



REVIEW ARTICLE

BUDDHIST PRECEPTS: THE FOUNDATION OF BUDDHIST ETHICS FOR A PROSPEROUS LIFE

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ABSTRACT

In today's society, Individual values and moral qualities are significantly shaped by the transformation and interaction of social life. Buddhism emerges and exists in this world to bring happiness to humanity and alleviate their suffering, guiding people toward inner peace and a noble life grounded in morality, wisdom, and compassion. The precepts prevent all sins and maintain purity in Body, Speech, and Mind. By adhering to the precepts, the mind becomes pure; when the mind is pure, wisdom arises, and with wisdom comes Buddha-like insight. Therefore, we must regard the precepts as a guide to cultivate morality in our worldly lives. The Five Precepts for laypeople can bring happiness and peace to humanity in the present. This way of life embodies equality, humanity, and democracy, serving as the moral foundation of human existence on this planet. Albert Schweitzer, the German philosopher, wrote, "The Buddha created inner virtue perfectly through his first five commandments and was one of the greatest moralists in the world." In any group, community, or nation, there must be established rules. Thanks to his teachings, the Buddha has been able to grow and endure to this day. This demonstrates that Buddhism radiates a vigorous vitality derived from rich spiritual values that express teachings relevant to every human life; these teachings are *Sīla*, originating from the Buddha's words.

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INTRODUCTION

After reaching enlightenment, the Buddha presented the Noble Eightfold Path to humanity as a way to bring happiness. *Sīla*, *Paññā*, and *Samādhi* are the means to alleviate suffering and lead to the liberation of *Nibbāna*. In the *Dīgha Nikāya*, the Buddha stated: "Virtue, concentration, wisdom, and unparalleled liberation are the principles that the Buddha attained, and he taught the *Dhamma* to his disciples. He is the destroyer of suffering, the fully enlightened one, dwelling in absolute peace."¹ The precepts were established by the Buddha to stabilize the *Saṅgha* and benefit those who practice. The Buddha established these principles to provide a refuge for all sentient beings to practice more fully. Anyone seeking freedom from suffering, sorrow, and anxiety must abstain from negative actions of body, speech, and mind and strictly practice moral principles to develop inner peace. These precepts serve as a stepping stone to enlightenment, lay the foundation for wisdom to arise, and are a precious treasure for those who practice.²

To follow the right path, we must understand and adhere to it. Many *Bhikkhus* did not live properly within the *Saṅgha*, leading to criticism and discrediting. To purify and restore the prestige of the *Saṅgha*, the Buddha prescribed the *Vinaya* to prevent unwholesome actions. The precepts established by the Buddha still hold great value for laypeople and monks today. They play a crucial role in fostering a prosperous and peaceful society, serving as the ethical foundation of Buddhism and humanity, and promoting moral qualities and healthy behaviors for a developed and prosperous society.

Foundation and Development of Precepts (*Sīla*): After the Buddha founded the *Saṅgha*, the number of followers and Buddhists increased continuously. Hence, the relationship between the *Saṅgha* and the lay community was well-balanced and adapted to the needs of spreading the *Dhamma*. The Buddha based on the lewd behavior of his disciples and successively set out the precepts, which Buddhism calls "*Sīla*". After the Buddha's death, while developing and spreading Buddhism, the *Vinaya* also followed the development of society and was somewhat different, but remained faithful to the *Vinaya* set by the Buddha. Based on the different situations of the *Saṅgha*. The first council took place three months after the Buddha's death, the *Vinaya* was repeated by *Upāli*, but

¹Bhikkhu Nanamoli, (tr. ed), *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, Boston - USA: Wisdom Publications, 2009, p.254.

²Bhikkhu Nanamoli, (tr. ed), *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*. Boston - USA: Wisdom Publications, 2009, p.551.

only by oral presentation without writing on paper, and until the third council it was written on palm leaves, so the *Vinaya* was written and is one of the *Tipitaka* of Buddhism. Through the above meanings, Precepts are considered as a means to prevent evil from arising through the body. At the same time, they eliminate impurities in the mind. The Buddha advised that “for the happiness of ourselves and others, we should maintain them: “Principles of practice”, called precepts. Precept refers to the prevention of evil. They serve as guidelines for cultivating a noble and pure life by preventing and eliminating harmful thoughts and unwholesome actions. In this context, the precepts seen as a method to prevent evil from manifesting through the body while purifying the mind from defilements.

Sabbapāpassa akaraṇaṃ
Kusalassa upasampadā
Sacittapariyodapanāṃ
*Etam buddhāna sāsanaṃ*³

(Not doing the evil deeds, gathering the wholesome, purifying one’s mind -That is the teaching of the Buddhas). Ethics is fully understood as overcoming, preventing, and controlling harmful actions of body, speech, and mind to prevent all mistakes and purify all afflictions, thereby achieving a peaceful and happy life. The first words the Buddha spoke to his disciples when he accepted them as his disciples concerned their perfection in the precepts and the restraint that went with it. (*Ehi tvam bhikkhu silavā hohi pātimokkhasamvarasamvuto viharāhi ācāragocarasampanno anumattesu vajjesu bhayadassāvi samādāya sikkhāhi sikkhāpadesu’ ti*).⁴ *Mahasamghika Vinaya*, volume I, Buddha told *Sariputra*: “There are ten benefits that the Tathagatas establish precepts for their disciples. Those ten benefits are (1) For the sake of subduing the *Saṅgha*. (2) For the sake of thoroughly subduing the *Saṅgha*. (3) For the sake of bringing peace to the *Saṅgha*. (4) For the sake of subduing those who are not ashamed. (5) For the sake of allowing those who are ashamed to live in peace. (6) For the sake of making those who do not believe gain faith. (7) For the sake of increasing the faith of those who already believe. (8) For the sake of ending all defilements in the present. (9) For the sake of preventing defilements that have not yet arisen from arising. (10) For the sake of allowing the True *Dhamma* to last long.

Thus, the process of forming the precepts took place over a long period, based on the practical experiences that took place in the life of the *Saṅgha* for the Buddha to establish. The perfection of the entire system of Buddhist precepts is the crystallization of the two qualities of compassion and wisdom of the Buddha.

Precept Is Basis of Ethics for Lay Followers: The five precepts (*pañcasīla*) or the five rules of training (*pañcasikkhapada*) form the most essential ethical framework for lay Buddhists. They form the basic code of ethics that lay Buddhists must observe. The Buddha laid down the five precepts and combined them with the Noble Eightfold Path. This Noble Eightfold Path can bring us a good way of life and relationships between husband and wife, parents and children, teachers and students, brothers and sisters, friends, etc., among religions and races.

The effectiveness of the five precepts combined with the Noble Eightfold Path will make our daily life and society peaceful and prosperous. *Pañcasīla* constitutes the basic ethical code of Buddhism. These five precepts (*Pañcasīla*) are ethical habit, virtuous conduct, ethical practice, and conduct. It is based on love and compassion.⁵ The five precepts (*Pañcasīla*) of Buddhism include:

- Abstention from killing living beings
- Abstention from stealing or theft
- Abstention from sexual misconduct or abstention from committing adultery
- Abstention from telling a lie
- Abstention from partaking of intoxicants

The above five precepts are the principles that guide people to peace and happiness in their present life. They are also the principles that build the foundation for personal, family, and social happiness. By learning and practicing the five precepts, they will follow the right path and avoid mistakes, suffering, fear, and disappointment. They will build peace and happiness for themselves and their families and contribute to the stability of the whole society. Practicing the precepts means following the Buddha’s teachings and consistently living in moderation. In the *Dhammapada*: “Better to live one day wisely and meditatively than a hundred years foolishly and without self-control.”⁶ For lay Buddhists, practicing good deeds means keeping the five precepts. The five precepts should be considered the minimum level of morality for a human being. It is also a common civic lesson that any society or country that wants to be prosperous and powerful cannot ignore.

The benefit of Precepts lies in preventing evil deeds and promoting good actions. Here, the precepts act to deter unwholesome actions of body, speech, and mind, addressing the causes and conditions that lead to such negativity. Simultaneously, precepts nurture the body, speech, and mind in virtue and accomplishment.

In *Dīgha Nikāya II*, there are five benefits of precepts as follows:

- Virtuous people will enjoy the Dhamma wealth through diligence.
- Virtuous people have a good reputation that spreads far and wide.
- Virtuous people are not afraid or timid when appearing in front of a crowd.
- A virtuous person will not have a disturbed mind when he dies
- People who have virtue after death will be reborn in heaven. The Buddha’s teachings are clear: those who live without morality, indulge in laziness, or violate the precepts will face five disadvantages. First, business and trade are increasingly disappointing, and earning money is no longer as easy as it once was. Next, the assets saved in the past become very difficult to maintain and gradually diminish. When morality declines, reputation fades, bad reputations spread, and we lose trust and respect.

⁵Kohn, Livia (1994), *The Five Precepts of the Venerable Lord*, p.173.

⁶Ven Acharya Buddhārakkhita (tr. & ed.) *Dhammapada Pali-English*, International Tipitaka Chanting Ceremony, 2016, p.46.

³Acharya Buddhārakkhita (tr), *The Dhammapada: The Buddha’s path of wisdom*, verse 183, p.51

⁴Majjhima Nikāya.III. 2, p.134.

The Impact of Buddhist Precepts on Society Today: In today's society, all values in science, technology, culture, politics, and religious teachings are influenced by interaction, and Buddhism is no exception. The actions of standards are carried out on precepts. And morality is found based on precepts. Among them, the five precepts are the strongest moral foundation to protect peace, and happiness and bring happiness to humanity. This is a practical way of life, demonstrating equality, humanity, democracy, and human moral standards. Albert Schweitzer, German philosopher; "The Buddha created a perfect inner morality through his first five precepts and is one of the greatest moral virtues the world has ever received." Today, Buddhism has influenced and spread throughout the world. Although it has been more than 2,500 years, the image of Buddhism has not faded but has developed strongly. Therefore, we cannot deny that the philosophy of Buddhism passed on to us is the path of salvation, the path of peace, and the path of non-violence. Everything serves human life. It is for this reason that the precepts and teachings of the Buddha are the moral foundation for creating a perfect society.

For Buddhist monks, they enter the lives of sentient beings to guide them, always maintaining strict precepts. Taking benefits and bringing happiness to sentient beings is also a method of practice for oneself. From the results achieved, the practitioner achieves freedom and good benefits. Thus, education is to lead people to live a moral life by the *Dhamma*. It is a noble way of life for others to follow. Similarly, in the spiritual realm, precepts are a sign of achieving consciousness. It is not only a means for self-cultivation to achieve joy, but it also has a great effect on others and society. Again, Buddhism builds morality based on wisdom, this precept is not only for monks and lay people but also for any individual in society. Today, Buddhism has millions of followers worldwide and exerts a significant influence not only on individual beliefs and practices, but also on the cultural, social, and political aspects of contemporary life. Its teachings on mindfulness and meditation are particularly noteworthy for their profound impact on modern society.⁷ In recent years, mindfulness and meditation have become increasingly popular as a means of reducing stress, improving mental health, and promoting overall well-being.⁸ These practices, which are rooted in Buddhist philosophy, have been adopted by people from all walks of life, including business leaders, athletes, and celebrities.⁹ By emphasizing the importance of living in the present moment, Buddhism has helped create a culture that values mindfulness and self-awareness. Buddhism has had a significant impact on modern art and literature. Buddhist philosophy is based on the idea that everything is impermanent and constantly changing. This has inspired many artists and writers to create works that reflect this belief. They use techniques such as abstraction and minimalism to convey a sense of impermanence and transience. Moreover, contemporary art and literature have integrated Buddhist themes and symbols, showcasing the enduring impact of this age-old philosophy. In addition to its impact on individual beliefs and practices, Buddhism has influenced social and political movements around the world.

In many countries, Buddhist monks have played important roles in advocating for human rights, peace, and environmental protection. For example, in Myanmar, Buddhist monks have led the pro-democracy movement and have been crucial in demanding an end to human rights abuses and the restoration of democracy. Similarly, in Sri Lanka, Buddhist leaders have spoken out against ethnic and religious violence and have worked toward promoting inter-religious harmony and reconciliation. In addition, Buddhism has had a notable influence on modern science and technology. Buddhist philosophy highlights the significance of empirical observation and inquiry, and many of its principles align with contemporary scientific revelations. Moreover, neuroscientists have extensively investigated Buddhist meditation techniques and found that they can bring about changes in the brain's structure and function. As a result, this has led to the development of new treatments for conditions such as the nature of consciousness and the mind-body connection.

CONCLUSION

The monk's sole path to liberation is none other than *Sīla*. The *Vinaya* plays an important role in the ethical foundation for lay people, monks, and nuns, leading to the noble path. The Buddha taught, "The teacher's teaching has ceased; we have no teacher now. Do not look at it like that, *Ānanda*, for what I have taught and explained to you as the *Dhamma* and discipline when I am gone, will be your teacher."¹⁰ Therefore, the most important thing for people is to make an effort to practice virtue, control their behavior, and live a righteous life. Each of us has a role to play in building a moral, civilized, and developed society. Thanks to the precepts, we can practice virtue, develop spirituality, cultivate deep morality, bring prosperity to society, and many benefits to humanity. Through this, we can affirm that the precepts are the foundation of Buddhist ethics for all social classes. It is ethical behavior that will bring peace and prosperity to life.

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⁷Mahasi Sayadaw, *Practical Vipassana Instructions*, pp.22-27.

⁸Wilson J (2014). *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture*. Oxford University Press.p.35.

⁹Noetel M, Ciarrochi J, Van Zanden B, (2019). Mindfulness and acceptance approaches to sporting performance enhancement: a systematic review. *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology*. 12 (1): 139–175. doi:10.1080/1750984X.2017.1387803. S2CID 149040404.

¹⁰Bhikkhu Nanamoli, (tr. ed.), *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, Boston - USA: Wisdom Publications, 2009, p.270.