

The moral training

Source: (Chakka) Arati Sutta (A 6.113, SD 62.10g), the bad lifestyle and the good lifestyle, © Piya Tan, 2025.

1.2.2.1 The 5 moral precepts (*pañca, sīla*) are the self-avowed training in avoiding *killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, falsehood and intoxication*. Basically, this entails respect for *life, property, freedom, truth and the mind*. These are the **5 universal values** in which the 5 precepts are respectively rooted. These values humanize us and form the bedrock for the good society characterized by harmony, progress and freedom.

The respect for life refers to the vision that each human is unique and capable of independent growth, creativity and wisdom; that our individual life has been possible and wholesome because of *other* lives by way of our parents, the family, society and humanity as a whole. Humanity is rooted in society, consisting of families and individuals, such as parents, teachers, thinkers, workers, children and so on. Hence, the quality of our lives depends on our respect for life, both human and non-human.

Non-human lives are just as precious as human life for the simple reason that they have arisen by themselves just as human lives have. Every living being, human or non-human, values their lives, and would dislike pain and fear destruction just as humans do. Moreover, rebirth means that there is natural mobility amongst the various lives, human and non-human; we may devolve into subhuman states and non-humans may evolve into humans or divine beings. Killing creates pain and fear, and disrupts the natural progress of life, preventing the evolution of beings into higher spiritual states.

This is the rationale for the 1st precept against killing.

1.2.2.2 The respect for honest work is based on the recognition that for life to be possible and wholesome, we need to have *food, clothing, shelter and health* (the 4 supports of life). To have these supports we must exert some kind of productive effort or to give something in fair exchange for such supports. To have an abundance or power over such supports is called wealth. The word **wealth**—derived from “weal” (well) + the substantive prefix -th (as in “health” from “heal”)—refers to one’s wellbeing, both material, psychological and spiritual.

Due to the value and role of wealth in supporting life and wellbeing, wealth must be properly earned, that is, well worked for or honestly gained or freely gotten. In such texts as **the Ādiya Sutta** (A 5.41), the Buddha teaches that what is well earned or justly obtained in a lawful way should be enjoyed in the following ways:

- (1) we enjoy it happily for ourselves and our family (including dependents);
- (2) we happily share it for the happiness of friends and companions;
- (3) we secure ourselves against all misfortunes (such as by savings and having insurance);

(4) we make offerings to relatives, guests, the departed, the authorities and deities;¹

(5) we offer support to virtuous and noble religious (as acts of merit).

The spirit of such teachings is that wealth is not just about having but should wholesomely promote one's **being** (happiness and development) and that of others.²

1.2.2.3 Keeping to the precepts is rooted in **the value of freedom**, personal and social. We must be free *to live, to labour, to love, to learn and to let go* of things and thoughts so that we wholesomely grow as individuals and social beings. The greatest freedom must be that given to the mind which should be free from stress and suffering. The most effective way to do this is to cultivate lovingkindness, hold happy thoughts, and enjoy wholesome work and work-out.

The following **wrong ways of thinking** enslave us to stress and suffering; they should be avoided:³

- **All or nothing thinking** (ANT), eg, "I failed to do this. I'm stupid. I'm giving up." Nothing is always either black or white. There is a middle way; there is diligence (repeating the effort with patience and wisdom). Drop by drop water fills the pot (Dh 121).⁴
- **Rain-clouding**, eg, "I can only sit for 5 minutes. I'm a bad meditator." Doing good cannot be measured. Even meditating for the moment it takes to pull milk from a cow's udder-teat, one has practised the Buddha's teaching. There is always a silver living. (S 20.4)⁵
- **Mind-reading** or **fortune telling**, eg, "He didn't say hello. He must be mad with me." "I'm full of defilements! I'll never learn to meditate." When we do initiate friendship or try something new or difficult, we thus have at least 50% chance of making friends or succeeding. Before we can know someone, we have to be his or her friend. In friendship, the Buddha is said to the one who is *the first to greet others*. (D 5,7 (18))⁶
- **Label sticking** or **over-generalizing**, eg, "I'm stupid. I will never learn." "Nothing good ever happens." Just because one has failed does not mean one will always fail! Failing means that one has not learned why or how one fails! The Buddha reminds us to ask ourselves: "What shall I do next?" (A 54.8)⁷
- **Measuring**, eg, "I can never have what I want like her." Having things does not mean we are happy with it. Contentment is the greatest wealth (Dh 204).⁸

¹ In this teaching, the Buddha addresses society as a whole, incl non-Buddhists or those who look up to Buddhism beyond their personal faith. See SD 2.1 (f 2).

² A 5.41/3:45 f (SD 2.1).

³ Based on "Automatic Negative Thoughts (ANTs) and unhelpful thinking styles," www.mindwell-leeds.org.uk.

⁴ SD 19.14 (5.1.3); SD 56.1 (7.4.2).

⁵ **Okkha S** (S 20.4), SD 2.14; **Cūl'accharā S** (A 1.6,5), SD 2.13; **Velāma S** (A 9.20,5.2(10)), SD 16.6. See *Simple Joys 2* 2011: ch 10 The possibility of awakening.

⁶ *Pubba, bhāsī* (initiates a conversation) D 5,7 (18) (SD 22.8); *Puretarāṇ ālapitvā* (one who first speaks to another), SD 61.14 (2.1.5). See also D 4,6 (SD 30.5); SD 45.16 (2.5.3(2)).

⁷ **Alabbhanīya Thāna S** (A 5.48,72), SD 42.1.

⁸ **Pasenadi Kosala V** (1) (DhA 15.6), SD 37.13(2).

- **Emoting**, eg, “I feel like a failure; I must be one.” “I’m afraid I will die!” Thinking makes it so. Hence, we only need to change the thinking! (Dh 1 f)
- **Guilty prejudgement**, eg, “I should have known it was wrong.” “I’m so slow, I should have done the work already.” Things happen due to many conditions, many causes with many effects (dependent arising). (SD 5.16 (6))⁹
- **Extreme view** (maximizing or minimizing), eg, “I said something wrong to the monk; it’s bad karma.” We sometimes say things which may sound wrong or taken the wrong way. It’s our real intention that counts. It may help to apologize, but we should not be doing this too often. Karma is intention. (A 6.63,11.2)¹⁰
- **Blaming**, eg, “I would have got that if it wasn’t for her.” Failure is not always due to others; we must also be accountable for our own actions or non-action, and work to make things better. One is one’s own master—who else could it be? (Dh 160)¹¹
- **Personalizing**, blaming oneself or reacting to negative remarks as if they were true. “It’s my fault she’s not happy.” “He is in a bad mood; it must be something I said.” Things happen for many reasons or any reason. Even if it is how someone feels about us, this does not define what we really are. We do not know the real reasons that someone has said or done something. When someone says hurtful words to us, we’re hurt only if we accept those words. The hurt remains with the speaker of hurt. (S 7.2)¹²

ANT also means “Automatic Negative Thoughts.” It’s all in the mind. Do not let the ANTs in. Do not feed the ANTs.

1.2.2.4 A free mind is one that is calm and clear. Breath meditation, even when briefly done as needed, can help to **calm** the mind so long as one does not fall back into the stressor. One easy way to **clear** the mind is to smile inwardly, especially at the stressor or distraction. Breath meditation and inner smiling work very well together.

The freedom related to the 3rd precept is rooted in **respect for the person’s person**, that is, not to violate another’s body or personal space. Sex is only proper between appropriate individuals who truly love one another done with mutual consent. Sex is the grand portal to samsara—it creates life—and has to be respected. Sex whether procreative or not, between appropriate partners is best closed with personal reflections on impermanence. The rule of celibacy should be respected when one is on retreat or one has taken up the rule. The idea of being celibate is to direct all one’s energy, physical and mental, to spiritual work. Be warned: sex is the most selfish and time-consuming of human activities.¹³

1.2.2.5 The 4th precept is rooted in **the respect for wholesome truth**. We keep to the precepts simply because they are based on goodness and truth. Here we may speak of 2 kinds of truth: the moral and the spiritual. Moral truth is that which is

⁹ See *idap,paccayatā* (SD 5.16 (6)).

¹⁰ **Nibbedhika (Pariyāya) S** (A 6.63/3:415), SD 6.11 (2.2.2); SD 48.1 (9.1.3).

¹¹ Dh 160, 380. SD 3.1 (1.4.3) self as refuge.

¹² **Akkosaka Bhāra,dvāja S** (S 7.2), SD 84.2). See also the Jeta,vana parable: Alagaddūpama S (M 22,41) & SD 3.13 (2).

¹³ SD 31.7 (6.2); SD 32.2 (3.1.3).

rooted in the 5 kinds of respect—for life, property, freedom, truth and the mind—in the living of a morally virtuous life.

Moral truth is a reflection of a higher, that is, spiritual truth; that all conditioned things are impermanent, unsatisfactory and nonself. Moral freedom is subsumed under spiritual truth: life is impermanent, suffering and nonself; so are property, freedom, truth and wisdom. “Truth” on the level of moral living in the sense that it is instrumental; the truth of moral goodness serves as the basis for a deeper understanding of true reality. Similarly, the moral life conduces to giving calm and clarity to the mind so that the mind can directly see into true reality, and gain liberating wisdom, that is, the path.

1.2.2.6 Moral living is an excellent way to begin one’s spiritual life, but it is made good and purposeful as the instrument for mental cultivation. Moral conduct restrains and refines one’s speech and bodily conduct, so that they conduce to the cultivation of the mind for calm and clarity for seeing directly into true reality which brings spiritual freedom brimming with wisdom and compassion, one who boundlessly benefits other beings by teaching them to be self-reliant to gain the very same awakening and freedom.

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