

Bodhi Leaf Publication No. 59

Buddhist Lay Ethics

Francis Story



BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY

Buddhist Lay Ethics

by

Francis Story

**Buddhist Publication Society
Kandy • Sri Lanka**

Bodhi Leaves No. 59

Copyright © Kandy, Buddhist Publication Society
(1972)

BPS Online Edition © (2009)

Digital Transcription Source: Buddhist Publication
Society

For free distribution. This work may be republished, reformatted, reprinted and redistributed in any medium. However, any such republication and redistribution is to be made available to the public on a free and unrestricted basis and translations and

other derivative works are to be clearly marked as such.

Buddhist Lay Ethics

T

he life of the Buddhist layman is, or should be, regulated by the five precepts. These constitute the minimal requirements for ethical day-to-day living, to be of benefit both to the individual and to the community. All effort towards higher spiritual achievement must begin with virtue (*sīla*), for without virtue mental concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*pañña*) are not attainable. And without the self-discipline that *sīla* inculcates, civilised life is not possible.

Aside from these obvious truths, the five principles of moral conduct were laid down by the Buddha, the supreme physician, for another reason also. They are to serve as a prophylactic against unwholesome karma and the misery that results from it; they are the basic rules of mental and spiritual hygiene.

Observance of the precepts is a form of insurance against the risk of rebirth in states of greater suffering, a danger that is always present unless strenuous efforts are made to overcome the taints (*āsava*) and defilements (*kilesa*). Every human being born into this world has in his character an accumulation of unwholesome tendencies from the greed, hatred and

delusion (*lobha, dosa, moha*) of the past, mixed with good ones, for if he were free from the craving, antagonisms and ignorance that accompany the illusion of selfhood he would not have been reborn in this or any other sphere. He has to maintain a constant vigilance against these harmful qualities, whose greatest menace is directed towards himself.

Virtue does not develop automatically; it calls for diligent cultivation, sustained by self-analysis and unwavering self-discipline. In the *kāmāvacara-bhūmi*, the realm of sense-desires, there is a natural bias towards self-gratification. It takes many forms, some of them highly deceptive so that we are often victims of the disease to a greater extent than we realise. For this reason it has to be resisted, not spasmodically but all the time, as gravity must be resisted when climbing uphill. Descent is easy and rapid, but ascent is always toilsome and slow.

We do not lack reminders of the inexorable nature of cause and effect, the universal law, for we see evidence of it everywhere. All around us people are suffering the results of their unwholesome karma of the past. They expiate it in disease, poverty, deformity, mental deficiency, frustration of their efforts and countless other kinds of misfortunes. There is no truth more obvious than that *dukkha* predominates in life, heavily outweighing man's gleams of momentary and

fragile happiness. The happiest man cannot say when misfortune will strike him, or what form it will take; and neither wealth, position nor skill can avail to ward it off. Yet men, even though they have been taught the moral law by a Supreme Buddha, still recklessly pursue their wilful ends, as though intoxicated—which indeed they are. They are intoxicated by craving for sense-pleasures and by the mental defilements which, like the flow of impurity from a suppurating wound (the *āsavas*), work like a poison in the bloodstream, driving them madly on, oblivious of danger.

Just as flies swarm round a jar of honey, crawling to their doom over the bodies of other flies already caught in the alluring trap of death, so men disregard the warning signs given by the suffering of others they see all about them, and are drawn into the same trap by their craving for sense-gratification and the evil courses into which it too often leads them. Like the flies, they see their fellows suffering for their folly, yet they go on to the same end, regardless of the inevitable result. And just as the flies crawl over the struggling bodies of other flies already trapped, so men themselves often go to their doom trampling on the prostrate bodies of their fellow men. This is the grim picture the world presents, a fit subject for compassion. We may look in vain for any evidence of

a merciful deity in this amoral wilderness; its creator is ignorance, and its ruler, desire. If it were not for *sīla*, the pitiless jungle law would prevail everywhere.

The Five Precepts of the layman, as distinct from the augmented Eight and Ten Precepts to be observed on Uposatha Days, are meant to be followed by Buddhists at all times, the object being to establish a habit-formation of virtuous and restrained conduct, in opposition to the unwholesome tendencies of greed, hatred and delusion that form a part of human nature and the ego-assertive instinct. Thus they serve a dual purpose, being at once a barrier to unwholesome mental impulses and deeds, protecting one who observes them from generating bad karma for which he would have to suffer in the future, and a necessary purification to make clear the way for wisdom, insight and ultimate liberation from the round of births and deaths.

From this it naturally follows that the regular observance of the Five Precepts is more beneficial than the occasional observance of the Eight or Ten Uposatha Day vows. The extra precepts added to make up the eight or ten are not ethical rules but vows of a mildly ascetic nature whose purpose is to subdue the senses and strengthen the will. In daily life, it is the moral principles involved in the Five Precepts which, colouring all our associations with other people, go to

build up a consistently moral character. More sustained effort is required to keep the Five Precepts all the time than to keep eight or ten on special occasions. It is a mistake to assume, as some people seem to do, that the strict observance of Uposatha Day vows will compensate for a life that is spent, on the whole, in disregard of the five basic precepts. Ideally, both should be observed; but if a choice is to be made it should be in favour of the more difficult task, that of following the rules of disciplined conduct at all times and in all circumstances.

When moral restraint is regarded as psychological treatment, as it is in Buddhism, there is no excuse for allowing it to degenerate into a once-a-week or once-a-fortnight practice—a pious formality carried out as a kind of magic ritual to win the favour of some supposed god, and to ensure good fortune. It is a mental health regimen, and as such must be followed daily, just as one follows the rules of physical hygiene. If human society could develop an ethic that by common consent led people to regard the man who regularly breaks these five basic rules of morality as they regard one who does not bathe, clean his teeth or change his dirty clothes, we should be on the way to evolving a perfect civilisation. Unfortunately, this is far from being the case. In modern society, physical impurities are not tolerated but many impurities of

character and conduct are not only tolerated but are actually encouraged. The man who boasts of his conquests with women is not condemned—except by husbands whose marriages he has broken up; and society holds out no particular sanctions against gambling and drunkenness. Lying is accepted as a necessary device from the highest diplomatic circles down to the sphere of the petty shopkeeper who adjusts his prices to the appearance of his customer; while killing is considered a virtue in hunting, fishing and shooting circles; perhaps the only virtue that they recognise. As for theft, if it is done on a large enough scale and successfully, it is considered highly respectable. So, while *sīla* is a necessary part of civilised living, it is interpreted with great elasticity in practice, according to the mores of the particular group in question. While most people subscribe to certain abstract principles, there is no general agreement as to what constitutes the fundamentals of right conduct in specific details. The conventions of society, therefore, offer no reliable guide to one who is seeking universal principles. On the contrary, they have often led to a great deal of confusion.

The English philosopher Hobbes saw man as a being motivated in all his actions by the desire for self-gratification; even the exercise of charity he attributed to this self-regarding urge. Repulsive though this view

may appear at first sight, it has never been seriously challenged. All religions tacitly acknowledge it when they hold out hope of rewards for virtue, and the Buddha expressly declared that a man's first duty is towards himself:

“Let one not neglect one's own good for that of others, however great it may be. One should pursue one's own good, knowing it well.”

Dhammapada, 166

In Buddhism, one's own good coincides with the good of mankind as a whole, for the Buddha's Teaching was always directed towards the ultimate good of attaining the selfless and therefore desireless state. Those who mistakenly see their own “good” in the gratification of their desires at the expense of others are *bāla*, fools in the realm of morality, and *andhabāla*, mentally blind fools in respect to their own spiritual welfare. In the Buddha's discourses the fool always signifies one who is immoral; that is to say, impure in thought, word and deed. “That man in this very world destroys his own roots” (*yo naro ... idhevam eso lokasmim; mūlam; khanati attano*, Dhṛ 247). There is no mistaking the powerful emphasis the Buddha laid on the admonition: here, in this very world, the fool destroys himself by his misdeeds.

In view of this, the question whether ethical behaviour is to be considered a means to an end, or the end itself, vanishes. Considered solely as an end, moral activation may be often unsatisfactory in that it fails to produce immediate results in the form of an improvement in worldly conditions or a happier subjective experience; but viewed as a method of attaining supramundane states, it justifies itself both as end and means. In a world that is apparently without moral purpose, the rationalist concept of ethics as a code of conduct to be followed solely for the satisfaction it brings and without any expectation of results, lacks the force that is required to make it universally acceptable. As a way of life unsupported by any solid religious structure or frame of defined principles, it is scarcely even relevant to the human situation, since notions of what constitutes moral conduct have varied widely from age to age and in different parts of the globe. How weak is the simply humanist foundation of ethics in a sceptical and materialistic world is shown clearly by the decline in human standards that we see taking place where religion has lost its hold on the people. There is a weakness also in the fact that in most instances law itself derives its authority from religion, and divine authority has too often been called upon to justify man's acts of selfishness and barbarity. But on the

whole, the moral sanctions of religion have provided a sound guide for the development of civilised values. At least, no better has yet been found.

The rules laid down by the Buddha differ from those that characterise the theocratic laws of other religions in that they do not demand any obedience to an unseen, unknown deity, nor do they include any observances of a purely formal, ritualistic and non-ethical type. Whereas other codes lay down prohibitions concerning food, and even in some instances clothing, which may have been useful in certain places at certain periods but cannot be universally adopted and serve no purpose outside the historical context in which they were formulated, the precepts of Buddhism contain only one item dealing with a man's treatment of his own body, and that is a perfectly rational and universal one, the vow to abstain from intoxicants and drugs. The use of intoxicating liquor and stupefying narcotics is the only way in which moral character can be affected by what is taken in by the mouth; so, while elsewhere the Buddha specified for his monks ten kinds of animal flesh (e.g. snakes, elephants, etc.) as being unsuitable for consumption, dietary prohibitions form no part of the Five Precepts and are not to be considered in any sense mandatory.

Another fact that renders the Buddhist precepts

unique is that they do not make impossible psychological demands. Faith cannot be produced to order, yet many religious commandments literally order the devotee to have faith in what cannot be proved. They also command him to love his fellow-men. Like faith, love cannot be conjured up by command, and Buddhism recognises this truth. *Metta*, or universal benevolence, has to be cultivated systematically; it is no more possible to produce it instantly by willing than it is to grow a new limb. A psychological reorientation away from “self” is necessary before the perfection of loving kindness, which is one of the *brahma-vihāras*, can be realised.

As exercises in moral restraint, the Five Precepts are necessarily expressed in negative form. The intention is to tell the devotee what he should avoid doing. They are concerned with outward behaviour while the exercises in mental development (*bhāvanā*) are concerned with the development of subjective states tending to the attainment of insight wisdom. While *sīla* (virtue) is essential to the practice of *bhāvanā*, *bhāvanā* itself fortifies *sīla*; the two are mutually-supporting, and grow side by side. It is as this growth takes place that the positive side of the precepts asserts itself. From the negative vow to refrain from taking life there emerges the positive and active principle of benevolence towards all sentient beings.

In time it becomes impossible to break any of the precepts because the will to do so has perished. It fades out from inanition, having no ego-craving on which to subsist.

It is sometimes argued that the first precept to abstain from taking life is a counsel of perfection that cannot be followed in its entirety. Man's existence on earth is subject to the same laws of survival as obtain in the animal realm where it is a question of "kill or be killed." Human beings do not have to fight for existence continually as do the animals, yet if many creatures inimical to man were not destroyed, human life itself would eventually disappear from the planet.

This objection is based on a misunderstanding of the nature and purpose of the Precepts. They are not commandments; they originated as advice on the course of conduct most favourable to the production of good karma, and are taken voluntarily as vows, with this end in view. The follower of the Buddha is invited to make a choice between the "good" of expediency, which often turns out to be an ethical cul-de-sac, and the highest moral and spiritual good, which is certain and undeviating in its results. The householder who has property and worldly interests to guard, and who owes a duty to society and its laws in return for the protection it affords him, may not always find it possible to observe the first precept. He

is in that position because his desire for possessions and family ties has placed him in it. Having made that particular choice he has also chosen to risk whatever consequences may come of it. The dilemmas that confront him at every turn are of his own making. So long as he remains in that position, the only course he can adopt is to minimise as far as possible the need to perform unwholesome actions. There are many ways in which he can do this, the first being to ensure that he engages only in undertakings that do not cause moral confusion (*anākulā ca kammantā*) and supports himself by work of a pure and blameless character (*anavajjāni kammāni*). This comes under Right Livelihood in the Noble Eightfold Path. If this is not sufficient and he aims at the highest moral perfection, he may renounce all worldly responsibilities and connections and enter the Sangha. There he is free to pursue the highest good, unfettered by the demands of mundane life. It was for this purpose that the Buddhist Sangha was established, and so long as it remains there is a refuge for those who wish to shun evil in all its aspects. The standards of perfection in Buddhist ethics do not make them impossible as some have believed. It is an ideal that can be actualized.

The Buddha did not lay down laws for the conduct of human affairs in any but a strictly personal sense. He gave advice to rulers, as he did to ordinary

householders, but did not attempt to formulate principles of state policy, as some religious teachers, with varying success, have attempted to do. His Teaching was for those who wish to liberate themselves from *saṃ;sāra*, not those who desire to improve its conditions. Nevertheless, those teachings, pointing to a goal beyond conditioned existence, have an application in the world of practical affairs. Nibbāna may be an individual, not a collective goal, but the path to it, followed by the individual for his own highest good, has beneficial repercussions on the whole of society. Every man or woman who observes the five precepts and conscientiously tries to follow the Noble Eightfold Path, makes it easier for someone else to do the same. One who works for his own highest good confers blessings on all mankind.

Table of Contents

Title page	2
Buddhist Lay Ethics	4