

2.1 THE FIVE PRECEPTS

[Source: Bhikkhu Bodhi, "Going for refuge; Taking the precepts." Wheel 282/283/284.

Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1981]

Selected by Piya Tan

I. The Essential Meaning of *Sīla*

The Pali word for moral discipline, *sīla*, has three levels of meaning:

- (1) inner virtue, ie, endowment with such qualities as kindness, contentment, simplicity, truthfulness, patience, etc.;
- (2) virtuous actions of body and speech which express those inner virtues outwardly; and
- (3) rules of conduct governing actions of body and speech designed to bring them into accord with the ethical ideals.

These three levels are closely intertwined and not always distinguishable in individual cases. But if we isolate them, *sīla* as inner virtue can be called the aim of the training in moral discipline, *sīla* as purified actions of body and speech the manifestation of that aim, and *sīla* as rules of conduct the systematic means of actualizing the aim. Thus *sīla* as inner virtue is established by bringing our bodily and verbal actions into accord with the ethical ideals, and this is done by following the rules of conduct intended to give these ideals concrete form.

The Buddhist texts explain that *sīla* has the characteristic of harmonizing our actions of body and speech. *sīla* harmonizes our actions by bringing them into accord with our own true interests, with the well-being of others, and with universal laws. Actions contrary to *sīla* lead to a state of self-division marked by guilt, anxiety, and remorse. But the observance of the principles of *sīla* heals this division, bringing our inner faculties together into a balanced and centered state of unity. *sīla* also brings us into harmony with other men. While actions undertaken in disregard of ethical principles lead to relations scarred by competitiveness, exploitation, and aggression, actions intended to embody such principles promote concord between man and man—peace, cooperation, and mutual respect. The harmony achieved by maintaining *sīla* does not stop at the social level, but leads our actions into harmony with a higher law -- the law of kamma, of action and its fruit, which reigns invisibly behind the entire world of sentient existence.

The need to internalize ethical virtue as the foundation for the path translates itself into a set of precepts established as guidelines to good conduct. The most basic set of precepts found in the Buddha's teaching is the *pañca, sīla*, the five precepts, consisting of the following five training rules:

- (1) the training rule of abstaining from taking life;
- (2) the training rule of abstaining from taking what is not given;
- (3) the training rule of abstaining from sexual misconduct;
- (4) the training rule of abstaining from false speech; and
- (5) the training rule of abstaining from fermented and distilled intoxicants which are the basics for heedlessness.

These five precepts are the minimal ethical code binding on the Buddhist laity. They are administered regularly by the monks to the lay disciples at almost every service and ceremony, following immediately upon the giving of the three refuges. They are also undertaken afresh each day by earnest lay Buddhists as part of their daily recitation.

The five precepts are formulated in accordance with the ethical algorithm of using oneself as the criterion for determining how to act in relation to others. In Pali the principle is expressed by the phrase *attānaṃ upamaṃ katvā*, "consider oneself as similar to others and others as similar to

oneself.” The method of application involves a simple imaginative exchange of oneself and others. In order to decide whether or not to follow a particular line of action, we take ourselves as the standard and consider what would be pleasant and painful for ourselves. Then we reflect that others are basically similar to ourselves, and so, what is pleasant and painful to us is also pleasant and painful to them; thus just as we would not want others to cause pain for us, so we should not cause pain for others. As the Buddha explains:

In this matter the noble disciple reflects:

‘Here am I, fond of my life, not wanting to die, fond of pleasure and averse from pain. Suppose someone should deprive me of my life, it would not be a thing pleasing or delightful to me. If I, in my turn, were to deprive of his life one fond of life, not wanting to die, one fond of pleasure and averse from pain, it would not be a thing pleasing or delightful to him. For that state which is not pleasant or delightful to me must be not pleasant or delightful to another: and a state undear and unpleasing to me, how could I inflict that upon another?’

As a result of such reflection he himself abstains from taking the life of creatures and he encourages others so to abstain, and speaks in praise of so abstaining.

(Saṃyuttanikāya, 55, No. 7)

This deductive method the Buddha uses to derive the first four precepts. The fifth precept, abstaining from intoxicants, appears to deal only with my relation to myself, with what I put into my own body. However, because the violation of this precept can lead to the violation of all the other precepts and to much further harm for others, its social implications are deeper than is evident at first sight and bring it into range of this same method of derivation.

Each moral principle included in the precepts contains two aspects—a negative aspect, which is a rule of abstinence, and a positive aspect, which is a virtue to be cultivated. These aspects are called, respectively, *vāritta* (avoidance) and *cāritta* (positive performance). Thus the first precept is formulated as abstaining from the destruction of life, which in itself is a *vāritta*, a principle of abstinence. But corresponding to this, we also find in the descriptions of the practice of this precept a *cāritta*, a positive quality to be developed, namely compassion.

Nevertheless, despite this recognition of a duality of aspect, the question still comes up: if there are two sides to each moral principle, why is the precept worded only as an abstinence? Why don't we also undertake training rules to develop positive virtues such as compassion, honesty, and so forth?

The answer to this is twofold. First, in order to develop the positive virtues we have to begin by abstaining from the negative qualities opposed to them. The growth of the positive virtues will only be stunted or deformed as long as the defilements are allowed to reign unchecked. We cannot cultivate compassion while at the same time indulging in killing, or cultivate honesty while stealing and cheating. At the start we have to abandon the unwholesome through the aspect of avoidance. Only when we have secured a foundation in avoiding the unwholesome can we expect to succeed in cultivating the factors of positive performance. The process of purifying virtue can be compared to growing a flower garden on a plot of uncultivated land. We don't begin by planting the seeds in expectation of a bountiful yield. We have to start with the duller work of weeding out the garden and preparing the beds. Only after we have uprooted the weeds and nourished the soil can we plant the seeds in the confidence that the flowers will grow healthily.

Another reason why the precepts are worded in terms of abstinence is that the development of positive virtues cannot be prescribed by rules. Rules of training can govern what we have to avoid and perform in our outer actions but only ideals of aspiration, not rules, can govern what develops within ourselves. Thus we cannot take up a training rule to always be loving towards others. To impose such a rule is to place ourselves in a double bind since inner attitudes are just simply not

so docile that they can be determined by command. Love and compassion are the fruits of the work we do on ourselves inwardly, not of assenting to a precept. What we can do is to undertake a precept to abstain from destroying life and from injuring other beings. Then we can make a resolution, preferably without much fanfare, to develop loving-kindness, and apply ourselves to the mental training designed to nourish its growth.

II. The Five Precepts

1. Abstinence from Taking Life

The first of the five precepts reads in Pali, *Pāṇātipātā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi*; in English, “I undertake the training rule to abstain from taking life.” Here the word *pāṇa*, meaning that which breathes, denotes any living being that has breath and consciousness. It includes animals and insects as well as men, but does not include plants as they have only life but not breath or consciousness. The word “living being” is a conventional term, an expression of common usage, signifying in the strict philosophical sense the life faculty (*jīvit’indriya*). The word *atipāta* means literally striking down, hence killing or destroying. Thus the precept enjoins abstinence (*veramaṇī*) from the taking of life. Though the precept’s wording prohibits the killing of living beings, in terms of its underlying purpose it can also be understood to prohibit injuring, maiming, and torturing as well.

The Pali Buddhist commentaries formally define the act of taking life thus: “The taking of life is the volition of killing expressed through the doors of either body or speech, occasioning action which results in the cutting off of the life faculty in a living being, when there is a living being present and (the perpetrator of the act) perceives it as a living being.”

The first important point to note in this definition is that the act of taking life is defined as a volition (*cetanā*). Volition is the mental factor responsible for action (*kamma*); it has the function of arousing the entire mental apparatus for the purpose of accomplishing a particular aim, in this case, the cutting off of the life faculty of a living being. The identification of the transgression with volition implies that the ultimate responsibility for the act of killing lies with the mind, since the volition that brings about the act is a mental factor. The body and speech function merely as doors for that volition, ie, as channels through which the volition of taking life reaches expression. Killing is classified as a bodily deed since it generally occurs via the body, but what really performs the act of killing is the mind using the body as the instrument for actualizing its aim.

A second important point to note is that killing need not occur directly through the body. The volition to take life can also express itself through the door of speech. This means that the command to take life, given to others by way of words, writing, or gesture, is also considered a case of killing. One who issues such a command becomes responsible for the action as soon as it achieves its intention of depriving a being of life.

A complete act of killing constituting a full violation of the precept involves five factors:

- (1) a living being;
- (2) the perception of the living being as such;
- (3) the thought or volition of killing;
- (4) the appropriate effort; and
- (5) the actual death of the being as a result of the action.

2. Abstinence from Taking What Is Not Given

The second precept reads: *Adinnādānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi*, “I undertake the training rule to abstain from taking what is not given.” The word *adinna*, meaning literally “what is not given,” signifies the belongings of another person over which he exercises ownership

legally and blamelessly (*adandāraho anupavajjo*). Thus no offense is committed if the article taken has no owner, eg, if logs are taken to make a fire or stones are gathered to build a wall. Further, the other person has to have possession of the article taken legally and blamelessly; that is, he has to have the legal right over the article and also has to be blameless in his use of it. This latter phrase apparently becomes applicable in cases where a person gains legal possession of an article but does so in an improper way or uses it for unethical purposes. In such cases there might be legitimate grounds for depriving him of the item, as when the law requires someone who commits a misdemeanor to pay a fine or deprives a person of some weapon rightfully his which he is using for destructive purposes.

The act of taking what is not given is formally defined thus: "Taking what is not given is the volition with thievish intent arousing the activity of appropriating an article belonging to another legally and blamelessly in one who perceives it as belonging to another." As in the case of the first precept the transgression here consists ultimately in a volition. This volition can commit the act of theft by originating action through body or speech; thus a transgression is incurred either by taking something directly by oneself or else indirectly, by commanding someone else to appropriate the desired article. The fundamental purpose of the precept is to protect the property of individuals from unjustified confiscation by others. Its ethical effect is to encourage honesty and right livelihood.

According to the commentaries, for a **complete breach of the precept** to be committed five factors must be present:

- (1) an article belonging to another legally and blamelessly;
- (2) the perception of it as belonging to another;
- (3) the thought or intention of stealing;
- (4) the activity of taking the article; and
- (5) the actual appropriation of the article.

3. Abstinence from Misconduct regarding Sense-pleasures

The third precept reads: *Kāmesu micchācārā veramaṇī sikkhāpadam samādiyāmi*, "I undertake the training rule to abstain from misconduct in regard to sense pleasures." The word *kāma* has the general meaning of sense pleasure or sensual desire, but the commentaries explain it as sexual relations (*methuna, samācāra*), an interpretation supported by the suttas. *Micchācāra* means wrong modes of conduct. Thus the precept enjoins abstinence from improper or illicit sexual relations.

Misconduct in regard to sense pleasures is formally defined as "the volition with sexual intent occurring through the bodily door, causing transgression with an illicit partner." The primary question this definition elicits is: who is to qualify as an illicit partner? For men, the text lists twenty types of women who are illicit partners. These can be grouped into three categories:

- (1) a woman who is under the protection of elders or other authorities charged with her care, eg, a girl being cared for by parents, by an older brother or sister, by other relatives, or by the family as a whole;
- (2) a woman who is prohibited by convention, that is, close relatives forbidden under family tradition, nuns and other women vowed to observe celibacy as a spiritual discipline, and those forbidden as partners under the law of the land; and
- (3) a woman who is married or engaged to another man, even one bound to another man only by a temporary agreement.

In the case of women, for those who are married any man other than a husband is an illicit partner. For all women a man forbidden by tradition or under religious rules is prohibited as a partner. For both men and women any violent, forced, or coercive union, whether by physical compulsion or psychological pressure, can be regarded as a transgression of the precept even

when the partner is not otherwise illicit. But a man or woman who is widowed or divorced can freely remarry according to choice.

The texts mention four factors which must be present for **a breach of the precept** to be incurred:

- (1) an illicit partner, as defined above;
- (2) the thought or volition of engaging in sexual union with that person;
- (3) the act of engaging in union; and
- (4) the acceptance of the union.

4. Abstinence from False Speech

The fourth precept reads: *Musāvādā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi*, “I undertake the training rule to abstain from false speech.” False speech is defined as “the wrong volition with intent to deceive, occurring through the door of either body or speech, arousing the bodily or verbal effort of deceiving another.” The transgression must be understood as intentional.

The precept is not violated merely by speaking what is false, but by speaking what is false with the intention of representing that as true; thus it is equivalent to lying or deceptive speech. The volition is said to arouse bodily or verbal action. The use of speech to deceive is obvious, but the body too can be used as an instrument of communication—as in writing, hand signals, and gestures—and thus can be used to deceive others.

Four factors enter into **the offense of false speech**:

- (1) an untrue state of affairs;
- (2) the intention of deceiving another;
- (3) the effort to express that, either verbally or bodily; and
- (4) the conveying of a false impression to another.

5. Abstinence from Intoxicating Drinks and Drugs

The fifth precept reads: *Surā,meraya,majjapamāda-t,ṭhānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi*, “I undertake the training rule to abstain from fermented and distilled intoxicants which are the basis for heedlessness.” The word *meraya* means fermented liquors, *sura* liquors which have been distilled to increase their strength and flavor. The word *majja*, meaning an intoxicant, can be related to the rest of the passage either as qualified by *sura,meraya* or as additional to them. In the former case the whole phrase means fermented and distilled liquors which are intoxicants, in the latter it means fermented and distilled liquors and other intoxicants. If this second reading is adopted the precept would explicitly include intoxicating drugs used non-medicinally, such as the opiates, hemp, and psychedelics. But even on the first reading the precept implicitly proscribes these drugs by way of its guiding purpose, which is to prevent heedlessness caused by the taking of intoxicating substances.

The taking of intoxicants is defined as the volition leading to the bodily act of ingesting distilled or fermented intoxicants. It can be committed only by one’s own person (not by command to others) and only occurs through the bodily door. For the precept to be violated **four factors** are required:

- (1) the intoxicant;
- (2) the intention of taking it;
- (3) the activity of ingesting it; and
- (4) the actual ingestion of the intoxicant.

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