



The Five Precepts of Buddhism for the Peaceful World

*Sumana*¹, *Dr. Chandrakitti (Champalal) Bhante*²

¹PhD Research Scholar, Subharti School of Buddhist Studies, Swami Vivekanand Subharti University, Meerut-250002

²Assistant Professor and HOD, Subharti School of Buddhist Studies, Swami Vivekanand Subharti University, Meerut-250002

ABSTRACT

The Five Precepts constitute the basic ethical guidelines for lay Buddhists and serve as the cornerstone for moral conduct within Buddhism. This foundational ethical code consists of abstentions aimed at cultivating a life of peace, self-restraint, and compassion towards all living beings. The precepts include abstaining from taking life, stealing, engaging in sexual misconduct, false speech, and the intake of intoxicants that cloud the mind. These guidelines are not commandments imposed by a divine authority but are voluntary commitments taken by individuals to foster personal and communal well-being, ethical integrity, and spiritual development.

The first precept emphasizes non-violence and respect for life, encouraging practitioners to cultivate compassion and mindfulness towards all sentient beings. The second precept promotes honesty and respect for others' possessions, fostering a society built on trust and generosity. The third precept focuses on responsible sexual behavior, protecting individuals and families from harm and emotional distress. The fourth precept underscores the importance of truthful communication, contributing to harmonious relationships and community trust. Lastly, the fifth precept warns against the use of substances that impair judgment and mindfulness, advocating for a clear mind as essential in the pursuit of wisdom and enlightenment.

These precepts are not only ethical imperatives but also practical guidelines that promote mental clarity, emotional stability, and a deepened sense of empathy and connection with others. By adhering to these principles, individuals cultivate a life of virtue and mindfulness, contributing to the alleviation of suffering and the realization of inner peace. Moreover, the practice of the Five Precepts reflects the interconnectedness of personal behavior with broader societal and environmental well-being, illustrating Buddhism's holistic approach to ethics and spiritual development.

Keywords: Five Precepts, Buddhism, Peaceful, Happiness, Harmony, Well-being

1. Introduction

The Dhamma taught by the Buddha shows us the correct path which leads to ultimate peace. This path can be classified into three stages. They are *Sīla* (morality), *Samādhi* (concentration) and *Paññāna* (wisdom). They are three cornerstones of Buddhism, which lead us ultimate peace. They can be fulfilled over many lifetimes with great effort. Of these, the first stage is *Sīla*. Discipline, good conduct, virtue, precept and morality are synonymous with this word *Sīla*. This is foundation to lead a religious way of life. If a house is built without laying a proper foundation, it will be very unstable. Modern man had learned how important it is to live in *Sīla*. We must learn how to live as harmless and gentle human beings. In simple language, we must know how to live without disturbing the peace and good-will of others. It means respecting the right of others to live in peace and harmony. If we are able to do this, it will indeed be a great achievement. A good Buddhist has a deep respect and concern for the well-being of every other being. This is *Sīla*.

The meaning of the term '*Sīla*' is morality or discipline. It is divided into two sections. They are *Cāritta Sīla*- the duties that one should perform and *Vāritta Sīla*- abstinences' from what is prohibited by the Buddha. Performing the obligatory duties towards parents, children, husband, wife, teachers, pupils, friends, monks etc. mentioned in detail in *Singālovāda sutta* is fulfillment of *Cāritta Sīla*. Apart from these, observing five precepts, eight precepts, ten precepts etc. other disciplinary rules is fulfillment of *Vāritta Sīla*.

"The one who neglects *Cāritta Sīla* is not perfect in *Vāritta Sīla*. With impurity of *Sīla*, the ignorant cannot focus one's mind."

"The unconcentrated mind could not see the truth. Not seeing the truth, there is no liberation of suffering".

There are five precepts, which are basic principles for lay Buddhists with regard to *Vāritta*. They are abstaining from killing, stealing, committing sexual misconduct, telling lies and taking intoxicants and drugs. If someone observes these noble precepts, he not only leads religious way of life but also renders a better service to others by allowing them to live peacefully. By leading a pure life according to the noble Eightfold path, we become noble ourselves and our lives become more meaningful. Those who are spiritually advanced see nonsense at all in material possessions and worldly powers. Therefore, they renounce the worldly pleasures and observe the precepts in order to gain more peace and happiness. If every human being in this world could follow the five precepts which are the noble principles of moral conduct, how peaceful and happy we will all be!

Fundamental Moral Conduct For a lay Buddhist

Five precepts are the fundamental moral conduct for a layperson in Buddhism, through which bodily and verbal actions are controlled. The five precepts provide good qualities of life such as prosperities, grace, courage, mindfulness and birth in the happy states after death. Individual and social harmonies also depend on it. There are many kinds of moral precepts: namely- the five precepts, the eight precepts, the ten precepts and the fourfold purity of monastic moral precepts etc. Of these, the five precepts which is fundamental moral conduct for every Buddhist layperson would have been studied from canonical point of view. The original Pali word of five precepts is Pañca Sīla. Here, Sīla means restraint in physical and verbal actions. It means purity in thought, word and deed. The two basic helpful foundations for moral precept (Sīla) are hiri (shame to evil) and Ottappa (fear to do evil). These two causes are the proximate ones to get moral restraint or discipline in moral life. Although there are many kinds of Sīla given by the lord Buddha, on the whole, it is of two kinds: Cāritta Sīla, fulfilling the moral codes prescribed by the Buddha and Vāritta Sīla refraining from immoral conducts prohibited by the Buddha.'

Five Precepts-Pañca Sīla

The five precepts prescribed in the Pāli canon for every lay Buddhist are:

- (1) Abstaining from killing a living being
- (2) Abstaining from taking what is not given
- (3) Abstaining from sexual misconduct
- (4) Abstaining from telling lies
- (5) Abstaining from taking intoxicants.

Exposition of First Precept and Its Consequences

The first of the five Precepts is to refrain from killing a living being. Killing of any living being with intention means a breach of the first precept of non-killing. By observing the first precept of non-killing, we save the lives of one, two, three and other countless beings. Sīla ensures the safety of all living beings and augments the flourishing of Metta, karuṇā, and Muditā towards all living beings. Thus the world will become a more auspicious peaceful and enjoyable abode where all sentient beings will live happily ever after. Suppose, if a man is killing living being, the victim will suffer terribly. All beings are crying, shaking in fear of death. If we observe this first precept, we save their lives, make them happy and give them freedom. They will live peacefully and harmoniously in the world.

However, some people are killing living beings. The worst thing is that people are fighting and killing each other, waging civil wars, regional wars and world wars where many people die, some become handicapped, some homeless. In some countries people kill each other claiming "ethnic cleansing". Actually these unpleasant things are created by people who ignore the first precept of abstaining from killing living beings. Motivated by anger and hatred, they kill. They should control their anger in order to keep this precept by cultivating loving kindness and compassion. Moreover, they should reflect on universal law of kamma, the law of action and reaction. According to this law, if one kills others, he will be killed in this life or in the next life. If he abstains from killing, he will have advantages such as being healthy and having longevity etc....

As to the first precept of non-killing, it is the fact that everyone wants to be healthy and happy. No one, at least, wants to have a headache. Bodily suffering and mental suffering caused by pain, injury and illness etc. are the consequences of transgressing the first precept of non-killing. Transgressing the first precept of non-killing would eventually lead to world war spreading bloodshed globally. The first precept of non-killing should not be transgressed because this would cause catastrophe to one and every inhabitant on this earth. By observing the first precept of non-killing, we save the lives of one, two, three and other countless beings and also control our hatred and cultivate loving kindness.

Exposition of Second Precept and Its Consequences

Second Precept is Adinnādāna Virati. It means abstaining from taking what is not given. Taking other's things without asking for permission of owner and taking other's properties by force or by cheating or by trick or by trading with false weight, false measuring basket, or false scale or adulteration are Adinnadana kamma.

If everyone observes this precept, we could keep our house open and unlocked. We wouldn't need the police for our security. Nevertheless, there are some people who violate it, and we live under heavy security forces. Reflecting on world history in the nineteenth century, some powerful countries colonized other countries. Their policy was obviously against this precept. The colonial countries lived unhappily under imperial countries because they had lost their country, their culture, their civil rights and their nationality. They did not have freedom and were oppressed in many ways.

As to the second precept, many people experienced intense distress when their belongings were stolen or robbed. Robbing or stealing causes affliction and misery to the victims. By abstaining from stealing other's properties, we can free all human beings from suffering, woe and create physical peace as well as mental peace. Moreover, we could control our greed and cultivate non-attachment.

Exposition of Third Precept and Its Consequences

The third precept is abstaining from committing misconduct in sexual relations. A man having sex with a woman other than his wife, or a woman having sex with another man other than her husband is sexual misconduct, *Kāmesumicchācāra*, which is, indeed, a heinous crime.

This precept is very effective in making a perfect family life. If the husband and wife are faithful to each other without committing sexual misconduct, their marriage will be solid and happy. Otherwise, they will have a family feud. This precept seems particularly weak in big cities, because news of sex scandals are heard often from televisions and newspapers. People are living in danger of rapists. Extreme sexual desire is the cause of violating the precept of abstaining from committing sexual misconduct.

To control this desire, one should contemplate on the thirty-two parts of the body. He has to contemplate like this; "This body has hairs of the body, hairs of the head, nail, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, diaphragm, spleen, lungs, intestines, bowels, stomach, excrement, brain, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, spittle, nasal mucus, oil of the joints, and urine. If these four factors are involved in committing adultery, one is said to have committed *Kāmesumicchācāra kamma*. If a man has sex with any woman who is under the guardianship of someone, he commits *Kāmesumicchācāra*, which is a heinous crime. The perpetrator will suffer the evil consequences such as being reborn in the four miserable realms, being reborn as a sexual pervert in the human world for many existences, and being separated from his loved ones.

As to the third precept of non-committing sexual misconduct, ordinary worldlings are very fond of sensual pleasure, especially, bodily pleasure. Every man is attached to his better half very much and never hesitant to defend her fiercely. Therefore to abstain from sexual misconduct means abstaining from causing misery and suffering to others. Abstinence from sexual misconduct will bring peace and calm to everyone living in this world. Moreover, we could control sensual lust and cultivate our contentment.

Exposition of fourth Precept and Its Consequences

The fourth precept is abstaining from telling lies, cheating or deceiving. Telling what is not true by gesture or by words with malicious intention is committing the fourth precept. A lot of people speak untruths, more or less, so it is said that lying is common. Telling a lie, nevertheless, degrades one's moral value because he is not a trustworthy person. People do not want to associate and work with him. Being kept away by people he will live a lonely life.

In addition, everyone should be aware of self-cheating which is more dangerous than cheating others because we would be hypocrite. A hypocrite won't achieve in practice of morality and spirituality. That's why a meditator should practice meditation honestly and report and discuss honestly his experience with his teachers. Apparently hatred and greed are the causes of telling a lie, some people never tell the truth to those whom they hate and dislike: some deceive their rival business men or politician.

As to the fourth precept of non-telling lies, those who had the experience of being cheated or told lies, would suffer from extreme anger. Today, there are many sectarian leaders who propagate their faith professing it to be the absolute truth. Therefore, millions of people are led astray, finally encountering an infinite number of catastrophes. To abstain from telling lies amounts to protecting others from suffering. Moreover, we amount to cultivate truthfulness.

Exposition of Fifth Precept and Its Consequences

Fifth precept is abstaining from taking intoxicants. Everyone should observe this precept because if we break it, we would violate other precepts too. We have found many criminals who committed drug-related crimes in the world. Drug addicts dare to kill, to rape, or to lie, and they are socially and morally unacceptable people. Because of them, there is no peaceful environment.

Generally, people with a temperament of ignorance and delusion enjoy using drugs. In order to avoid the suffering of their lives, some of them drink alcohol to be drunk, some use cocaine or heroin to dream a fantasy world. To be free from the situation of drug use, one has to control and subdue ignorance and replace it with wisdom. He should practice mindfulness meditation regularly for increasing wisdom which leads him on the right path.

As to the fifth precept of non-taking intoxicants, one who consumes some forms of intoxicant will suffer from bad consequences in this life and the lives hereafter. When most drinkers are drunk, they are no more hesitant to breach the other precepts. They are willing to quarrel, to kill, to steal or to tell lies. Therefore intoxicants cause addicts to commit atrocities without restraint. They would no longer be reluctant to commit murder, rape, arson, theft, etc. The alcoholic causes misery to everybody in his community. Those who abstain from taking intoxicants will free the world from such misery and distress. Moreover, we can develop mindfulness by abstaining from taking intoxicants. Therefore a person should try his best to observe all precepts so that all inhabitants on earth are in peace and harmony.

Conclusion

Lay Buddhist morality embodies in the five precepts. It may be considered at two levels. First, it enables men to live together in civilized communities with mutual trust and respect. Second, it is the starting point for the spiritual journey towards liberation. Unlike other religious commandments, Buddhist precepts are accepted voluntarily by the person himself with understanding the usefulness of adopting some training rules for disciplining his body and speech. The precepts are basic practice in Buddhism. They are guidelines for human beings to follow on right path to future security, happiness and

welfare. The purpose is to eliminate rude passions that are expressed through thought, word and deed. The precepts are also indispensable basis for people who wish to cultivate their minds.

When a person observes the precept of not killing, he controls his hatred and cultivates loving-kindness. In the second precept, he controls his greed and cultivates non-attachment. He controls sensual lust and cultivates his contentment in the third precept. In the fourth precept, he abstains from false speech and cultivates truthfulness. He abstains from unwholesome mental excitement and develops mindfulness through the fifth precept. When a person follows the precepts through faith, he will realize that the observance of the five precepts does not cause him to be self-critical and negative, but to earn great fame and reputation. The scent of the virtue excels all scents and the reputation of the virtuous ones wafts in all directions. Therefore, the Buddha says;

Every country has its codes which are considered to be moral actions within its contexts. These codes are often linked to the society's interests and its code of law. These man-made codes are flexible and amended from time to time to suit changing circumstances. This man-made standard cannot serve as a reliable guide to some principles of morality which can be applied universally. By contrast, Buddhist morality is not the invention of human mind. It is based on the universal law of cause and effect.

The precepts based on the universal law of cause and effect should be observed by every one for happiness in this world and the next also, it is like a daily meal which has to be had. If one does not take it, he will die. Likewise one who neglects the five precepts will lose his noble human life and go to woeful states. Although there are many precepts, we can easily keep the five precepts through sympathy treating others as we would like to be treated by them. If we love all living beings unconditionally, we have already kept them. Therefore, we should cultivate loving-kindness towards all living beings in order to observe the five precepts.

May all beings be happy and peaceful!

References:

1. Dhammapada pali and Atthakatha
2. Dhammasangani Pali (Atthasalini)
3. Dhammasangani Atthakatha
4. Vinaya Pitaka- Suttavibhanga 2
5. Visuddhimagga Pali and Atthakatha
6. Theragatha Pali and Theragatha Atthakatha
7. Itivuttaka Pali and Atthakatha
8. Anguttara Nikaya Pali and Anguttara Nikaya Atthakatha