

## Five Precepts

In some ways dharma practice is a subtraction practice. We subtract certain things and what's left, we find, is what we're looking for. The same way as when we clear debris from a neglected lot we discover, right there, a lovely garden, or at least the potential for a lovely garden.

In cultivating ethical conduct, we subtract certain actions that cause harm to others and to ourselves. We refrain from taking these harmful actions.

The Pali word we translate as ethical conduct is "sila." Sila is also sometimes translated as virtue or morality. Terms like ethical conduct, virtue, morality, oftentimes provoke a negative reaction. We might associate the terms with a kind of Puritanism. We might ascribe a prim, pious, holier-than-thou quality to the words. We might think that developing ethical conduct is a repressive practice. All told, we may have preconceived notions about ethical conduct. As we've said, it's important to recognize our preconceived notions. It's important to question them. Are they useful? Are they serving us, in our efforts to move along the Buddha's path? Can we put aside our limited ideas? Can we allow ourselves to take a wider view? Can we open to the possibility that there may be value in developing ethical conduct?

The Buddha gave specific parameters for developing ethical conduct. For householders, he delineated five precepts. The precepts identify five modes of harmful action that we should attempt to subtract.

The five precepts are:

1-To refrain from taking the life of any living creature.

2-To refrain from stealing.

3-To refrain from engaging in illicit sexual conduct.

4-To refrain from harmful speech.

5-To refrain from consuming intoxicants that cause heedlessness.

Four of the precepts offer guidelines for refraining from harmful physical action. These include the precepts pertaining to killing, stealing, illicit sexual conduct and consuming intoxicants. We may not find it difficult to hold to some of these precepts. It may not be that hard, for instance, to follow the precepts on killing and stealing. However, sometimes students struggle to follow certain precepts related to physical action. The precepts on illicit sexual conduct and consuming intoxicants, in particular, pose a challenge for some dharma students.

In adhering to the precept concerning illicit sexual conduct, we refrain from engaging in sexual conduct that causes harm. Primarily, this entails committing adultery. It should also include having sex with somebody other than your partner when you're involved in a committed relationship as well as having sex with somebody who is in a committed relationship even when you are single.

Following the precept on intoxicants, we refrain from consuming any amount of alcohol and/or drugs that causes us to take action that brings about harm to others or ourselves.

Most of us will want to closely monitor our relationship to the precept pertaining to verbal action. Following this precept, we refrain from harmful speech.

The Buddha had clear insight into the ways we cause harm with our speech. He delineated four kinds of harmful speech:

1-False Speech (all forms of lying, blatant and subtle)

2-Abusive Speech (harsh, abrasive, loud, angry, aggressive, violent speech)

3-Divisive Speech (speaking in ways that create rifts between people; setting people apart from and against each other)

4-Idle Speech (frivolous speech, including gossip; speech that isn't useful and doesn't contribute anything worthwhile)

In subtracting harmful speech, we strive to refrain from engaging in each of these four modes of speech. It isn't always easy, of course. We may have a well-established habit of taking these kinds of harmful verbal actions. But if we make a commitment to cultivating ethical conduct, we'll find in time that we're able to follow this precept.

As Thanissaro Bhikkhu explains, the five precepts provide "clear-cut" guidelines for developing ethical conduct. The instructions are explicit, precise. We refrain from killing, stealing, illicit sex, harmful speech, consuming intoxicants. Following the precepts is meant to be a straightforward practice. Sometimes, as Thanissaro Bhikkhu notes, there's a tendency to complicate the precepts, to add to the instructions, to expand, elaborate, extrapolate. For instance, some teachers, embellishing the precept on stealing, include the way we plunder the environment. Or the way we "take" another person's time. We have to understand, however, that the five precepts denote a baseline. They indicate five harmful actions we should refrain from. There are many other ways that we might act unskillfully. As we develop skillful

qualities, as we continue forward, we'll want to put effort into abandoning all the different forms of unskillful action. But we begin here, with these five harmful actions. These five actions, the Buddha posits, are the most pernicious, most damaging. If we don't subtract these actions, it will be difficult or impossible for us to move toward true happiness in our lives. If, on the other hand, we refrain from taking these five harmful actions we'll put ourselves in a good position to move along the Buddha's path.

In cultivating ethical conduct, it's important to keep it simple. If we keep it simple, it's a do-able practice. As Thanissaro Bhikkhu says, it's "practical." Again, it's not always easy. Most of us labor, at times, in our efforts to stay to the precepts. But it's something we can do. If we add to the precepts, broaden the scope of the precepts, they will, undoubtedly, become too difficult to follow. We'll be setting ourselves up for frustration, disappointment, self-doubt.

The fact is, if we follow the five precepts as they are we'll reap extraordinary benefits. If we refrain from taking these five baseline actions, we'll make significant headway in our journey toward true happiness. As it is, it's a powerful practice. It's a transforming practice. Think about what the world would be like if everybody followed the five precepts. Think about what the world would be like if everybody followed just one of the precepts. Think about what it would be like if everybody followed just the first precept, if everybody refrained from killing. It would be a vastly different world.

It's to our advantage to attend to the five precepts in the manner the Buddha suggested. After all, the Buddha was a pretty good teacher. Like any good teacher, he knew where to begin. The guidelines for developing ethical conduct offer a clear road out of the wilderness of unskillfulness. If we follow this well-marked road we'll begin to know the sublime fruits of dharma practice.

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