The Pragmatism of Five Precepts

By Gil Fronsdal

Buddhist spiritual practice falls into three general categories, known in Pali as sila, samadhi, and pañña. These terms can be translated into English as ‘precepts,’ ‘meditation,’ and ‘wisdom,’ respectively, and they function like the three legs of a tripod. Thus it is essential to cultivate all three. The precepts are concerned with avoiding harmful actions of body and speech; meditation focuses on cultivating beneficial states of mind (or heart); and wisdom is understanding what is beneficial, both for self and for others. These three aspects of practice influence each other. For example, practicing the precepts of body and speech also develops both the mind and wisdom. Meditation and wisdom infuse the precepts with goodness and clear understanding. Practicing both the precepts and meditation provides us with a foundation on which to develop wisdom to its full potential.

No single English word is an adequate translation of sila. The primary meaning of this Buddhist word is ‘conduct’ or ‘practice.’ The word is also used to refer to a person’s character or nature, making it clear that our conduct has deep roots in the mind and heart. Both as conduct and character, sila is the bedrock upon which the rest of our spiritual practice is built. Sooner or later, anyone who begins to develop mindfulness practice will discover that without the foundation of ethical behavior, further development of mindfulness is difficult.

While sila is usually translated as ‘virtue’ or ‘ethics,’ we need to be careful not to confuse it with Western ideas associated with these two words. A traditional foundation of Western ethics is a set of commandments and values handed

down by a divine being. As commandments they should be strictly obeyed, and as values they include ideas about good and evil, virtue and sin. This approach to ethics easily leads to guilt, an emotion that's pervasive in the West but which is considered unnecessary and counterproductive in Buddhism.

Buddhism understands virtue and ethics pragmatically, based not on abstract ideas of good and bad, but rather on the observation that some actions lead to suffering and some actions lead to happiness and freedom. A Buddhist asks, "Does this action lead to increased suffering or increased happiness for myself and others?" This approach is more conducive to wise investigation and avoids following a set of 'shoulds,' which can lead to debilitating guilt.

As guidelines for virtue and ethical behavior, the Buddha taught precepts for us to follow. For lay people, there are five basic precepts: 1) to abstain from killing, 2) to abstain from stealing, 3) to abstain from sexual misconduct, 4) to abstain from lying, and 5) to abstain from intoxicants such as drugs or alcohol.

Buddhism refers to these five in different ways, giving us different perspectives with which to understand them. Sometimes they are called the five 'trainings' (sikkha), sometimes the five 'practices' or 'precepts' (sila), and sometimes simply and broadly the five 'items' or 'things' (dhamma). The expression 'the five things' might strike us as odd, but perhaps it helps to free us from moralistic ideas about what these 'things' are and how they function.

There are many valuable ways of understanding these 'five things.' The first is as rules of behavior voluntarily taken on as a discipline for avoiding harm and to

support spiritual training. Following them promotes the development of meditation, wisdom, and compassion.

Also known as ‘training steps’(sikkhapada), the precepts are understood as trainings in restraint. We agree to hold back on certain impulses. So, for example, instead of following an inclination to kill a mosquito or steal pencils from work, we refrain and, instead, bring mindfulness to the discomfort we are impulsively reacting to. Rather than focusing on whether the actions are bad or immoral, we use these restraints as mirrors to study ourselves, to understand our reactions and motivations, and to reflect on the consequences of our actions.

As trainings, when we choose to abide by the five precepts, the traditional wording for this commitment is “I undertake the training step not to…” From the point of view of training, if we sincerely try to adhere to the precepts but fail, the task is to try again (perhaps after making amends for any harm done).

Following the five trainings offers a powerful form of protection. Certainly they protect us from bringing much suffering and difficulty to ourselves. And importantly, they also protect others from the harm we might cause if we did not practice the five precepts.

Buddhism also sees the precepts as rooted in principles of virtue. The fundamental principles that underlie all five precepts are compassion, not causing harm, and generosity. We follow the precepts out of compassion, out of caring for the suffering of others, and from a vision of what will be beneficial for them. The motivation of compassion also includes compassion for ourselves.

So that the precepts do not become a rigid ideal, we practice them together with the principle of non-harming. We can keep in check any tendency to create harm through narrow-minded, callous, or rigid use of the precepts by asking ourselves, “Is my application of the precepts causing harm or stress to myself or others?” If it is, this does not mean we abandon the precepts, it means we search for ways to adhere to them that are nourishing and inspiring.

Living by the precepts is itself an act of generosity; we give a wonderful gift of protection and joy to ourselves and to others. Indeed, one pragmatic reason to follow the precepts as rules of restraint is to have joy and the ‘bliss of blamelessness.’ Many people come to Buddhist practice because they feel a lack of joy and happiness in their lives. One of the best ways to cultivate and appreciate joy is to live a blame-free life.

Another way of approaching the precepts is as qualities of personal character. The Buddha described someone who was spiritually well developed as endowed with the five precepts. He said that when one reaches a certain level of awakening, it is simply not possible to consciously and intentionally break the precepts. Following the precepts is a direct by-product of having discovered freedom. In a sense, one’s character has been ethically transformed so that it is free of intentions or desires to cause harm.

These ‘five things’ can be understood as trainings to improve the quality of our inner life, as principles to guide our actions, and as a description of how an awakened person behaves. The world needs more people with the intention, sensitivity, and purity of heart represented by the five precepts.

May the precepts be a source of joy for everyone.