

## D. Precepts

*We are the heirs of our actions.*

– The Buddha

Since ancient times, spiritual traditions have offered precepts to help mitigate attitudes and activities that can disrupt meditation and spiritual maturation.

In the *Book of Discipline (Vinaya)*, Buddhist monks are enjoined to not “whistle and snap their fingers ... and having spread their upper robes as a stage, say to a *nautch* (dancing girl) ‘Dance here, sister,’ while they applaud.” (*Saṅghādisesa* 13). I have never been tempted to invite somebody to dance on my clothes as I whistled and snapped my fingers. However 2,600 years ago, apparently monks who professed to be followers of the Buddha were allured this way. So rules were created to guide them.

The rules were gradually codified into 311 precepts for nuns, 227 precepts for monks, 8 precepts for lay folks on retreat, and 5 precepts for laity in daily life.

The Buddha did not sit in deep contemplation and come up with these policies. Rather they were created and modified in response to situations that arose among fifth century BCE monastics. Most of the rules were created by the *saṅgha*, not by the Buddha. Some rules are so quaint as to not be useful to us today. Contemplating the metaphorical equivalent of dancing girl temptation might be helpful. But unless we spend time with *nautches*, the specific injunction is archaic.

Other precepts, like non-killing and non-stealing, are painted in broad strokes. They transcend a particular time and culture and remain as germane today as they were for the ancients. If we’re tempted to break one of these precepts, it is best to refrain and reflect on the inner states urging the action. However, since they were drawn so broadly, we must engage

apply to 21<sup>st</sup> century life. In Chapter 49, "Engaging Precepts Mindfully," pp. 225–237, we began exploring issues around engaging precepts.

In this appendix I want to expand this exploration by first offering precepts for daily life followed by stricter precepts for retreat. They are followed by a detailed discussion of interpreting these precepts and applying them to our lives.

I have found this to be a highly charged topic for many people. So I want to proceed carefully making a clear distinction between, on the one hand, what the ancient precepts actually say and don't say, and on the other hand, our interpretations of what they mean and don't mean to each of us.

My intention is not to tell you what you should do. I only want to share my own struggles in sorting them out in the hope it will help you sort them out for yourself.

First, the precepts themselves.

## **Daily Precepts**

I recite seven daily precepts before my first sitting each day. The first five are traditional. The sixth is in many of the Buddha's talks. It is an overall reminder of what the precepts are about. The last precept summarizes them all in positive terms of kindness and generosity.

**I undertake the precept to refrain from  
killing or harming on purpose.**

**I undertake the precept to refrain from  
taking what is not freely given.**

**I undertake the precept to refrain from  
sexual misconduct.**

**I undertake the precept to refrain from  
lies, gossip, harsh speech, and idle chatter.**

**I undertake the precept to refrain from  
drugs and alcohol to the point of heedlessness.**

**I undertake the precept to refrain from  
speaking or acting with ill will.**

**I undertake the precept  
to be kind and generous to myself and all beings.**

## **Retreat Training Precepts**

I use the following nine precepts in retreats and offer them to my students when I am leading a retreat. They are more rigorous than the daily precepts in order to take advantage of the quiet of a retreat to reflect more deeply.

**I undertake the precept to refrain from  
killing or harming on purpose.**

**I undertake the precept to refrain from  
taking what is not freely given.**

**I undertake the precept to refrain from  
all sexual activity.**

**I undertake the precept to refrain from  
lies, gossip, harsh speech, and idle chatter.**

**I undertake the precept to refrain from  
drugs and alcohol.**

**I undertake the precept to refrain from  
eating solid food after the noonday meal.**

**I undertake the precept to refrain from entertainment  
and distractions, and to groom and dress modestly.**

**I undertake the precept to refrain from  
speaking or acting with ill will.**

**I undertake the precept  
to be kind and generous to myself and all beings.**

## **Bringing Ancestors Back from the Dead**

The Buddhist precepts were recorded in the Pāli language. Before looking at specific precepts in English, let's look at translation in general.

When Pepsi Cola went into China, it translated its slogan, "Come alive with the Pepsi generation" into Chinese. It came out, "Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the dead." In English, "come alive" is usually metaphorical. In Chinese, it is

usually literal. These and other differences in nuance implied a message far different from what Pepsi intended.

Most words don't translate readily from one language to another because words don't have a single meaning. Rather they have clusters of definitions and connotations that differ from one language and culture to another. And within a given language, words' meanings are fluid, shifting from generation to generation and even from year to year. To confidently understand what the Buddha meant requires a nuanced understanding of the time, culture, and language around him. Many of those details have been lost to us.

When we translate the Buddha's teachings, we have an additional difficulty: during his time, writing was considered too crude for spiritual matters. Important teachings were conveyed orally. The Buddha spoke a language called *Magadhi Prakrit*. His teachings were passed verbally for generations before finally being recorded in the Pāli language. English did not exist at that time. The translations we have today are the product of a 2,600-year game of Telephone.

Scholarly detective work can uncover clues about original intent. But if we take these clues too literally, we risk thinking Pepsi brings our ancestors back from the dead.

## **Intoxicants and Intoxication**

The fifth precept about alcohol and drugs illustrates some of the complexities of translations. It is also a relatively charged precept, perhaps because of the widespread use and misuse of intoxicants of all varieties in our 21st century lives. Let's begin with a little historical background so that we might understand what this precept meant in the Buddha's time when it was created.

In the early years of his ministry, the Buddha and the saṅgha used only four precepts. Alcohol was not mentioned. The Buddha's Middle Way implied moderation in drinking, but his followers weren't teetotalers.

During the ninth year of his ministry, a dispute arose amongst the monks near the city of Kosambi. A monk had broken a rule about washing: after using the latrine and washing their hands, monks should throw out any unused water so bugs couldn't grow in it. A monk forgot to throw out the water and confessed his transgression. Then an argument arose over whether his infraction was a minor or a major offense. The dispute became so acrimonious that the citizens of the city were losing faith in the saṅgha.

The Buddha went to Kosambi to try to settle the bickering. Upon approaching the city, he saw a monk passed out dead drunk beside the road. Within a few months, the saṅgha put forth the fifth precept. In *Pāli* it reads:

**Surāmerayamajja pamādaṭṭhānā  
veramaṇī sikkhāpadam samādiyāmi.**

The first two words are the substance of the precept. The last three words are a standard formula for all precepts: *veramani* ("to refrain from"), *sikkhāpadam* ("the training precept"), and *samādiyami* ("I undertake"). Rearranging these to conform to English syntax, we get: "I undertake the training precept to refrain from ..."

The first two words tell what this particular precept recommends we refrain from. Both words are compound. The first compound is made up of three words. "*Sura*" and "*meraya*" were different kinds of alcohol. One probably refers to simple fermented drinks like wine and beer. The other probably refers to fermented and distilled drinks like liquors. The third word, "*majja*" is controversial. Like most words in most languages, it has multiple meanings. It can be read as "intoxicant" or "intoxication."

In *Pāli* compound words, the final word in the series is usually the root word while the preceding ones are modifiers. So "*suramerayamajja*" can mean "an intoxicant made from alcohol" or "intoxication from alcohol" depending on how we read "*majja*."

The second compound word, "*pamādaṭṭhāna*" is made up of *pamāda* ("heedlessness," "carelessness," or "negligence that leads to moral lapse") and *thāna* ("place"). So *pamādaṭṭhāna* literally means "place of heedlessness" and metaphorically "condition of heedlessness." However, it is unclear whether "place" or "condition" refers to the condition of the mind of a person drinking alcohol or the "condition" of the drink to potentially intoxicate.

If we go with the first meaning, the precept is about refraining from intoxicants that can give rise to heedlessness. In other words, abstaining from all alcohol. If I'm invited to join a champagne toast at a wedding and no other beverage is available, I should not participate. If we go with the second meaning, the precept is about refraining from the mind condition of intoxication. In other words, modest use of alcohol is okay as long as we don't get drunk. I can take a sip of champagne so long as it's not enough to fuzz the mind.

So which is it? Do we refrain from intoxicants or from intoxication? Sincere scholars and teachers earnestly advocate each interpretation. If we could take a time machine back 2,600 years and talk with the saṅgha in their native *Prakrit*, we could find out if they intended one interpretation over the other. But in the *Pāli* language as we understand it, both meanings are equally valid.

The controversy around this precept is ironic. Behind the dispute in Kosambi were monks holding differing views of precepts and rules. Some said rules should be followed to the letter. Others said rules were guidelines to help us better examine our intentions. They should be applied sensitively and flexibly to the natural ambiguities of life.

The Buddha did not take sides in this fight. Instead he said, "I wish you would quit arguing. The wise do not dispute with one another." He left it at that.

### *Tightly or Gently*

How do we apply this ambiguous fifth precept to our lives?

Since the text is unclear, we can look for clues in the larger arc of the Buddha's teaching and in our own intuition. These are not likely to lead to a definitive answer that will please everyone. Indeed, even among serious scholars and practitioners, I find little disagreement about what the text *says* even as there is marked disagreement as to what it *means*. The text is ambiguous. The differing views are usually justified by differing personal experiences, insights, and beliefs about human nature. Some hold the precept tightly while others hold it gently. My views fall into the "gentle" camp. Here are some of my thoughts:

- The Buddha's path is a Middle Way that avoids extremes. In this case, the middle is somewhere between abstinence and indulgence.
- One argument for abstinence is that the only reason someone would take alcohol is craving to dull the mind. Such intentional ignorance is seriously unwholesome.

This argument implies that we should never act with craving. But until we are near full awakening, we will have craving that can give rise to suffering. The Buddha recommended we understand suffering rather than suppress it.

In truth, there are lots of other reasons someone might drink alcohol, such as not wanting to offend someone by rejecting an offered drink.

And if someone does want to dull the mind, the solution is not necessarily abstinence. That may suppress the behavior without working wisely with the craving itself. It can become a kind of craving for non-craving and lead to rigidity rather than freedom.

- The data is clear that people with a history of alcohol abuse or addiction do much better with abstinence and support from others for abstinence.

- On retreats, I recommend abstinence. Keeping the saṅgha healthy and sober is valuable to everyone. And retreat time is so precious that I don't want to risk muddying the mind-heart even a little.

Some argue that for them personally, a little alcohol or recreational drug helps them relax or see more clearly. In some cases this might be true. But I still recommend against it because there may be others on retreat who have a history of alcohol or drug abuse. It may be wisest for them to abstain completely. Having everyone abstinent is a support to them. Keeping the saṅgha healthy and sober is more valuable to everyone than a few indulgences might be to anyone.

- Both *sura* and *meraya* refer to alcoholic drinks. The precept doesn't mention other drugs. Yet most contemporary Buddhist teachers include recreational drugs as part of this precept. It is reasonable to assume that, were the Buddha alive today and looking at the wide variety of mind-altering substances available to us, he might include other substances under the precept.
- Most teachers make an exception for prescriptions. They say prescriptions are "medicine" not "drugs." However, an opioid, for example, has the same effect on the body and mind with or without a note from a doctor. This exemption says in effect, "If a wise and knowledgeable expert agrees that the benefits of a drug outweigh the problems, it's okay to use in an appropriate dosage."

I think this is a wise standard. If we want to use a modest amount of a substance, it is helpful to consult a wise and knowledgeable expert — a doctor, teacher, or friend — who has our highest best interest at heart and see if they agree.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> I never recommend using a substance that requires a medical prescription without having a doctor's prescription. And I never recommend not using a substance a doctor has prescribed. If a necessary medication has an adverse effect on the mind, there are

- Some mind and mood altering substances don't fall into the conventional understanding of alcohol, drugs, or medicine. For example, small amounts of caffeine make my mind restless and groggy at the same time — a useless condition. So I avoid all caffeine unless there is a compelling reason to take it. Other people are not affected the way I am. So I don't consider caffeine to be part of the precept. The precepts do not cover every contingency.

Refined sugar can be harmful for some people. Partial or complete abstinence may be wisest for some people, even if it's not part of the precept. It's important to understand your own system and get qualified advice where appropriate.

In truth, anything we ingest has some effect on our bodies and minds. If we refuse to put anything into the body, we die. Precepts can only point out some general principles about how to manage. It's up to us to be kind and wise in how we treat the body-mind.

### *Bottom Line*

Rules and thoughtful reflection can only take us so far. At some point we have to look at our own experience and discover what is most helpful.

I have found that even small amounts of alcohol can disrupt subtle awareness for hours, a day, or longer. As such it is incompatible with advanced meditation. So is caffeine, too much sugar, poor diet, lack of exercise, lack of sleep, too much time on computer or TV screens, too little time in meditation, working too hard, and difficult people, to name a few. As best as I can figure, I probably consume an average of about six ounces of alcohol per year. Each time it prevents my meditation from going to its greatest depth for a time. But in the larger scheme of things, it hasn't slowed my progress more than other bad habits.

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ways to work with it in meditation.

I think it is vitally important for us to understand how our own body-mind-heart system responds to various substances and activities and then be kind, clear, and fiercely honest with ourselves about our motivations to engage in anything that doesn't support our highest best interest. That is how wisdom grows.

Wisdom does not grow through indulgence or rigid abstinence. We can treat the desire for alcohol like any other desire by being aware of our intentions and relaxing any tension in them using the Six Rs. If we have any concern about them, we can have a conversation with a wise and knowledgeable friend.

Ajahn Sumedho was talking about the suttas in the following passage. But he could have been talking about the precepts when he wrote:

*Suttas [or precepts] are not meant to be 'sacred scriptures' that tell us what to believe. One should read them, listen to them, think about them, contemplate them, and investigate the present reality, the present experience with them. Then, and only then, can one insightfully know the truth beyond words.*

## **Killing and Harming**

The first four predate the Buddha. Other groups, like that Jains, used the same language as Buddhists. The Buddha merely adopted these four from long-standing traditions. As with other things he adopted, he tweaked them to match his understanding.

The original language of the first precept refers to abstaining from “striking”:

### **Pāṇātipātā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi**

Most later translations refer to abstaining from “killing” or from “killing and harming.” The early meaning emphasized the action. The later emphasized the effect. The shift in emphasis may reflect changes in the meaning of *pāṇātipātā*. But the intentions are similar and clear.

## Taking What is Not Freely Given

The second precept is to abstain from taking what is not freely given:

**Adinnādānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.**

Some people translate it as refrain from “stealing.” But “taking what is not given” has a wider connotation. I prefer “not *freely* given” to make it clear that coaxing or manipulating somebody into giving us something can be in the same category as stealing.

## Sexual Misconduct

The third precept is about sexual misconduct:

**Kāmesumicchācāra veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.**

The earlier meaning was sensual misconduct. That is a much higher standard than just sexual misbehavior. But it has been so consistently translated and elaborated on in the text as sexual misbehavior, that I use that.

Sexual misconduct is considered any sexual behavior that is directly or indirectly hurtful to anyone. On retreats, people are encouraged to refrain from all sexual behavior so the time can be used fully for meditation training and observing the mind-heart itself.

## Lies, Gossip, Harsh Speech, Idle Chatter

The Buddha had more to say about speech than any other precept. When we open our mouths, mindfulness tends to fly away. The precept itself is usually translated as incorrect speech or lying:

**Musāvādā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.**

But given the importance of speech in our everyday lives, I like to include a few of the other qualities the Buddha spoke about: lies, gossip, harsh speech, and idle chatter.

On retreats, correct speech is usually silence.

## **Solid Food After Mid-Day**

These first five precepts are the ones for the laity to use in everyday life. On retreats they are modified to include abstaining from all sexual activity, all non-essential speech, and all use of alcohol and non-prescription drugs.

Traditionally there are three additional precepts used on retreats. The first is to not eat at “incorrect times”:

**Vikālabhojanā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.**

The only “correct time” is between the time you can see the lines of your hand when outdoors — that is around dawn – and before the sun reaches its zenith.

Daylight Savings means that the zenith is not always high noon. And many rented retreat centers offer the mid-day meal at noon rather than before noon. So I follow Bhante Vimalaramsi’s looser interpretation of not eating after the noon meal. This also means that advanced meditators who want to sit for many hours in the morning and through the middle of the day can still get a meal even if the “noon-day meal” is not until the afternoon.

“Solid food” is considered anything that does not naturally melt and turn to liquid before we swallow. So ice cream, chocolate, and hard candy are traditionally not considered solid. It seems to me that such exceptions are skirting the intention of the precept. So some people interpret it more strictly.

If somebody must have a later meal for medical reasons, I tell them not to take the precept at all.

## **Entertainment, Distractions, and Immodesty**

The seventh precept is long:

**Nacca-gīta-vādita-visūkadassana  
mālā-gandha-vilepana-dhāraṇa-mañdana-vibhūsanatthānā  
veramaṇī sikkhapādam samādiyāmi.**

It translates roughly as refraining from dancing, singing, and music because they were considered frivolous distractions and restraining from beautifying the body with garlands, perfumes and cosmetics because they were considered vain.

Today there are problems with these. First, not all music and dance are frivolous. Second, “beautify,” “garlands,” “perfumes,” and “cosmetics” sound like they target women. This list could include the scents of deodorants, soaps, and colognes or grooming practices such as shaving so that the list addresses both genders. The culture during the Buddha’s time was misogynistic. I’d rather not continue wording that reinforces that aspect of the tradition. Furthermore, today movies-on-demand, cellphones, computers, and other electronic devices offer distractions not on the ancient list. So I update and simplify the precept “*to refrain from entertainment and distractions, and to groom and dress modestly.*” The concerns are the same as in the Buddha’s time but these specifics align more closely with the 21st century distractions and vanity and with gender equality.

## High Beds

The eighth traditional precept is to refrain from using high beds. This is a cultural artifact from a time when high beds were a sign of privilege or haughtiness. In the context of modern society, this is no longer meaningful. I don’t use it.

## III Will

When talking about ethical behavior in his discourses, the Buddha rarely mentions just five precepts. He often mentions ten behaviors. For example in *The Sammāditṭhi Sutta: Right View (Majjhima Nikāya 9.6)* he advises abstaining from:

- killing
- taking what is not given
- sensual pleasure

false speech  
 malicious speech  
 harsh speech  
 gossip  
 covetousness  
 ill will  
 wrong view

Notice that he doesn't mention drugs or alcohol, perhaps because that precept came from the saṅgha later or perhaps because he didn't think alcohol was as important as the other ten.

Also notice that he says a lot about speech. Perhaps because wise speech is so difficult he mentions four specifics.

The second to last item is abstaining from ill will. Without ill will, the previous items would not arise. This is a good summary of them all. So I include it as an additional precept. However, precepts are about specific physical or verbal actions. Ill will is an attitude or feeling. We have very little control over the attitudes and feelings that arise in us at any given moment. We can't wish them away. However, if we refrain from speaking or acting with ill will, we don't reinforce it. Over time it will fade. So the precept is about refraining from speaking or acting with ill will. (See pp. 134–135.)

## **Kind and Generous**

The precepts are framed as refraining from harmful actions or speech. This way we are more likely to catch ourselves when we are tempted to speak or act unwisely.

However, it can be helpful to frame them positively. So the last precept I use summarizes them affirmatively. The opposite of ill will and covetousness is kindness and generosity.

## **Wisdom**

The last item on the list is wise view — or refraining from wrong view. When we take the precepts to heart, we don't take

life so personally. When we don't take life personally, we have wise view.

## Related Chapters

30. Covert Intentions and Self, p. 127.

31. Recognizing Two Species of Intentions, p. 131.

49. Engaging Precepts Mindfully, pp. 225.