

B. Five Precepts for Lay Buddhists

When we take Namō in the Three Jewels, we decide to practise the Dharma, the Buddha's teachings, in our lives following the example of the Sangha. Precepts (silas) are the Dharma presented in a formula format, or the summaries, the procedural presentations of the Buddha's teaching for direct practices. It is the precepts that help us stay on the Path. One may say that precepts are similar to a boundary separating peace and trouble, joy and sadness, happiness and sorrow. By keeping the precepts, we are living in a peaceful, joyous and happy realm (or state). Violating any precept is similar to crossing the boundary to go to the other realm, the realm of greed, hatred and delusion, the realm of sorrow and sufferings.

There are different sets of precepts. In each set there are many practical degrees (levels). The precept set for lay Buddhists is composed of five precepts: not killing, not stealing, not being involved in immoral adultery, not telling falsehoods and not using drugs. By keeping these five precepts, we become upright Buddhists.

1. Not Killing

Not killing means not terminating the life of any thing, including humans, animals, insects, trees, plants, etc. In an absolute manner, we can say that the not-killing precept is to prohibit us from interfering with the environment. Every thing in this universe has a fair right to live. We all want to protect our right, and therefore we should respect the right of others. Not violating others' lives is the absolute level of the not-killing precept. To keep the not-killing precept, we also have to protect others' lives, from pets to wild animals, from insects to forests, mountains, rivers, lakes, water falls, beaches, trees, plants, etc. We should protect not only from being killed but also from being deteriorated.

However, in this worldly life, it is almost impossible to keep the not-killing precept at the absolute level, but we should try at a level as high as we can. We can start at a basic level, for example we should not kill anything just for fun or for entertainment such as fishing, hunting or burning forests for fun. We should not enjoy seeing people or animals killing or hurting one another. At a little higher level, we should avoid killing due to our greed or hatred. We may reduce our daily food to the amount necessary for our health. To be vegetarian is a good way to practise the not-killing precept.

By practising the not-killing precept, we will have the following benefits:

- Peace, joy and happiness: we will not regret and repent our killing actions, not worry about being avenged. We will have good sleep without nightmares.

- Love and friendship: we will be friendly to everyone, humans as well as animals, insects, trees, plants, etc.
- Good environment: we will live in beautiful areas with plenty of trees, flowers, rivers, beaches, etc. There will be fewer severe flood, drought or pollution because we have plenty of green trees and forests.

2. Not Stealing

Not stealing means not taking things that belong to others without their voluntary permission or acceptance. The not-stealing precept helps us overcome our greed and respect the right of every living being to have equal opportunities. Stealing may be performed in many formats. Students who do not try all their best in study, employees who do not work efficiently and sufficiently the time required, citizens who do not pay their tax honestly, persons who found lost things and do not try to return to the owners, etc. all violate the not-stealing precept. People who take advantages of their strengths, positions, skill, talent, intelligence, etc. to get a big amount of something more than needed while some others do not have enough, people who take opportunities to buy something too cheap because the sellers need money, etc. also violate the not-stealing precept. Being involved in activities such as gambling, horse races, lotto, raffles, etc. may lead us to the violation of the not-stealing precepts.

We may vow to keep the not-stealing precept at a coarse level then slowly move to subtle levels. Giving donation and helping others are active forms of practising the not-stealing precept.

By practising the not-stealing precept, we will have the following benefits:

- Peace and happiness: we will not be afraid of being summoned to court.
- Trust: everyone will trust us.
- Friendship: we will be friendly to people who recover their lost properties.

3. Not being involved in Immoral Adultery

People who keep the precept of non-immoral adultery will not speak, think of, or be involved in immoral sexual activities or related matters. They keep themselves away from sexual movies, books and magazines. They only have quality sexual activities with their official partner.

If we keep the precept of non-immoral adultery, we will have the following benefits:

- Trust and happiness: we will be held in trust of our partner. Our families will live in harmony and happiness.
- Health and wealth: We will be healthy and wealthy.

4. Not Telling Falsehoods

People who keep the precept of not-telling falsehoods will not say anything that is not true or brings sorrow, unhappiness to others. Keeping the precept of not-telling falsehoods also may be achieved in many levels. We may start with a promise of not lying to our parents, or not telling untrue things to gain some benefits. Often what we say in anger brings sufferings to others; we therefore may promise ourselves, not to say more than five minutes when we are angry, etc. For subtler levels, we may avoid saying false story just for fun or keep saying only honest speeches that bring harmony and happiness to everyone. One practical approach to keep the precept of not lying is to check the motivation of our speaking, and to keep silence when we lose our temper or patience.

If we keep the precept of not-telling falsehoods, we will have the following benefits:

- Trust and harmony: we will be trusted and live in harmony. We will not quarrel with one another over false stories.
- Wisdom: we will see the truth and live in wisdom, free from ignorance and illusion.

5. Not Using Drugs

Drugs are things when used their effects will give us illusion and make us unable to recognise the world as it is. Cigarettes, alcohol, beer, narcotine, etc. are drugs. People using drugs may lose their control and may not feel ashamed. They may therefore easily violate the other precepts.

We can start keeping the precept of not-using drugs by limiting the consumed amount of drugs we are used to. For example, we can start by limiting ourselves to a maximum of one pack of cigarettes or one can of beer a day, etc. With this beginning, we can give up all drugs within one year.

By keeping the precept of not-using drugs, we will have the following benefits:

- Health and wealth: we will be healthy and will not lose property. Our family will have less chance of being sick due to lung cancer, high blood pressure or stroke. We will not waste money on unnecessary things such as cigarettes, alcohol, beers and drugs.

- Cleanliness: there will not be smoke, ashes, cigarette butts, injecting needles, beer bottles or cans, etc. that pollute the environment. Our children will not feel uncomfortable due to our breath.
- Harmony: Our family will live in harmony because we will never see a drunken father, mother or children in our house.

Conclusion

Keeping precepts is a basic step leading to peace, joy, harmony and happiness. The security of our life is higher if the level of our precept keeping is subtler, and as a consequence, we will be more peaceful, joyous and happier. The forms of precepts are very diversified. Sometimes only we can verify whether we violate precepts or not. Some actions seem fine to us but may encourage others or ourselves to violate precepts. For example, driving cars too fast will lead us to the violation of the not-killing precept; our sexy clothes may induce others or ourselves to immoral adultery; living in luxury may provoke others' greed, etc. We therefore should be clear-sighted to control our thoughts, speeches and actions to help others and ourselves to keep precepts. However, not violating any precept is almost impossible. We should be honest and sincere to recognise our violation. We should not try to cover our mistakes, because nobody forces us to keep precepts; we keep precepts for the happiness of our family and our society. We should therefore sincerely repent our mistakes.