinct and one of the strongest. However, one must consider the consequences of one's actions, and as Buddha had, himself, declared, one should not act in ways that one has to regret later. It is also true that many industries have sprung up around this basic instinct. Drugs for illnesses resulting from unwholesome intimacy, performance enhancing drugs, cosmetics, pornography, even accepted art forms are industrial ventures that thrive on sex. Even advertisements cater to 'sexual titillation'.

One could see certain trends in society: early marriages and unions, un-wed partnerships, frequent break-ups, unwanted children, frustration violence and even suicide. It is the responsibility of parents and teachers not only to the biology of it but also the psychology and social consequences of unacceptable intimacy. They must instill fear and shame towards unwholesome behavior in their wards. They must discourage those in their care, the limits of human endurance. Otherwise, those they nurture would turn back and say: 'Had we been told of the consequences of our actions'! Over-indulgence in

using make-up is to be restrained. After all, 'No man or woman, leaving this life, can keep this body. Buddhism does not discourage healthy intimacy, with moderation, in a socially acceptable way for those who lead a layman's/ lay woman's life. A tried and true method of achieving moderation is to watch our own desires and see how they fade away. Restraint in every aspect of sensual desire is a step in the right direction in the Noble Eightfold Path.

Buddha had observed that he who engages in false speech [musāvādā] is capable of doing any evil deed. False speech involves not only uttering falsehoods but also of slandering, gossiping and spreading rumors. One of the commonest cases of lying is to make false statements to avoid punishment: children, adolescents and adults, all do it. Slandering harms others. One is not aware that it harms the slanderer; him/ her. It is one's own uncontrolled ego that prompts one to slander and belittle others. Gossiping is a common pastime for many. It reminds one of the saying: An idle mind is the workshop of the devil. Spreading rumors can lead to not only personal conflicts but national and international conflicts. One must reflect on one's speech 'before, during and after' one's speech. Sweet speech [priya vacana] is encouraged. It involves right view, right effort and right mindfulness in the Noble Eightfold path.

Consuming of what leads to heedlessness [surāmēraya] is totally discouraged for one that undertakes to follow the five precepts. It takes one long and hard reflection to realize that one takes drugs of any form to cover up some form of weakness in oneself. Peer pressure is no excuse. One who takes drugs of any sort has no self-confidence. Taking drugs harm one and others. One's health as well as one's wealth is affected. When one becomes headless one harms others. Just to give one example: how many accidents are caused through drugs?

One must remember that the observance of the Five Precepts, universal love and compassion [mettā, karunā]. It encourages spiritual growth. Wholesome bodily, verbal and mental actions lead to spiritual purity. One might take the view that the observance of moral precepts is a passive process resorted to by the weak. That is definitely not so. We will be actively engaged in building a conflict-free personal and social environment and lead a blameless life which would benefit us as well as others in this very life.

Moral perfection requires courage and effort. We need not ponder on our past lapses. Let us make a firm resolve, here and now. Not to repeat any mistakes that we have committed in the past.

Let us avoid all evil [sabba pāpassa akaranam]!

That would be an ideal way to commemorate Vesak!!

With mettā,

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