



## The Five Precepts/Training Principles

### What are Buddhist ethics about?

To live is to act, and our actions can have either harmful or beneficial consequences for oneself and others. Buddhist ethics is concerned with the principles and practices that help one to act in ways that help rather than harm. The core ethical code of Buddhism is known as the five precepts, and these are the distillation of its ethical principles. The precepts are not rules or commandments, but 'principles of training', which are undertaken freely and need to be put into practice with intelligence and sensitivity.

The Buddhist tradition acknowledges that life is complex and throws up many difficulties, and it does not suggest that there is a single course of action that will be right in all circumstances. Indeed, rather than speaking of actions being right or wrong, Buddhism speaks of the being skilful (*kusala*) or unskilful (*akusala*). In Triratna, our faith in the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha finds everyday practical expression in our aspiration to live by ethical precepts, to the best of our ability.

**1. Not killing or causing harm to other living beings.** This is the fundamental ethical principle for Buddhism, and all the other precepts are elaborations of this. The precept implies acting non-violently wherever possible, and many Buddhists are vegetarian for this reason. The positive counterpart of this precept is love.

**2. Not taking the not-given.** Stealing is an obvious way in which one can harm others. One can also take advantage of people, exploit them, or manipulate them. All these can be seen as ways of taking the not given. The positive counterpart of this precept is generosity.

**3. Avoiding sexual misconduct.** Over the centuries different Buddhist schools have interpreted this precept in many ways, but essentially it means not causing harm to oneself or others in the area of sexual activity. It includes avoiding breaking commitments in the area of sexual relations, and avoiding encouraging others to do the same. The positive counterpart of this precept is contentment.

**4. Avoiding false speech.** Speech is the crucial element in our relations with others, and yet language is a slippery medium, and we often deceive ourselves or others without even realising that this is what we are doing. Truthfulness, the positive counterpart of this precept, is therefore essential in an ethical life. But truthfulness is not enough, and in another list of precepts (the ten precepts or the ten *kusala* dharmas) no fewer than four speech precepts are mentioned, the others enjoining that our speech should be kindly, helpful, and harmonious.

**5. Abstaining from drink and drugs that cloud the mind.** The positive counterpart of this precept is mindfulness, or awareness. Mindfulness is a fundamental quality to be developed the Buddha's path, and experience shows that taking intoxicating drink or drugs tends to run directly counter to this.