

The Five Precepts

The five precepts are:

1. to refrain from destroying living creatures
2. to refrain from taking that which is not given
3. to refrain from sexual misconduct
4. to refrain from incorrect speech
5. to refrain from intoxicating substances

The term translated as “precept” (Pali *sīla*; Sanskrit *śīla*, pronounced *sheela*) has a wide range of meanings, including “virtue” and “good conduct”, and the term is also used to describe the middle section of the eightfold path (right speech, right action, right livelihood) when it is often translated as “morality”. So the five “precepts” are really five “good things to do”. Except, of course, they are not “good things to do” so much as “bad things to avoid doing”. Virtue in this context is abstaining from bad conduct, since this would, of course, lead to bad karmic fruits in future lifetimes, as well as lead one away from the path to liberation.

These five commitments are the basic moral rules of all Buddhists, though the extent to which they are followed varies. They are also the foundation of moral conduct that is built upon by further layers of rules. For example, on holy days (such as the full and new moon days, or festivals marking key events in the Buddha’s life) laypeople might observe eight precepts, which include these five – with the rule about sexual misconduct upgraded to mean full abstinence – and add three more to do with avoiding luxuries. A novice monk or nun begins with a slightly expanded ten precepts, while full monastics abide by hundreds of rules.

Although the focus seems to be on actions (including what we say), the Buddhist understanding of karma insists that the underlying mental state behind an action is what determines its ethical value. These rules are said to help people develop positive mental habits, as well as helping people guard against falling victim to the defilements. The defilements (Pali *kilesa*; Sanskrit *kleśa*) are states of mind that result in bad karma. The three most commonly mentioned defilements are greed, hatred and delusion, which are also known as the three fires or poisons that keep us trapped in the cycle of rebirth and redeath.

Since one’s mental state is understood to be more important than the deed itself, breaches of the precepts, or reinterpretations of them, are not uncommon. Justifications are given for killing or lying, for example, when the motivation is said to be pure. But other Buddhists would argue that breaking the precepts with a pure motivation is not possible, at least not for those of us who are far from liberation and therefore still in the grip of the defilements. But just how Buddhist are the precepts themselves? Many have observed that they seem to be such general principles that it is hard to see much of specifically Buddhist morality in them. However, a few points are worth making in this regard. Let’s run through them in turn.

The first precept is to refrain from destroying living creatures. It is important to note here that living creatures means not just humans, but also animals or other sentient beings, all fellow travellers in the realm of rebirth and redeath. Obviously murder is no good, but many Buddhists also try to avoid killing animals, or at least make ritual amends when they have to do so. Early Buddhists famously rejected the animal sacrifice that formed an important part of Vedic culture. This does not mean that all Buddhists are vegetarian, however. Some consider that eating meat is okay, as long as someone else (practically speaking, a non-Buddhist) has done the killing, and hasn't done it specifically for you. Lots of Buddhists do take this precept to mean a vegetarian lifestyle is appropriate, however. Others have made arguments defending the killing of humans, for example in self-defence, or in defence of one's nation, or even in defence of Buddhism, though this is very contentious.

The second precept is to refrain from taking that which is not given, or, in simpler terms, not to steal. Some obvious Buddhist implications here come from the emphasis on uprooting craving and attachment, the defilements that would lead to someone wanting something that didn't belong to them. The same theme is evident in the third precept, against sexual misconduct. While a traditional interpretation of this would be that someone should restrict themselves to sexual relations with their spouse, there is scope within the precept for other forms of respectful and honest relations.

The fourth precept is to avoid incorrect speech. This isn't just lying, but also speech that is harmful or malicious, or even frivolous. The opposite of wrong speech, of course, is speech that is beneficial and true; speech that reflects and promotes a correct understanding of the world, and helps beings. Bad speech would naturally proceed from delusion, hatred or greed.

Finally, Buddhists refrain from intoxicants, or – depending on your interpretation – from intoxication. Once again this precept is lived out in different ways by different Buddhists. It is certainly not the case that all Buddhists are teetotal. Many interpret the rule as forbidding the sort of intoxication that would lead you to do other bad deeds, so moderate drinking is okay, but stronger drugs should be avoided. Smoking is another debated one – some people think it's okay because it isn't a mind-altering drug (it's notable that even some Buddhist monks smoke), but others abstain because it is addictive. Some Buddhists abstain completely from alcohol, and others even include drugs such as caffeine, and abstain from tea and coffee. The focus is on maintaining a clear mind, necessary for observance of moral conduct in general, but also for pursuing Buddhist practices such as meditation.

The *Pāṇīya jātaka*, or Drinking-Water Story

At one time, in a major city, five hundred citizens heard the Buddha's teachings and became monks. However, they continued to have lustful thoughts. The Buddha had them gathered together and addressed them: "Monks, there is no such thing as a *minor* defilement. Monks must stop all defilements as they arise. Wise men of old, before the coming of the Buddha, subdued their defilements and became renunciators." And he told them a story of the past.

In the past, when Brahmadatta was king in the city of Varanasi, there were two friends in a certain village nearby. They went out into the fields and took a drinking pot each, which they set aside as they worked. Whenever they got thirsty they would go and take a drink, but one of the friends took water from the pot that was not his own, preserving his own water for later. At the end of the day he reflected, "Have I done any wrong today?" He thought of the water he had stolen, and cried out, "If it increases, this thirst will lead me to a bad rebirth! I must put a stop to this defilement." As a result of reflecting on this, he became a renouncer.

Meanwhile, a landowner was sitting in the marketplace. Another man's wife walked past and she was absolutely gorgeous. The man was struck by her beauty and desired her. He thought, "If it increases, this thirst will lead me to a bad rebirth." He too became a renouncer.

Not far off, a father and son were travelling through a forest known for kidnappers. If these robbers came to know that there was a close family relationship between those that they caught, they would keep one person and send the other off to collect a ransom. So the father and son agreed that, if they were caught, they would not reveal their true relationship. When they were intercepted by the robbers, they claimed to be nothing to one another, and so both came out of the forest safely. But when the son reflected on the lie they had told he cried out, "If it increases, this evil will lead me to a bad rebirth! I must put a stop to this defilement." He too became a renouncer.

In another village nearby, a village overseer was approached for permission to carry out the traditional sacrificial offering to the spirits. He gave his permission, but when he saw how many animals had been killed he was distraught: "So many beasts have been killed all because of my words!" He too became a renouncer. Similarly, the overseer of another village gave permission for a drinking festival to be observed, as a result of which people started having fights and injuring themselves. He felt sorry for this, and reflected, "If I hadn't given my permission, they might not have experienced this suffering." He too became a renouncer, and went to a mountain cave, where he met the other four renunciators. They began to travel together seeking alms.

One day, they approached the city of Varanasi, and the king was so impressed by their appearance and manner that he invited them to his palace. There, he washed their feet and offered them food and then asked them, “Sirs, you have become renouncers while still young, and you see the danger of desires. How did this come about?” They replied:

“Though a friend, I stole the water of a friend.
Later I loathed that bad deed I had done.
I renounced so I would not do evil again.”

“I saw another’s wife, and desire arose.
Later I loathed that bad deed I had done.
I renounced so I would not do evil again.”

“Great king, thieves snatched my father in the forest,
And I answered their question one way, knowing it was otherwise.
Later I loathed that bad deed I had done.
I renounced so I would not do evil again.”

“Beings were killed for the sacrifice,
And I gave my permission.
Later I loathed that bad deed I had done.
I renounced so I would not do evil again.”

“The people first got drunk on spirits and more,
And caused a great deal of harm in their drinking bout,
And I gave my permission.
Later I loathed that bad deed I had done.
I renounced so I would not do evil again.”

Hearing their verses of explanation, the king was delighted and praised the five men. He offered them many gifts before they departed. And from that day onwards the king stopped being satisfied with his life of sense pleasures. He no longer enjoyed his food, and wouldn’t even look at his wives. In the end, he decided that he wanted to abandon worldly ties altogether, and he too became a renouncer.

Questions for Discussion

Comprehension of the source

What do you think the Buddha means when he says there's no such thing as a *minor* defilement?

What are the actual transgressions of these five men? How do they relate to the five precepts?

Do the men do *very* bad things? Why do they feel so bad about what they did?

Why do all the men become renouncers? How does renouncing help them avoid doing more bad deeds?

Why does the king decide to renounce at the end?

Application to other contexts

How important is it to do the right thing all the time?

Are there situations in which it is okay to break moral rules, for example to lie?

Reflection on wider Buddhist issues

Why is the mental state behind the action so strongly emphasised in the story? What role does mental state have in Buddhist understandings of karma and of the causes of suffering?

The word translated in this story as “thirst” is *taṇhā*, which is often translated more loosely as “craving”, for example in many accounts of the four truths of the noble ones. Can you see how this story relates to the teachings of the four truths?

Why do you think that they are all men? Is there no place for women to become renouncers in this text, or in the ancient Indian society in which it was composed?

Sources / Further Reading

This is a summary/abbreviated translation of story 459 in a large collection of past-life stories of the Buddha (the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*) found in Pali and preserved by the Theravada school of Buddhism. The text was probably composed between the 3rd century BCE and the 5th century CE. For the full text see <https://jatakastories.div.ed.ac.uk/stories-in-text/jatakatthavannana-459/> - I have been liberal in cutting out portions of the text that are irrelevant to the main theme, in particular all references to the renouncers becoming *paccekabuddhas* (“solitary” or “independent” buddhas), since the complex implications of this concept would only distract from the usefulness of the story as a teaching aid.

For a helpful account of the complex responses to real moral challenges see Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).