

## **2. PERFECTION OF ETHICS (SILA)**

Buddhist ethical behavior is an ethics of intention, an intention not cause harm. A practicing Buddhist makes an effort not to act in a harmful way but in a beneficial way. The best-known pattern of ethical behavior is that of the '*Five Silas*', generally known as the Five Precepts.

### **The Five Precepts**

- I undertake to abstain from taking life.
- I undertake to abstain from taking the not-given.
- I undertake to abstain from sexual misconduct.
- I undertake to abstain from false speech.
- I undertake to abstain from taking intoxicants.

### **The Five Positive Precepts**

- With deeds of loving-kindness, I purify my body.
- With open-handed generosity, I purify my body.
- With stillness, simplicity and contentment, I purify my body.
- With truthful communication, I purify my speech.
- With mindfulness clear and radiant, I purify my mind.

The first of the Five Precepts is abstention from harming living beings. This is the literal translation. Although sometimes rendered as 'not to kill', it is really abstention not only from killing but from harming in any way. It conveys the meaning of abstention from all forms of violence, all forms of oppression, all forms of injury. Violence is wrong because ultimately it is based, directly or indirectly, on an unskillful mental state, i.e., on the state of hatred or aversion, and if we indulge in violence this unskillful mental state, of which violence is the natural expression, will become stronger and more powerful than it is already.

The positive counterpart of abstention from violence is, of course, the practice of maitri (Pali metta), love or friendliness. Here, matri is not just an emotion or a feeling, but matri as embodied in deeds-- as put into actual practice. It is not enough to simply feel goodwill towards others. It must be expressed in action.

The second of the Five Precepts is abstention from taking the not-given. This again is a literal translation. It is not just abstention from theft. That would be too easy to evade or to circumvent. The second Precept involves abstention from any kind of dishonesty, any kind of misappropriation or exploitation, because all these things are expressions of craving, or selfish desire. The positive counterpart of abstention from taking

the not-given is, of course, dana or generosity. Here, again, it is not simply the generous feeling, the will to give, that is meant, but the generous act itself. Dana is something which all those who have contact with living Buddhism for any length of time quickly come to understand.

Thirdly, abstention from sexual misconduct. In the sutras the Buddha makes it clear that, in the context of the Five Precepts, sexual misconduct comprises rape, abduction, and adultery. All three are unskillful because they are expressions, simultaneously, of both craving and violence. ... It should be noted that in Buddhism, marriage is a purely civil contract, not a sacrament. Moreover, divorce is permitted and from a religious point of view monogamy is not compulsory. In some parts of the Buddhist world there are communities which practice polygamy and this is not considered as amounting to sexual misconduct.

The positive counterpart of abstention from sexual misconduct is *samtushti* (Pali *santutthi*), or contentment. ... In modern psychological terms, it means a positive state of freedom from using sex to satisfy neurotic needs in general and, in particular, using it to satisfy the neurotic need for change.

Fourthly, abstention from false speech. False speech is that which is rooted in craving, hatred, or fear. If you tell a lie, it is either because you want something, or because for one reason or another you are afraid of telling the truth. Untruthfulness, therefore, is rooted in unskillful mental states. This requires no demonstration. The positive counterpart of abstention from false speech is *satya* (Pali *sacca*), or truthfulness.

Fifthly, abstention from drink and drugs the taking of which results in loss of awareness. There is a certain amount of disagreement about the interpretation of the Precept. In some Buddhist countries it is interpreted as requiring strict teetotalism, i.e. total abstinence; in other Buddhist countries it is interpreted as requiring moderation in the use of anything which, taken in excess, is likely to result in intoxication. One is free to take one's choice between these two interpretations. The positive counterpart of the Precept is, of course, *smṛti* (Pali *sati*), mindfulness or awareness. This is the real criterion. If you can drink without impairing your mindfulness (it might be said), then drink; but if you can't, then don't. However, one must be quite honest with oneself, and not pretend that one is mindful when one is merely merry. Thus even if the Fifth Precept is interpreted as requiring simply moderation, in light of its positive counterpart total abstinence will still be required in the vast majority of cases.