

Practicing with the Five Precepts

by Gil Fronsdal

Going for refuge in the Three Jewels – the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha – is a gate to Buddhist spiritual practice and the path of non-harming. Buddhist practice falls into three general categories known in Pali as *sila*, *samadhi* and *pañña*, which can be translated into English as “virtue,” “meditation” and “wisdom,” respectively. These function as equal partners supporting and guiding each other; it is essential to cultivate all three. Wisdom and meditation will not develop without virtue. Developing virtue and understanding the full depths of its possibilities requires wisdom and meditation.

Sila is usually translated as “virtue” or “ethics,” but we need to be careful not to confuse it with ideas of virtue and ethics that are commandments, puritanical, or unquestioned. Buddhism understands virtue and ethics pragmatically, based on the observation that some actions lead to suffering and some actions lead to happiness and freedom. A Buddhist asks, “Does this action lead to increased suffering or increased happiness for both myself and others?”

As guidelines for virtue and ethical behavior, the Buddha formulated precepts as practices we can use to train ourselves in becoming more ethical and liberated people. For lay people these are the following five basic practices:

- (1) Training to abstain from killing
- (2) Training to abstain from stealing
- (3) Training to abstain from sexual misconduct
- (4) Training to abstain from lying
- (5) Training to abstain from intoxicants, such as drugs or alcohol, that lead to heedlessness

The Buddha referred to these five in different ways, giving us different perspectives from which to understand them. Sometimes he called them the “five training rules” (*pancasikkha*), sometimes “five virtues” (*pancasila*), and sometimes simply as “the five things” or the “five truths” (*pancadhamma*). The expression “the five things” might seem odd, but perhaps it helps to free us from too fixed ideas about what these “things” are and how they function.

There are three ways of understanding these “five things.” The first is as “training rules.” We voluntarily take on the training precepts as a discipline for the support of our spiritual training. Following them promotes the development of meditation, wisdom and compassion.

As training rules, the precepts are understood as rules of restraint. They are phrased as “For the sake of my training, I vow not to kill, not to steal,” and so forth. We agree to hold back on certain impulses. Instead of following our inclination to kill a mosquito or steal pencils from work, we hold back and try to bring mindfulness to the discomfort we are impulsively reacting to. Rather than focusing on whether the actions are bad or immoral, we use these restraints as mirrors to study ourselves, to understand our reactions and motivations, and to reflect on the consequences of our actions.

Following the training rules offers us a powerful form of protection. Primarily, the precepts protect us from the suffering we cause others and ourselves when we act unskillfully.

The second way the Buddha talked about the precepts was as principles of virtue. The fundamental principles that underlie all five precepts are compassion, not causing harm, and generosity. We follow the precepts motivated by our compassion, our empathy for the suffering of others, and to support others to be free of suffering. We also live by the precepts out of compassion for ourselves. We want to be careful about our intentional actions, how we act, how we speak, even the kinds of thoughts we pursue.

So that the precepts do not become a rigid ideal that we live by, we practice them together with the principle of non-harming. We can keep in check any tendency to create harm through narrow-minded or callous use of the precepts by asking ourselves, “Is this action or ethical judgment causing harm to myself or others?” The understanding of what causes harm brings humanity to the precepts.

Living by the precepts is itself an act of generosity; we give a wonderful gift of protection to ourselves and to others. Indeed, one pragmatic reason to follow the precepts as rules of restraint is to bring joy to our lives. Many people meditate because they feel they are lacking joy and happiness. According to the Buddha, one of the best ways to cultivate and appreciate joy is to live a virtuous life.

The third way the Buddha talked about the precepts was as qualities of a person’s character. The Buddha described someone who was spiritually well developed as endowed with the five virtues. The Buddha said that once you reach a certain level of awakening, it is simply not possible to break the precepts. Following the precepts is a direct by-product of having discovered freedom.

In summary, these five things can be understood as rules of training, as principles to guide our actions, and as a description of how an awakened person acts.

The world needs more people with the intention, sensitivity and purity of heart represented by the five precepts. May the precepts be a source of joy for everyone.