

Application of Buddhist Teachings in Modern Life: The Foundational Role of the Five Moral Precepts¹

By Ron Epstein

Abstract:

Focusing with the lens of the five moral precepts as they have been traditionally taught in Buddhism, the author shows how they can be applied in new ways to the complexities of modern life. Each precept is examined individually to explore its relevance to the problems of the contemporary world.

Introduction: A Brief and General Explanation of the Moral Precepts

Much of the Buddha's teaching can be summarized in this often repeated instruction: we should use moral precepts, meditative concentration, and clear, correct understanding as antidotes for the three poisons of greed, anger and foolishness, because these three poisons are the main reason that unenlightened living is fundamentally unsatisfactory (*duḥkha*). Of the three antidotes, the first mentioned, moral precepts, comprises the foundational component of Buddhism. The precepts were spoken by the Buddha at the beginning of his teaching life, and he elaborated on them as situations arose that required further moral guidelines. They are part of the two-fold formula — *dharma-vinaya* — that the Buddha recommended at the time of his nirvana as the most reliable guide to practice once he was no longer in the world.² In the very first Buddhist teachings brought to China, in the form of the *Sutra in Forty-Two Sections*, the Buddha says:

My disciples may be several thousand miles away from me, but if they remember my precepts, they will certainly obtain the fruits of the Way. If those who are by my side do not follow my precepts, they may see me constantly, but in the end

¹ This paper was submitted to the Third World Buddhist Forum, which convened in Hong Kong in April, 2012.

² Just before the Buddha entered nirvana he said to the Venerable Ananda: 'It may be, Ananda, that in some of you the thought might arise, "The word of the master is ended, we have no teacher more!" But it is not thus, Ananda, that you should regard it. The Truths [Dharma], and the Rules of the Order [vinaya], which I have set forth and laid down for you all, let them, after I am gone, be teacher for you.' (T. W. and C. A. F. Rhys translators, *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Part II. *Sacred Books of the Buddhists*, Vol. III (1938), p 171.

they will not obtain the Way."³

The ethical guidelines that are embodied in the moral precepts (*śīla*) and in the monastic regulations (*vinaya*) are lenses that help us focus our understanding, and they act as guards that keep us from generating karma that will lead to increased dissatisfaction in our lives. Buddhist ethics are based on knowledge of the relation between our intentional actions (physical, verbal, and mental) and their consequences. Both wholesome and unwholesome intentional actions arise from the mind. Unwholesome ones are easier to curtail if one is aware of them when they are just sprouting into consciousness. Intentional activity is the definition of karma, so Buddhist ethics can be said to be karma-based. Such an understanding of ethical action has, for example, influenced Chinese civilization for over two thousand years, has become an important part of the Chinese cultural heritage, and is an integral part of the Chinese collective psyche.

The *Brahma Net Sutra* historically has been the main written source of the Bodhisattva precepts in China. The sutra's title is based on the following symbolic imagery. As an adornment of his court, a netted curtain is suspended before the god Brahma, lord of the Brahma Heaven of the pure world of form. A pearl is suspended in the center of each of the spaces of the net. Each of the pearls reflects all the other pearls and also shines its light on all the other pearls. The result is a dazzling display of infinitely inter-reflected light. The net curtain can be understood analogically. It stands for one's own body and mind. Each space in the netting represents a specific outflow of one's vital energy. Each pearl represents a moral precept that plugs an outflow. To the extent that one keeps the moral precepts, the pearls emit light and illuminate both one's own body and mind and also those of all other living beings.

What it has traditionally meant to conduct one's life in accordance with the moral precepts is well known in communities in Buddhist countries and has been chronicled in a wide range of writings. The Venerable Master Hsüan Hua summarized it in the following verses:

*If in this life you don't keep birds in cages,
in future lives you will not sit in jail.
If in this life you do not capture fish,
in future lives you will not beg for food.*

³*The Sutra in 42 Sections Spoken by the Buddha with Explanation by the Venerable Master Hsuan Hua*, Rpt. Buddhist Text Translation Society, 2009, page 74.

*If in this life you do not kill,
in future lives you'll suffer no disasters.
If in this life you do not steal,
in future lives you won't be robbed.
If in this life you commit no sexual misconduct,
in future lives you will not be divorced.
If in this life you do not lie,
in future lives you will not be deceived.
If in this life you do not take intoxicants,
In future lives you will not go insane.⁴*

Although writings on the traditional Buddhist understanding of the moral precepts could be said to be almost ubiquitous, serious consideration of their practical application to the dauntingly complex world of the present is still in its infancy. Nowadays Buddhist ethics are not primarily taught and applied in the aesthetically pleasing surroundings of ancient temples that have become museums, or in places that attempt a lifeless imitation ancient Buddhist daily life. Everyday worldly situations are all potential opportunities for assessing how the moral precepts can be practically applied. It is to that challenge that I would like to direct the present discussion. Focusing on the context of contemporary society, I would like to reexamine the meaning and application of the Five Moral Precepts, which embody the fundamentals of the Buddhist ethical teachings, using the framework of karma, which can be understood as the network of intentional actions that lead to specific consequences.

1) Respect for and non-harming of all sentient life

Not to harm sentient life is the first and essential step toward true compassion. All the other precepts can be derived from it. The Venerable Master Hsüan Hua explained it this way:

Why should one refrain from killing? It is because all living beings have a life; they love their life and do not wish to die. Even one of the smallest creatures, the mosquito, when it approaches to bite you, will fly away if you make the slightest motion. Why does it fly away? Because it fears death. It figures that if it drinks

⁴ Ven. Master Hsuan Hua. *The Shurangama Sutra with Commentary*, Vol. 2. , Buddhist Text Translation Society; 2nd edition (October 1, 2003) p. 46. See also "Abhisanda Sutta"--The rewards of observing the precepts: AN VIII.39, and the "Vipaka Sutta"--The consequences of failing to observe the precepts: AN VIII.40.

*your blood you will take its life. From this you can see that all living beings love life and do not wish to die. Especially people. Everyone wants to live and no one wants to die. Although people sometimes commit suicide, ordinarily people do not seek death. Suicide is a special exception to the principle. That is why we should nurture compassionate thought. Since we wish to live, we should not kill any other living beings.*⁵

This moral precept encompasses more than a prohibition against killing. Respect for life includes the recognition that all sentient beings have intrinsic value, apart from any instrumental value they may have. That means we should not see other beings, or ourselves, as objects, as mere tools for the gratification of desires. Yet this is exactly what modern society teaches us to do — to treat other people as objects, and even to treat ourselves as objects to be judged by others as objects of desire. But in our true nature, we are not sex objects, nor are we objects to be used to assuage others' insecurities through forced manipulations.

Respect for others and for ourselves starts with the notions of filial respect promulgated by both Confucius and the Buddha. Infant and childhood relations with our parents and other family members are the templates for all of our relations with others in later life. Yet the popular media totally undermine these basic values of a healthy society — respect for parents and elders, respect for our bodies, and respect for marriage and family.

Although these values are equally to be found in the traditional canon of Western cultural values, they have been somewhat attenuated in the West by the myth of the isolated, independent, rights-bearing individual, which is one of the foundations of Western democratic political theory. Yet the notion of the autonomous individual does not correspond to the reality of the experience of each one of us. From conception, we are not separate or isolated from others. One's relation with one's mother and then with one's father and siblings and close relatives becomes the template for one's sense of identity and one's further relationships in society. The interpersonal self, which acknowledges its shared experience and its dependence on others for the common welfare, creates a firm basis for understanding the need for properties and interests held in public commons that belong to all, in contradistinction to the closed-off properties and interests of the isolated individual. (Of course, from the Buddhist perspective, even this sense of interpersonal self must be understood to be a temporary and ultimately illusory construction based on ignorance and fundamental cravings.)

⁵ "Five Moral Precepts," Ronald B. Epstein and Buddhist Text Translation Society Editorial Committee, *Buddhism A to Z*, Buddhist Text Translation Society, 2003.

One important but overlooked aspect of this is the all-too-frequent denial or willful ignorance of the relation between mentally breaking the precepts and physically breaking the precepts. We all know that killing other humans is wrong, yet how many of us take seriously what kids learn when they kill characters in computer games? These games nourish a measurable predilection for violence in a significant minority of the children who play them, and it has led to the dehumanizing situation in which soldiers in remote locations use computer game formats to control drones that kill people halfway around the world.

Buddhism teaches that the karma of killing, which is the root cause of violence and war, hangs over all of us like the dark and ominous clouds of an incipient storm. Although that cloud of karma is invisible, it is nonetheless real. Its origin is thoughts of harm and killing in the minds of all sentient beings. Much of the cloud consists of the fear, resentment and hatred felt by beings who have been killed or are about to be killed. They include not only the human victims of violence, but also the billions of animals that are victims of the explosion of meat-eating on the planet.

The First Moral Precept and Environmental Harm of Sentient Life

We are faced with two special challenges that make it much more difficult now than was in the Buddha's time to keep the precept against killing. First, our senses have become effectively obsolete in their ability to detect harm, and, second, it is difficult if not impossible for us to follow many of the long and complicated chains of cause and effect that are ubiquitous in contemporary life. Our nervous systems evolved to detect dangers to our health and life that we might encounter in a natural environment. They still work to a certain extent in our post-natural world — for example, with our eyes we can still detect some human-caused dangers, such as visible smog, and we can still detect with our taste and smell certain harmful man-made chemicals, but other unnatural causes of harm and death are not detectable by our senses: invisible air pollution, much water and soil pollution, and nuclear radiation, to give just a few examples. And by our lack of understanding of how a wide range of individual and collective acts of pollution has led to serious and widespread consequences for humans, animals, ecosystems, and even for planet-wide self-regulating systems, we have put life itself on Mother Earth in danger of extinction.

The whole planet is in crisis and, since there are so many things wrong, it is hard to know where to begin. Yet Buddhist ethical teachings provide a mechanism for analyzing the underlying mental and physical causal patterns which are the seeds that may grow into dire consequences. We need to explore carefully how Buddhist teachings can

provide us with an analysis of root causes and help us develop new perspectives for lessening environmental death and destruction and the human suffering that they entail.

From a Buddhist perspective, morality is based on purification of the mind. As our minds are purified, our actions are purified. As a result, not only do mental attitudes that are dissonant or harmful to the natural world disappear, but new mental states lead directly to more enlightened actions in relation to the natural world and more enlightened influence on others about the natural world. This was already apparent in the Buddha's time. Buddhist monks and nuns vow to follow moral precepts that prohibit harming of the environment, including all the sentient beings who live in it. Buddhist monastics make vows for protecting the purity of the water; for not killing sentient beings who live in the earth; for not killing insects, birds, and animals; for not starting forest fires; and for respecting the life of trees, particularly ancient ones.

2) Not taking what is not given

Not taking what is not given, the second of the five moral precepts, is much broader notion than not stealing. Not stealing is all too often thought to be restricted to not illegally taking the possessions of others.

Do our thoughts and actions reinforce the duality of self and other because we see our own interests as separate from those of others? Or do our thoughts and acts generate the compassion for others that comes from the realization that what separates us is not as profoundly important as our fundamental commonalities and ultimate non-duality? When we take advantage of other people and extract from them, against their will, money, goods, labor, or services, that is not taking what is not given. Then we are also reinforcing mental attachments to categories that blind us to the Buddhist Path and cut us off from the selfless compassion of the Buddha.

In traditional cultures, taking what is not given was personal and direct. Everyone could identify it and see it happening, clearly and distinctly. The complicated nature of contemporary society, with its long, twisted, and often hidden chains of causes and effects, very often makes it difficult to identify this category of exploitation directly and personally. When the pathway from the doing of the deed to its consequences becomes muddled, and too long and circuitous to follow, the keeping of the precept becomes problematic. To give just one example, if a large corporation is, in either its broad or narrow sense, effectively stealing, whether legally or illegally, from large numbers of people in some developing country on the other side of the world, what degree of involvement with that corporation is permissible for us if we wish to keep this precept? That is not an easy question to answer.

Buddhist teachings can act as an aid in clarifying and magnifying such muddled situations and can encourage us to try to clarify and shorten the causal chains of the everyday transactions of contemporary daily life.

3) No sexual misconduct

In Buddhist societies, the prohibition against sexual misconduct traditionally meant celibacy for monastics and adherence to the cultural norms of marriage for lay disciples. The moral precept against sexual misconduct directs our attention to the negative effects of outflows of sexual energy for Buddhist practice, and also acknowledges the potential disruptive effects that improper sexual activity has on society and on basic social values. The teachings quoted below, from the Pali canon, illustrate some of these concerns:

Monks, these two bright qualities guard the world. Which two? Conscience and concern.⁶ If these two bright qualities did not guard the world, there would be no recognition of 'mother' here, no recognition of 'mother's sister,' 'uncle's wife,' 'teacher's wife,' or 'wife of those who deserve respect.' The world would be immersed in promiscuity, like rams with goats, roosters with pigs, or dogs with jackals. But because these two bright qualities guard the world, there is recognition of 'mother,' 'mother's sister,' 'uncle's wife,' 'teacher's wife,' and 'wife of those who deserve respect.'"⁷

Four things befall the heedless man who lies down with the wife of another: a wealth of demerit; a lack of good sleep; third, censure; fourth, hell.⁸

The institution of marriage has largely broken down in many societies of the developed world, so that serial monogamy outside of marriage has become widely acceptable, as has childbirth outside of marriage. Divorce has become so common as to call into serious question the meaning of marriage itself. And these changes in social attitude are strongly reinforced by the social media. We may know that sexual misconduct leads to serious negative consequences not only for those involved but also for society as a whole, but very few contemporary societies restrict or censure its being portrayed as the norm and as being without consequences. In film, on video, and on the Internet, the norm has become portrayal of casual sex without mention of its dangers — pregnancy,

⁶ Concern for the results of unskillful actions.

⁷ AN 2.9 PTS: A i 51. *Lokapala Sutta*: “Guardians of the World.” translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an02/an02.009.than.html>

⁸ *DhP 309-310 Dhammapada*, translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. <http://www.dharma.org/bcbs/Pages/documents/dhammapada.pdf>

disease, social disruption, and deep personal suffering .

Clear explanation by Buddhist teachers of the meaning and importance of this precept for the Buddhist laity and exhortation for them to make vows to follow this precept can be a strong force to heal this dangerous rent in the social fabric.

4) No wrong or harmful speech

The traditional formulation of this moral precept is “I undertake to abstain from wrong speech: telling lies, deceiving others, manipulating others, using hurtful words.”

The Buddha said:

In the case of words that the Tathāgata [the Buddha] knows to be factual, true, beneficial, and endearing and agreeable to others, he has a sense of the proper time for saying them. Why is that? Because the Tathāgata has sympathy for living beings.⁹

The Venerable Master Hsuan Hua points to deeper levels of the significance of this precept in the following verse:

*Truly recognize your own faults;
Don't discuss the faults of others;
Others' faults are my very own faults.
Affirming our identity with all
Is what is meant by great compassion.*

Profound personal honesty is absolutely essential for progress on the Buddhist Path. If we cannot be true to ourselves, we cannot be trustworthy in social relationships. Yet deception and dishonesty is the widespread currency of contemporary society. In the West many hold the notion that any deceit is acceptable as long as it is legal. This begins with deceiving others about the appearance of our bodies, includes phony representations of people and products in advertising, and is exemplified by widespread cheating on examinations, lying on resumes, and falsifying data in scientific papers. Deceit about financial transactions on the highest levels of the corporate world played a major role in the world financial crisis of 2008. Given recent technological developments, documents, photographs, and videos can now be easily altered in ways that are extremely difficult if not impossible to detect. People are routinely deceived and harmed by other people who use false identities and misrepresentations on the Internet. Using

⁹MN 58. <http://www.accesstoinight.org/ptf/dhamma/sacca/sacca4/samma-vaca/index.html>

the lens of this precept, it easily becomes clear where corrective action needs to be taken.

5) No taking of intoxicants

The traditional formulation of the fifth precept is as follows: “I undertake the training rule to abstain from fermented drink that causes heedlessness.” That is generally interpreted as abstention from alcoholic beverages.

Traditional explanations of reasons for this precept emphasize the danger that intoxicants cloud the mind — which is the exact opposite of the mental clarity that one strives for in Buddhist self-cultivation. Many intoxicants not only lead to a clouded mind, but also significantly diminish one’s sense of ethical responsibility, with the result that other moral precepts may be broken as well.

Most modern Buddhist masters teach that this precept prohibits a wide range of substances that cloud the mind, including recreational drugs and often tobacco. Little scientific and social attention has been given to the above mentioned side-effects of both legal intoxicants, such as alcohol and many prescription drugs, but also to illegal substances, such as marijuana and cocaine.

From a Buddhist ethical perspective, one of the major flaws of contemporary society is the pervasive manipulation of desires, from early childhood, by advertising. Media are flooded with messages that any personal physical or mental unpleasantness should be alleviated by taking a drug, whether legal or illegal. Prescription drug advertising on television is ubiquitous, and a large percentage of Internet sales of prescription pain killers and tranquilizers are made on the basis of phony prescriptions. Among the general public, there is little recognition of the Buddhist insight that these methods of avoiding pain and suffering just cover over the real problems, lead to more suffering, and do not get at the root causes. Drugs cannot replace the curative effects of introspection, repentance, and change of one’s mental and physical habits that cause the suffering in the first place. The pains of physical illness and the aging of the body must be dealt with on a deep level of insight into the nature of our bodies and our relation to them.

Buddhist teachers can play an important role in changing perspectives on pain and suffering. They can introduce people to specific methods of Buddhist practice that can be employed as an alternative to drugs, whether legal or illegal, and that can lead to true relief.

Conclusion

The historical Buddha Siddhārtha Gautama legislated moral guidelines for both his monastic community and his lay disciples by combining the principles of karma with Buddhist virtues in accordance with specific situations. His moral precepts protect us from committing bad karma and safeguard our purity of mind and body. Some of his guidelines are easy to apply universally and others refer to social and historical situations that no longer exist. Likewise, the contemporary world is filled with everyday situations and occurrences that not only did not exist at the time of the Buddha, but also would have been inconceivable to ordinary people then. Buddhist ethics have been preserved in Buddhist cultures in the countries to which Buddhism has spread. Their strength lies in their ability to retain their fundamental values while being creatively and legitimately applied to the new circumstances of our contemporary world. This work of applying Buddhist ethics to our new circumstances of daily living is not only of utmost importance for the Buddhist community, but it also can have widespread benefits to society as a whole. Buddhist insights and their ethical frameworks contain common values that are effective tools for all good people who wish to work together to repair the moral fabric of society, lessen human suffering, and restore our natural world.