The Heart of Ethics: The First Precept

by Gil Fronsdal

The intention to not cause harm lies at the heart of Buddhist ethical and spiritual life. The commitment to non-harming leads to a life committed to not killing, which is the first of the five precepts undertaken by Buddhists the world over.

The first precept has implications in many areas of our lives, some personal and others societal. Close to home it may relate to such issues as eating meat, hunting, having firearms, self-defense, and pest-management. Both at personal and societal levels the precept is connected to questions of abortion, euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide. More widely, the first precept relates to questions about war, military service, capital punishment, the culling of wildlife, and laboratory research with animals.

The first precept is also intimately connected to our inner life as it relates to our motivations, values, emotions, and beliefs. To live by this precept is more than avoiding killing, it touches on our capacity for goodness—sometimes called virtue. Mindfulness, love, compassion, generosity and wisdom are all companions to the first precept. In addition, freeing ourselves from the distortions of selfishness, greed, or aversion creates the conditions for naturally wanting to avoid harming.

As a Buddhist practice, the first precept can be approached though the framework of the three areas of Buddhist training: training in ethics, in meditation and in wisdom. Traditionally called sila, samadhi, and paññña these three trainings concern how we behave, how we are, and how we see. As such, they support us like the legs of a tripod: we need all three to stay upright and balanced in situations that may challenge a commitment to non-harming and the first precept.

Training in sila (ethics) emphasizes the practice of restraint. This training entails restraining from killing, even ants in our homes. Some people include avoiding activities indirectly connected to killing, such as buying produce grown with

pesticides. Restraint is useful in cultivating a number of important personal qualities. It develops will power, patience, the capacity to let go, and the safety of blamelessness. Restraint can also foster greater self-understanding; not acting on an urge can help us to see the urge more clearly.

In relation to the precepts, training in samadhi (meditation) involves developing the heart and mind so our inner life supports our ethical life. Traditional forms of samadhi training include meditation practices that develop mindfulness, concentration, loving-kindness, or compassion. Greater concentration, with the associated contentment, calmness confidence, and equanimity reduce the selfishness that lies at the root of most unethical behavior. Developing loving-kindness and compassion helps us consider and regard others in caring ways. These all contribute to greater ethical sensitivity and self-awareness. This, in turn, reduces the chances that we will act on the fear or hate which often motivate the impulse to harm.

Training in samadhi ensures that living by the precepts is not simply adhering to particular rules. When our virtues and beneficial inner states are developed, we are naturally motivated to act in ways informed by the precepts. When we are happy, mindful, and compassionate we are not inclined to kill. Rather, we understand that killing any living being diminishes our inner well-being and ease.

Training in paññā (wisdom) is developing our understanding and insight. One way ethical wisdom is cultivated is through investigation. When we are about to act contrary to the precepts we can stop to investigate the situation. In particular it is useful to inquire into three areas of our potential action, their intentions, their consequences, and alternatives to them.

For example, when our actions will directly or indirectly cause the death of a living being, we can investigate the intentions motivating the actions. Do the intentions support a path to awakening? Are we happy and proud to have these intentions? Is what we are intending to do worth the sacrifice of another life? How do we balance competing intentions? We may want to safeguard both the termites eating our house and our house. Are there times when we need to

choose between the termites and house? Or, what about a situation where we are being physically attacked? How do we choose between not wanting to cause harm and the desire to protect ourselves?

Because these can be difficult questions to answer, it is important to investigate the consequences of killing. Too often people kill with a short-sightedness that fails to recognize the ripple effect of taking life. Using pesticides may successfully exterminate a pest, but too many times we have discovered later that the pesticide harmed other creatures and humans exposed to the pesticide. Killing an enemy soldier may seem appropriate in times of war but when we consider the ripple effect on the soldier's children, family, and community, is war the best way to accomplish what needs to be done? By investigating and understanding consequences, the balance between self-care and caring for others may change.

We can also consider the consequences to our inner life if we take the life of another. Meditation practice reveals the toll that killing has on our inner life. When those who have killed other people or animals begin to meditate, it is not uncommon for them to experience difficulty in facing their past actions and working through the pain and regret. Until they meditated, the harmful personal consequences laid buried in their minds.

The third area to investigate when we are motivated to kill is to consider the alternatives. All too often people want a quick solution with clear results. But discovering the alternatives to killing sometimes requires research and creative problem solving. For example, instead of buying a gun to protect ourself, can we take the time to learn self-defense strategies that will keep us safe without needing a firearm? Instead of physician-assisted suicide, can palliative care reduce the pain? Instead of pesticides on our crops, can we choose to grow plants that are not threatened by local pests?

While killing can be done quickly and easily, the unexpected negative consequences can last a long time. Finding alternatives to killing may take much time and effort, but they do not leave the same legacy of suffering. Rather, alternatives to violence leave a legacy of peace and good-will.

The personal maturity that comes from the combined training in sila, samadhi, and paññña gives a person an internal guide for their ethical life. The motivation to live a life of non-harming becomes something we want to do; it becomes something we know enriches our inner life and the lives of those around us. Not only does it diminish the impulses of greed, hate and delusion, it also increases the presence of generosity, love, and wisdom.

In this way, living by the first precept is not only about what we don't do. It is also about what we do. The Buddha associated the first precept with the practice of generosity in the following teachings:

Abandoning the taking of life, one abstains from taking life. This gives freedom from danger, freedom from hostility, and freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of living beings. In giving freedom from danger, hostility, and oppression to others one gains a share in limitless freedom from danger, hostility, and oppression. This is the first great gift. —AN 8.39

Just as not taking life is the first Buddhist ethical precept, so generosity is the first Buddhist virtue. When they come together, we can have firsthand experience that the first precept is less about following external rules and more about expressing generosity and compassion arising from within.