

The Five Precepts

Collected Essays

by

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Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| The Precepts in Buddhism..... | 3 |
| Exhortation..... | 5 |
| Taking the Precepts..... | 6 |
| The Role of the Precepts..... | 8 |
| The Importance of <i>Pañca Sīla</i> | 11 |
| The Five Rules..... | 13 |

The Five Precepts

Pañca Sīla

1. *Pāṇātipātā veramaṇī, sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.*
 2. *Adinnādānā veramaṇī, sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.*
 3. *Kāmesu micchācārā veramaṇī, sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.*
 4. *Musāvādā veramaṇī, sikkhā-padaṃ samādiyāmi.*
 5. *Surāmeraya majja pamādaṭṭhānā, sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.*
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1. I undertake to observe the precept to abstain from killing living beings.
 2. I undertake to observe the precept to abstain from taking what is not given.
 3. I undertake to observe the precept to abstain from sexual misconduct.
 4. I undertake to observe the precept to abstain from false speech.
 5. I undertake to observe the precept to abstain from intoxicating drinks and drugs causing heedlessness.
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The Precepts in Buddhism

Dr. Paul Dahlke

There are five precepts in Buddhism which are binding on all who call themselves Buddhists. They are:

1. Not to take the life of any living being.
2. Not to take what is not given.
3. Abstaining from sexual misconduct.
4. Abstaining from wrong speech.
5. Abstaining from intoxicants.

These precepts are not commandments in the Christian sense. There is no divine law-giver who raises a threatening finger from behind the clouds. These precepts are self-given rules of conduct, which the individual voluntarily accepts and endeavours to keep—not to please a God, but for bringing himself morally into conformity with the results of his thinking.

Hence the precepts begin with the following words: “I take upon myself the rule of training to abstain ...” This is repeated for each of these rules.

The Judaeo-Christian commandment “Thou shalt not kill” reads in Buddhist formulation: “*I take upon myself the rule of training to abstain from taking the life of living beings.*” From the wide domain of hair-splitting casuistry and theorizing we arrive here at a quite unambiguous mental fact: whether some act of taking life constitutes, morally, legally or conventionally, “killing” or “murder,” this may be a matter of argument, and sometimes of a vain argument. But the phrase “Taking the life of living beings” is unambiguously clear. Whether the individual can observe that precept in all situations of life is another question. But if he cannot do it, he will, in any case, know that he has transgressed a self-given rule: he will have a bad conscience and will again and again endeavour to do better in future.

The Judaeo-Christian commandment “Thou shalt not steal” runs in its Buddhist version as follows: “*I take upon myself the rule of training to abstain from taking what is not given.*” What we said about the first commandment applies here too. Whether any appropriation of another’s possessions can be called “stealing” may be arguable. But if we say, “Not to take what is not given,” that is clear and anybody knows what it implies. The bonds in which that injunction holds him are strict but unambiguous.

The Judaeo-Christian commandment “Thou shalt not commit adultery” reads in its Buddhist formulation: “*I take upon myself the rule of training to abstain from sexual misconduct.*” Here, too, the self-given rule of the Buddhist is much broader and more definite. Someone may refrain from adultery and yet he may not be avoiding any other kind of sexual misconduct and be very far from a pure life. And it is that purity which alone matters if the concern is not only with setting up social barriers and protected fences, but to elevate morality in general.

The Judaeo-Christian commandment “Thou shalt not lie” is formulated in Buddhism as: “*I take upon myself the rule of training to abstain from false speech.*” What was said about the first and second precept holds good here also. What an enormously ambiguous thing is the concept of “telling lies”! But any hair-splitting about it has lost its ground as soon as one no longer clings to the concept, but adheres to the facts. Everyone knows what it means: not to use false speech that

is not in accordance with the facts. Present social conditions, however, have made enormously difficult the strict observance of this precept in particular. The so-called “conventional” or “white” lie has for almost all of us become a kind of expedient for protecting us against the brutalities of modern life. Even he who endeavours to lead a good Buddhist life will sometimes find it very hard to do without that expedient; but it makes a great difference whether one does something with a good or a bad conscience. If it is done with a bad conscience, one will constantly fight against it; and if one’s social conditions are such that this inner fight does not yield an external success, then one will try to change these circumstances by returning to more simple conditions of life which do not require such an elaborate apparatus of conventional untruths. But if that too proves impossible, one will at least cherish a longing for those simpler and more truthful conditions. Much is gained for inner progress if a man is dissatisfied with himself; and this will be the case when he knows that his life is not in harmony with his self-given rules of conduct.

As to the fifth precept “*I take upon myself the rule of training to abstain from intoxicants,*” there is no equivalent of it in the Judaeo-Christian code of morality. Christianity in particular shows in this respect a truly astounding indifference, the result being a laxity of morals as has never prevailed in any other religion.

The grape was one of the most important products of ancient Palestine, and wine a necessary part of the daily meal. Though Christ censured gluttony, he did not see anything wrong in drinking wine. He himself set the example of wine-drinking in one of the most important acts of his career. Hence it is not surprising that already in the early Middle Ages, monasteries were prominent in grape cultivation and later in the manufacture of special liquors and spirits.

To repeat: Buddhism has no commandments or prohibitions with a God as authority or prime mover, but self-given precepts which are a necessity for everyone who knows life as it really is and who has the courage to draw the moral consequences from that knowledge. If I have understood life as it really is, I have also understood that I am committed to those self-given precepts. For any act of violence towards other living beings, any appropriation of what is not given, any unchastity, any false speech, and any partaking of intoxicants, debases and contaminates my own conditions of existence, gives undesirable stimuli, and imparts impulses for a downward path; in brief, it does harm to myself. Whether through an evil act I am doing harm to another, I cannot always know. If this were to be the measure of our actions, there would sometimes be excuses for violence, untruth, theft, unchastity and gluttony, and under certain circumstances, they may even be regarded as praiseworthy. But this is not what matters. The moral needs of the world would be fully satisfied if everyone would measure one’s actions with the consequences one has for oneself, and not for others. To be able to do that, one must have a realistic philosophy of life. And to have that, one must be a Buddhist. Being a Buddhist, one will soon understand: even if the good or bad results of my deeds take effect nowhere else, they will take effect in me, the doer, necessarily and unavoidably. For, I do not *have* these actions as a quality of mine, but I *am* these actions myself, and am nothing but my actions. Hence I myself shall become the result of those actions, shall grow myself into these results.

This will have to be comprehended well for enabling one to put into practice a morality that is in accordance with actuality and with the ethical postulates resulting from actuality. Even if one does not possess the inner strength to live up to these ethical postulates, one’s comprehension will have removed the possibility of having a good conscience in the violation of the precepts. Through that fact alone much is gained for one’s future development, and by patience, earnest aspiration, and repeated attempts at perfecting one’s morality, some progress will be attained in times to come.

The goal stands before us: clear, sure and definite, independent of a God's acts of grace and compassion, a goal worthy of man's dignity and attainable by man's effort. If I make progress, it is by virtue of my own strength, because I have thought intelligently and have put these thoughts into practice energetically. If I do not make progress and slide back, it is because I have thought unintelligently and acted accordingly. If I realize that this is so, then I must just try to do better in future. That is all.

Abridged translation from the German *Neu-Buddhistische Zeitschrift, Sommerheft 1918*

Exhortation

Dr. Paul Dahlke

My dear friends, you are so very keen on doing something good for the world, for mankind! But why not, for once, do something good for yourselves? To be sure, what is good always remains good, must always show itself to be good, irrespective whether you practise it towards others or towards yourself. The only difference is that you cannot be always sure what is good for others; but you can quite well know what is good for yourself.

You ask: "Why should I be so much concerned with doing good just for myself?"

I answer: Firstly, because doing something good to yourself is the safest way of doing something good for the world; and secondly, because by that you prepare for yourself a good death and a favourable rebirth. The here and now harbours much more than the here and now. This life of ours contains more than just this limited life span. As a father by providing for himself also provides for his son, so man by providing for this life also provides for the next.

And how can man do good for himself?

He refrains from taking the life of living beings and from using force against them, even if intended for those beings' own best. Even though you who wish to do something good for that being by force or coercion, you cannot know what is actually good for it. But you can know for sure that an attempt to bring force to bear upon another being will do harm to yourself, the user of force. Hence give it up for your own and for others' sake!

He refrains from taking, that is from making his own, what has not been given to him. Theft is here included, but the rule goes much further than that.

He refrains from blindly indulging his sensuality. To be sure, a normal healthy person has a measure of sensuality, and will, at times, yield to it. In moments of gratification, as far as the act itself is concerned, he will be on the same level with the lecher. But there is a great difference in the way how one yields to lust: One might associate with a set of people because one likes them and feels attracted to them; and one might associate with them reluctantly, by force of circumstances, remaining ever mindful of making one's escape from that company. Similarly one can willingly seek the company of one's lustful desires because one is attracted by them; or one may associate with lust reluctantly, and remain constantly mindful of trying to escape from the bondage. He, who yields to lust but remains mindful of the escape, will even when yielding to lust still continue his fight against it, and if he patiently persists, the urge to escape will finally vanquish the urge to yield. But happy is he who, without yielding any more, is strong enough to make his steep and straight ascent of the Path.

He refrains from false speech. This includes telling lies, but again, this precept has a wider range.

He refrains from the use of intoxicants. He will do so because, for one who regards thinking as man's highest faculty, it is a veritable sin to impair the clarity of thought.

These are all prohibitions. But there is also that great postulate of Buddhism, that of Giving.

Give as much as you can, and foremost give in the service of the Teaching, in the service of those who serve the Teaching! The Buddha spoke of his monks as "the incomparable field of merit." To plant seeds in that field means to secure a good harvest. To give means giving a gift that yields interest. He who gives in the service of the Teaching does the very best for himself. He who becomes poorer in the service of the Teaching becomes richer within himself. To give for the Dhamma is the most worthy and the most profitable gift.

Translated from the German *Neu-Buddhistische Zeitschrift, Sommerheft 1919*

Taking the Precepts

Bhikkhu Sīlācāra

When on Uposatha days the Buddhist layman goes to the monastery and having offered his gifts (*dāna*), repeats after the Bhikkhu the words of the pledge to abstain from killing and stealing, from lewdness and lying, from the drinking of intoxicating liquors, it means that he impresses upon his memory once more the Rule by which he is to conduct his daily life. When Uposatha day is over and he is once more back in the midst of worldly duties and occupations. To 'take the precepts' on Uposatha days, or on any other day, means to remind oneself afresh of what the world's pressure of business and pleasure is so apt to make man forget, namely, the course of conduct which leads to the surest happiness in this and in all worlds, and brings him a little nearer to that which is far better than any other happiness this or any other world can give—the great peace of Nibbāna. The precepts, in short, are no magical formula or spell by the mere utterance of which great and miraculous results are to be achieved. They are purely and simply a reminder to the layman of what he must do as he mixes in the life of the great world, so that he may avoid putting any obstacles or hindrances on his path towards the Beyond-of-Life.

If, however, after 'taking the precepts', he goes off and immediately forgets all about them until next time he visits the monastery, obviously, for all the good they do him, he might just as well never have 'taken' them at all. For it cannot be too often insisted that it is not the mere 'taking the precepts', repeating the words of the vows as the Bhikkhu utters them, which leads to happiness here and to Nibbāna when all lives are ended; it is the keeping of these precepts in practice, the fulfilling of the vow in daily life and conduct.

In this matter, it is with Sīla, as it is with Dāna (giving). No one is considered to have made *Dāna* who only gives a promise to provide breakfast for the Bhikkhus, or simply says that he will furnish so many thousand bricks to help to build a new Pagoda. It is only when a man actually does what he has promised to do that it is considered Dāna; until then it is not Dāna at all, but only so many vain words. It is exactly the same with Sīla, the precepts of Right Conduct, the next stage after *Dāna*, which the layman is recommended to follow upon the highroad to Nibbāna pointed out by our Lord Buddha. Until these precepts of Good are kept, acted upon in

daily life in lesser or greater degree, there is no *Sīla* in the matter at all but only idle talk about *Sīla*.

Sīla, in short, means the *practice of Sīla*, and in this understanding of the word, it may perhaps be compared to a railway train, which conveys passengers to a certain destination. In taking advantage of such a train, the first thing to be done is to get a ticket, and afterwards to enter the train. So doing, in due time, a man will reach the town or village for which he is bound.

But if, after purchasing his ticket, instead of going into the train, a man goes away home or sets about to some other business, will he reach the place to which he wishes to go? There can be only one reply: he will not, even though he should buy a hundred tickets. They are, all of them, useless to bring him to the desired destination if the train is not entered. Though a ticket is necessary, indeed indispensable, it is not the ticket but the train that actually does the work of conveying the passenger to his destination.

Now, 'taking the precepts' from a bhikkhu, is only taking the ticket for the Buddha's train, *Sīla*, which carries all who will avail themselves of it to Nibbāna, or to at least a certain stage of it. But not in this case, any more than in the other, can any one get to the desired destination by merely taking a ticket. What is needed in addition is to *use* the ticket after it has been taken, to get into the train of the practice of *Sīla*; then and then only is it certain that the destination will be reached. But then it *is* certain. For there are no accidents or break-downs on this railway; everything is ordered and regular and sure. What a man does, of that he cannot fail to reap the ripened fruit.

Yet there are many people, in other respects quite sensible, who seem to imagine that all they need is to take the ticket for this train, that everything then is settled, and that they have done all they need do in the matter. And so they go to the monastery and take their ticket—yea, week after week, take ticket after ticket, until they must have accumulated quite a huge number of them; but they never enter the train, never try to practise the *Sīla*. Will such persons ever reach Nibbāna? Assuredly not. For all their ticket-taking they will not be one inch nearer to Nibbāna than they were at the beginning. And why not? Because they have never taken their seats in the train.

Or, to put it another way, our Lord Buddha has provided us with a map of the road that leads towards Nibbāna. It is a good map, a reliable map, the best map of the Nibbāna road in existence; for it has been planned out, drawn and coloured by One who has been over all the ground, surveyed the whole route Himself. On this map, the *Sīla* part of that road is clearly and distinctly marked, so that none can mistake it. But what are we to say of a person who sits down by the wayside and passes hours in looking at and admiring this map, in thinking what a fine, correct map it is, how superior to any other map that can be had, supremely satisfied at the thought that this so excellent map is his? Will this man ever get to his destination by this sitting and looking at it as it is marked there on the map? Assuredly not, even though he should look at it till his eyes grow dim with looking, and can look no more. For the thing that brings one to any given destination is not the looking at how one may get there, but the act of going. However long and earnestly he may give himself to such consideration of ways and means, at the end of it all a man is just in the same place he was in at the beginning, still sitting in one spot, not an inch nearer to the desired goal. And meanwhile other travellers along the same road, who perhaps do not possess such a good map as he has, or perhaps have not got one at all, but have only been told of the road by some person who has, are manfully stepping out along the highway and get to the journey's end long before he does. And why? Because they are walking the road.

In much the same fashion, it is to be feared, there are many calling themselves followers of the Lord Buddha and proud to call themselves such, proud that they possess his so excellent

chart of the way to Nibbāna who yet do not follow him at all but just sit still by the roadside admiring the splendid chart with which He has provided them, the chart where every by-road and fork that might lead them astray is clearly marked out, so that they may avoid it. Meanwhile, on the highroad of Sīla, Christians, Hindus, Mohammedans, and many other fellow pilgrims with charts of the road not nearly so complete and so accurate as his own, and some with no charts at all, are all steadily passing along, stoutly following the road. Will these reach the end of the road before the man with the superior chart? There is very much probability that they will. Nay, it is certain that they will if he continues to sit still, admiring his chart and himself as the owner of it; for it is not the chart that brings one to the city, but the following of the road marked on it. Those others with their inferior charts may at times go astray from the direct road and for want of a perfectly accurate guide to it take a wrong turning; yet they are always moving. Once they have found that they have taken the wrong turning, they can retrace their steps and look for the right turning, find that right turning, follow it, and so come to their destination, even with all that loss of time, long before the Buddhist who is content to take a few listless steps when the mood seizes him and then sits down again to admire anew his fine chart and himself as the fortunate, much -to-be-envied owner of it.

But the road to Nibbāna is a very long one, and it is not a few fitful steps now and again that will bring one to it within any reasonable time. On that long journey nothing avails but a resolute and continuous stepping out along the road shown to us, the road of Sīla. 'Taking the precepts' is only taking another look at the map of that road to refresh the memory, to remind ourselves of the existence of the depicted side-paths and alleys that might otherwise cause us to wander from it. What remains to do, when we have so refreshed our memory, is to get upon our feet, and, staff in hand, the staff of courage and constancy, fare forth along that grand highway, with the sure confidence that if only we keep on, we shall inevitably reach its glorious end. "*Appamādena sampādetha*" said He who first thoroughly explored and travelled and made known that road, the world-honoured Buddha. "*Appamādena sampādetha!*": "By diligence attain the goal!"

The Role of the Precepts

L. R. Oates

All religions, as well as the more practical philosophies, have their codes of ethics intended to give some guidance as to the everyday conduct expected of their adherents. Christianity has its Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule; Islam its Five Commandments; Taoism its Three Treasures of Love, Moderation, and Humility; Confucianism its Three Principles of Kindliness, Justice, and Courage; and Brahmanism its complex rules laying down the life prescribed for each caste. It is noteworthy that this last named tradition does not envisage a uniform ethical system for all castes. For instance, members of the warrior caste may take life under certain circumstances without guilt, while the other castes may not do so. Buddhism, however, resembles the other world religions in that its precepts are regarded as universally applicable, at least under the conditions of human existence.

These precepts are usually formulated as five, which in certain cases, especially in Northern Buddhism, are expanded to a more detailed list of ten. The five, it may be recalled, are defined as abstinence from taking life, from theft, from sexual misconduct, from falsehood, and from

intemperance. As an amplification of their true significance, it is worth enumerating the ten, consisting of abstinence from the three bodily evils (taking life, theft, and sexual misconduct), the four verbal evils (falsehood, abuse, slander, and idle gossip), and the three mental evils (greed, hatred, and wrong views). All possible activities come under these three classes of the bodily, the verbal, and the mental, so even when only the usual five are mentioned, the implication is that wrong mental states are at the root of all wrong conduct.

It has often been noted that however much the doctrinal theories of religions may differ, their ethical formulations are remarkably similar, even in detail. For example, by way of comparison with the Christian Golden Rule, we have the Confucian rule of reciprocity, and the Buddhist principle of “likening yourself to others” (*Attānaṃ upamaṃ katvā*), as in verse 129 of the Dhammapada. The reason why so many parallels occur in ethical systems throughout the world is doubtless because all religions have had to adopt a social role as well as a personal one, and whatever the underlying theory might be, it is necessary to solve similar social problems in similar ways. The Buddha recognized this, because in the ethical field he only claimed to confirm what the wisest teachers had always taught. The distinctive part of his doctrine lies in the reasons which he gives for ethical conduct.

This is the main question, as other religious teachers would probably agree. There should not be much dispute that the theistic religions, notably Christianity and Islam, adopt a certain line of action, not for its own sake, but because it is pleasing to the Creator, whose service is held to be the only reason for existence. A certain weakness in this attitude, however, is apparent from the history of these two religions, because in practice certain authorities have taken it upon themselves to define the Divine will, and if these declared that the slaughter of heretics, or the plunder of the heathen, was also pleasing to the Creator, their followers have felt free to do so. This attitude has gone far to undermine the high standards which the founders sought to establish.

Turning further eastward, Confucianism tries to justify its ethical code by an appeal to the interests of the social order, conceived partly as an end in itself and partly as founded on a grander cosmic order, which, however, it is beyond the scope of the human mind to define. Taoism reverses this scheme in an interesting way, since, believing that the social order is entirely dependent on the cosmic order it advises that the best way is to interfere as little as possible with the ultimate law so as to retain the balance and harmony of all things. In its attempt to awaken to ultimate reality and harmonize with it, Taoism approaches the Buddhist spirit more closely than any other philosophy.

The Buddha justified the ethical principles taught by him on two main grounds: firstly, that they form the foundation of all progress towards enlightenment and deliverance from all sorrow, and secondly, that in the interval before this final consummation, they are the basis for the happiest conditions possible in the realm of birth and death. The most concise definition of his teaching was that it concerned “suffering and the end of suffering.” By suffering is meant the indefinite series of cycles of birth and death, driven by wrong desires, bred under the sway of illusion. By its end is meant the dispersion of illusion by wisdom, with consequent emancipation from birth and death in the realization of the changeless Real.

So the role of ethics is twofold, first as the initial practical step towards final emancipation, and second as condition for greater happiness during the interval while we are working towards that goal (which, depending on our state of development, may still take many lives to reach). Let us consider the second reason first, as it concerns the preparatory stage which we must enter to begin with. Before awakening to the need of ethical conduct our thoughts and acts are basically conditioned by three forces: greed, aversion, and delusion. The first pair is the attraction and repulsion arising from the mind’s deluded discrimination of things as pleasant and painful, lovable or hateful, with the resultant struggle to be united with the pleasant and separated from the painful.

These struggles can never reach any final conclusion because of the perpetual and universal change that pervades the entire universe. Nowhere is there any security from separation from the loved and union with the unloved, yet many of us never seem to see things as they are. Those two forces, greed and aversion, are made possible by the third, delusion. This more specifically means that, although surrounded by the ocean of ceaseless change, we fail to perceive that this change operates according to an unalterable law: that what we sow we reap. It is not easy to overcome this obtuseness, because the causes that produced today's fruits may have been set in motion too long ago for easy recall, either in this life, or in earlier ones in a past whose beginning is beyond conception. But as long as the blindness persists, we will have the urge to injure those we hate, to steal what we covet, to lie to conceal our aims, and so forth, not realizing that these deeds will rebound and frustrate our designs not only in this life but in others to come.

On the other hand, to the extent we become awakened to the law of moral causality proclaimed by the Master, we come to see where our highest good lies. It is true that most of us do not habitually break the precepts in a flagrant way because, for mutual protection, human society has evolved restraints of law and custom which are difficult to challenge too directly. So outwardly, there may not seem to be much difference between the conduct of Buddhists and those without any real ethical convictions. But inwardly there is a great difference.

Those whose conduct is restrained not by conviction but by the fear of the law are never at peace. Their thoughts are full of suppressed passions and hatreds which allow them no contentment, and if (as too often happens) social restraint breaks down through war or other dislocation the hidden passions burst out in savage fury. It is otherwise with a convinced Buddhist. He keeps the precepts willingly and contentedly without any wish to transgress them. So he is at peace within, and can dedicate his conduct to the goal to which the Master pointed the way.

That is why, in Buddhist services, the precepts are not taken for their own sake, but as the corollary of taking refuge in the Triple Gem: the Buddha, the Teaching and the Order. This means that we keep the precepts not for purely temporal reasons alone, but because the Buddha adopted them as the foundation of his Teaching (the Path to Awakening), and because they have always prepared the way for the Order of the Enlightened of all ages, the community of all those who have realized the goal.

The relationship of the precepts to the Threefold Refuge was described by the Zen Master Dogen in these words: "We take refuge in the Buddha because he is the supreme teacher. We take refuge in the Doctrine because it is the best medicine. We take refuge in the Order because its members are our excellent friends. It is through taking the Threefold Refuge that we become the Buddha's disciples. Whatever precepts we take, we should first take the Threefold Refuge and then the precepts. That is to say, the taking of the precepts is based on the Threefold Refuge." This brings us to the consideration of the ultimate reason behind the precepts, the fulfillment of the life of enlightenment.

Even from the beginning this is, of course, always a factor. It is not possible to refrain from wrong conduct without putting something in its place. The merely negative method of repression is full of psychological dangers. It leads to a tendency to brood on our past mistakes and weaknesses, and if these continue to occupy our thoughts, we cannot be freed from them. That is why the Buddha said the holy life is like a serpent which, if grasped wrongly is more dangerous than when left alone. Our thoughts must not be suppressed, but liberated and turned to worthier ends.

In the traditional life of Buddhist monks or anchorites, the main preoccupation has been meditation, which opens up a world of subtle experience so satisfying that all yearning for gross mundane attachments dies away of itself. It is not easy, however, for lay Buddhists to develop the art of meditation deeply enough for their thoughts to be wholly transformed in this way. This needs a great deal of time and (in most cases) expert guidance which may not be easy to obtain. That is no reason, of course, why we should not try to cultivate the habit of meditation to the extent we find possible, but at the same time it is desirable to supplement it with other desirable habits. For instance it may be found profitable to develop an interest in Buddhist literature. Although its extent and variety may seem bewildering at first, its exploration will reveal inexhaustible treasures of beauty and wisdom, which will not only give good exercise to the intellect, but will prove a fruitful source of practical hints on the art of living.

The same applies to Buddhist art. Japanese Buddhism has been particularly fruitful in devising means of expressing the Buddhist spirit in many diverse fields such as the tea ceremony, landscape gardening, architecture, calligraphy, archery, and many others, each of which represents a form of expression completely free from egoism. The only motive behind them is to forget the self by losing it in a wider harmony with everything around us, inanimate or animate. They can, therefore, if rightly practised give a certain foretaste of the meaning of ultimate awakening, when the self-illusion is forgotten and sorrow is at an end.

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The Importance of *Pañca Sīla*

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How easy it is to repeat the precepts, how simple they seem as we say: '*Okāsa ahaṃ Bhante, tisaṇaṇena saddhiṃ pañcasīlaṃ yācāmi*'. But how many reflect on the significance of these five abstentions: from evil and foolish living; from those ordinary ways of life which create suffering for ourselves and others (individuals, nations, animals, all forms of sentient life).

In fact modern life, consciously or unconsciously, violates these precepts continuously. It is difficult indeed to live a harmless life; to do so it is necessary to have acquired a certain amount of *Sammā diṭṭhi* (right views), views that are not steeped in ignorance of the Four Noble Truths, etc.

Now, to acquire right views we must have learned to practise right attention (*Sammā sati*), vigilant observation of the phenomena around and about us, and to have also acquired the habit of observing internal mental phenomena. He who does not see the suffering that is bound up with sentient existence and the perpetual change of phenomena, has not learned to practise right attention, nor understood why we take these precepts. Therefore when we say "give me the precepts," we should say "teach me the precepts." Teach me the meaning and the practical application which will lead to the experience of purifying the mind and of establishing a certain harmless way of life, *a different attitude towards life, seen intelligently and compassionately*. Having acquired this attitude these simple precepts, when applied daily, will diminish the suffering for us and for others. *The significance of the precepts is of wide social importance.*

We should reflect that the first precept, that of abstaining from taking life, *any and all life*, will awaken and increase the sentiment of *mettā*. It will establish friendliness between man and man, and man and beast. In this precept is embodied intelligent, all-embracing compassion and goodwill. It alone could save humanity from destruction.

If a large body of men followed this precept they would be peaceful and they would abjure war. No mere lip service of course could so pacify the savage instinct of killing this or that. Life to the savage, as to the proud scientist, is not held sacred; some slay for greed of food, some for greed of power, some for mere sport, others for mere curiosity “to see how the wheel goes round.” Scientific curiosity often prefers the wickedness of willful destruction to the peaceful wisdom that is compassionate and protective of life.

Who has ceased from all hurt to any living thing, active or still;
Who neither slays nor causes to slay—him do I call Brahmin.

(Dhammapada 405)

So we see that the observance of the first precept could change our hearts and pacify the lives of multitudes of men. But our social structure is based on ignorant strife rather than on intelligent compassion. Men really believe that the jungle law of “slay or be slain” is a normal and inevitable way of life.

Then again the second precept affirms the necessity of fair play. It renounces greed and grasping unfair competition that, at any cost, leads one to acquire and accumulate riches by ruining others (as well as by flagrant thieving). The first and second precepts, as *social obligations*, would lead to a friendly co-operation instead of fierce competition. However, war justifies pillage and plunder and even the theft of life itself is considered commendable. Slaughter of man and of beast characterizes our “civilization.”

The third precept also is of great social importance. It implies self-control and would avoid sensual exaggeration. It would establish fidelity in the married life. It would curb physical excesses. The danger of certain contaminations would be eliminated. Health and family and society would benefit.

Who will deny that *musāvādā* leads to corruption of mind, one’s own mind, and causes hurt to others. Lying and slandering are forms of cheating. Stealing a man’s good character may be more harmful than stealing his purse. When nations treacherously, fraudulently, fail to keep their treaties with other nations, we understand the social catastrophe of dissimulation.

Now when the drug habit or the drink habit has weakened the moral stamina of a man, society at large suffers. Just as the repetition of good action establishes *Kusala Kamma*, so the repetition of indulgence in poisons becomes a social evil.

Not one of these precepts can be persistently broken without causing social as well as mental harm. For how can the slayer, the greedy, the sensualist, the deliberate liar or he who is poisoned by drink or drugs be pacified, control his senses, purify his mind, quench his passions and “come to coolness”? How could he consciously meditate, cultivate and develop the Four Illimitables, those sentiments that make for happiness when mind dwells peacefully, and happily radiates *mettā*, *karunā*, *muditā* and *upekkhā*?

In the temple and the school we “take” these civilizing precepts, but that is not enough; they must “take” us, “get us” as the popular saying is, live in us, live by and through us, and help to make and mould a peaceful society.

We count on our bhikkhus to be living examples of the harmless life. By example and by explanation we should come to understand that only by abstaining from evil can we gain good, and establish the good life that leads beyond suffering.

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The Five Rules

More is the treasure of the Law than gems;
Sweeter than comb its sweetness: its delights
Delightful past compare. Thereby to live
Hear the *Five Rules* aright:

Kill not—for pity's sake—and lest you slay
The meanest thing upon its upward way.

Give freely and receive, but take from none
By greed, or force, or fraud, what is his own.

Bear not false witness, slander not, nor lie;
Truth is the speech of inward purity.

Shun drugs and drinks which work the wit abuse;
Clear minds, clean bodies, need no Soma juice.

Touch not thy neighbour's wife, neither commit
Sins of the flesh unlawful and unfit.

Edwin Arnold, *The Light of Asia*

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