

The Hidden Aspects of the Five Precepts



The five precepts (Pāli: *pañca-sīlāni*) provide a basic code for living a life that is in-keeping with Buddhist ethical ideals. They are recited by lay and monastic Buddhist practitioners all over the world and a great deal has been written about their literal meaning. In today's post, we offer an interpretation of the five precepts that focuses on their hidden meaning.

First Precept: I undertake the training rule to abstain from killing (*Pānātipātā veramanī sikkhāpadam samādiyāmi*)

The hidden meaning of the first precept is that we should not kill the Buddha within. Whenever we chase after mundane goals such as wealth and status, this is killing the Buddha within. Our time on this earth is limited and sooner or later we will encounter death. At the point of death, all of our various life encounters and accomplishments mean absolutely nothing. They have no more significance than the fading memories of a dream and no matter how hard we try, nothing from this life can be taken into the next. The only exception to this is the spiritual insight that we manage to accrue on a day-to-day basis. Therefore, if we don't use this precious human rebirth to nourish and develop ourselves spiritually, we suffocate the Buddha within.

When we are with someone who is talking with us, confiding in us, and our mind is thinking about either what we want to say or what we could be doing instead of being with that person, then we are killing the Buddha within that person and we kill the Buddha within ourselves. When we do not listen to the bird that is singing for us then we kill the Buddha within ourselves as well as the Buddha in the bird. That bird spent many lifetimes training to sing that song so that we could hear it and we spent many lifetimes training so that we could listen

to what the bird has to say. The bird sang, we couldn't care, the moment passed and we were not aware. We are as good as dead alongside the Buddha within.

Second Precept. I undertake the training rule to abstain from taking what is not given (*Adinnādānā veramanī sikkhāpadam samādiyāmi*)

The hidden aspect of the second precept is that we should not steal from ourselves the opportunity to attain enlightenment in this lifetime. The second precept also means that we should not steal this opportunity from others. The opportunity to attain enlightenment is the birth-right of every living being in the universe. We steal away this opportunity from ourselves each time we practice mindless, selfish, and unskilful ways. We steal away this opportunity from others when we do not act with kindness, awareness, and gentleness in their presence.

When people set themselves up as 'Buddhist' teachers without having dedicated their lives to spiritual practice (or in some cases after having taken part in just one or two meditation retreats facilitated by people who have no real spiritual experience), they are putting their own spiritual lives in jeopardy. More concerning however, is that they are stealing the spiritual breath of others. They are stealing other people's opportunity to attain enlightenment. People come to them obviously in need of spiritual nourishment and all they get is the unfortunate experience of being robbed – both spiritually and materially.

Third Precept. I undertake the training rule to avoid lustful conduct (*Kāmesumicchācāra veramanī sikkhāpadam samādiyāmi*)

The innermost aspect of the third precept is that we should not lust after being a 'me', a 'mine', or an 'I'. Because of wanting to be somebody, people are unable to be themselves. The more we want to be someone, the more difficult it becomes to just simply be. Wanting to be a 'me', a 'mine', or an 'I' causes us to develop a big ego which acts as an obstacle to spiritual growth. When we let go of the idea that we inherently exist, we cease to separate ourselves from the energy and dance of *Dharmata* that is all around us. Phenomena do not exist as discrete entities. They exist as one. When the universe breathes in, all of the phenomena that it contains breathe in with it. When the universe breathes out, all of the matter and space that it contains also breathes out. When we stop wanting to be a 'me', a 'mine', or an 'I', we are able to relax into and once again abide in unison with the energy of *all that is*.

Forth Precept: I undertake the training rule to abstain from false speech
(*Musāvādā veramanī sikkhāpadam samādiyāmi*)

The hidden aspect of the fourth precept means that we should not utter false speech by giving Dharma teachings on subjects that we have not fully and directly realised ourselves. It seems that the number of so called Dharma and meditation teachers is rapidly increasing. More and more people are writing books about the Buddhist teachings (including mindfulness), and more and more people are offering meditation retreats and courses. Whenever we try to instruct others in spiritual teachings that we ourselves have not fully realised, we lie to them and we also lie to ourselves. This false speech serves to water down the Dharma, bolster our egos, and distance us (and those listening to us) from the possibility of cultivating true meditative calm and insight.

The same applies when we utter words such as “*I take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha*”. If during our day-to-day existence, we are only concerned with the petty affairs of our lives and getting ahead in the world, then these words are untrue. If we wish to take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, we have to stop thinking that the world revolves around us. We have to stop living a soap opera. We have to make our entire life a spiritual practice and not just engage in (what we deem to be) Buddhist practice when it is convenient to us or when we are going through a particularly difficult time.

Fifth Precept: I undertake the training rule to abstain from ingesting intoxicants
(*Surāmerayamajjapamādatthānā veramanī sikkhāpadam samādiyāmi*)

The innermost meaning of the fifth precept is that we should not fill up and intoxicate our own mind or other people’s minds with concepts, clever ideas, and wrong views. Too many people have their minds full-up. If our minds are too full then there is no room for wholesome thoughts to grow and flourish. In a full mind there is no space for simply being, and there is no emptiness to nurture and refresh our being. Having our minds full-up all of the time becomes very stressful and tiring not only for ourselves but also for those with whom we interact.

Some people that practice Buddhism fill up their minds with the idea that they are a Theravada Buddhist, a Mahayana Buddhist, or a Vajrayana Buddhist. However, a Theravada Buddhist who is caught up in the idea of being a Theravada Buddhist is not, in truth, a Theravada Buddhist. The same applies to Mahayana and Vajrayana

practitioners who foolishly attach themselves to the name and label of their particular Buddhist practice modality. In Theravada Buddhism there are strong Mahayana and Vajrayana elements, and in Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism there are strong Theravada elements.

In our work as Buddhist monks, we meet lots of people that proudly introduce themselves as (for example) a vegetarian, vegan, spiritual teacher, meditator, or philanthropist. If people want to be a vegetarian or a vegan that's great – good for them. But if they over-identify with the idea of being a vegetarian and/or believe that it somehow makes them a more spiritual or virtuous person, then they have allowed their life choices to intoxicate their mind. We abstain from intoxicating the mind with concepts and wrong views when we observe but do not attach ourselves to thoughts and feelings. When we allow thoughts, feelings, and other mental processes to roll freely through the mind and not to stick to it, the mind becomes completely immune to all forms of intoxicant.

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