

Ask a Monk

S E R I E S

Morality

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Morality I - The precepts

Morality is that which leads the mind to become focused and able to see things clearly as they are. Morality concerns the general state of mind that gives rise to concentration. It is not concerned so much with the result of one's actions on other people as it concerns the result of one's actions on one's own mind. Nor is it so much concerned with the judgment of others as it is with the judgment and reactions of one's mind to one's own actions. Morality is concerned with the negative effect that unwholesome deeds have on the mind. When you engage in unwholesome speech, action or thought, you are taken away from the focused, objective, clear state of mind we are trying to create.

The first aspect of morality to discuss is **the precepts** we take as Buddhists. Precepts are like fence posts you use to set up a clear boundary for yourself, a fence outside of which you do not trespass. The fence posts themselves will not keep anything in or out, but they serve as markers, clear indicators of where the boundary exists. The basic Buddhist morality of the Five Precepts - not to kill, steal, cheat, or lie and not to take drugs and alcohol - are not an exhaustive list of things that one should not do; you could never come up with such a list because morality is not the actions themselves, it is the intentions behind them. Precepts are only a guide.

The **Five Precepts** make up a list of guidelines that give you an idea of where the boundaries exist between moral and immoral, between good for you and bad for you. Actions like killing are bad for you, unwholesome and detrimental to your own spiritual well-being. Stealing as well, cheating on a loved one or breaking up someone else's marriage or relationship, lying or deceiving others, and using intoxicants which cloud the mind, all have the effect of creating states of mind that are antithetical to the goal of meditation practice, which is meant to cultivate clarity of mind, purity, and freedom from suffering. Immoral actions cloud the mind and create states of lust, hatred, fear, worry, remorse, and guilt.

Of course, the Five Precepts is not an exhaustive list. For example, hurting other people is also unwholesome, but it is not one of the precepts. The precepts are a guide for the most extreme, immoral acts, and they must be done away with even before you start to practice. Anyone who wishes to cultivate wholesomeness must assure themselves that they can keep these five precepts. One who is constantly engaging in breaking them will be unable to cultivate concentration and wisdom.

For the next step after you begin to practice meditation, the fence is brought closer by taking the **Eight Precepts**. A person who undertakes to practice meditation intensively is expected to keep more than just the Five Precepts. First, in the Five Precepts, the third precept is not to cheat on others; in the eight precept, this changes so that instead of not cheating on others, one undertakes to engage in no sexual or romantic activity at all during the meditation practice, as any such activity distracts one from the practice. Sexual and romantic activity are not immoral in a worldly sense, but they are actions that will get in the way of meditation practice by distracting and creating greater addiction and clinging.

For the sixth precept, one undertakes to eat only once a day or during the morning hours. We can eat enough food during the morning to keep us alive and healthy to practice meditation without obsessing over it or using it as an escape.

The seventh precept is to discard any entertainment or beautification. We do not listen to music, sing, dance, watch shows, read fiction, etc. — all sorts of things that during a meditation course will distract one from one's meditation practice, even though, in a worldly sense, they are not strictly immoral. We do not beautify ourselves; we give up wearing makeup and beautiful clothes and trying to make ourselves attractive, something that distracts us and other people and keeps us tied to the world of romance and attraction.

The eighth precept is to sleep on a simple bedding, such as sleeping on the floor or on a rug, and only sleeping a minimal amount of time. We recommend meditators to sleep only six hours or less during the meditation course. Since the mind is more focused and well-ordered through the meditation practice, one no longer needs so much sleep.

The eight precepts bring the fence posts in closer. They are still not morality in the strictest sense, as that must come from the meditation practice itself, but by keeping away from all of these activities, we support our meditation, allowing ourselves to gain greater states of concentration and thereby wisdom.

In terms of precepts, the final step one could take if one wishes to take up the life of a meditator fully is to give up all economy or commerce, refraining from using money, buying and selling, trading, or any economic activity whatsoever. This means living the life of a religious person, a monk; using an alms bowl and receiving food given to you out of charity.

Monastic morality starts by adding one more precept of not using money, which completes the precepts of a novice monk. From there you can progress to take on the entire list of monastic rules which serves to focus the mind on the practice and keep you away from worldly endeavours, pursuits, and distractions. There are 227 rules of the Bhikkhus, 311 of the Bhikkhunis, and hundreds more; it becomes an endless list of rules, where you live a prescribed life that keeps you on the straight and narrow.

Breaking these rules is not a cause for going to hell or being unable to meditate. They are guidelines or fence posts. Straying outside them is to your detriment; staying inside them is to your benefit and will support your meditation practice. This is the first aspect of morality, the rules. They are only one aspect of morality — important, useful, and a good introduction to the concept of Buddhist morality.

Beyond these rules relating to basic ethics or monastic harmony, there are no other rules you have to keep; you do not have to bow down in this way or chant in that way or light incense, etc. We have very simple rules that are based on morality and on how they affect your mind during your meditation practice.

Morality II - Guarding of the senses

Part two of morality is the guarding of the senses. In Buddhism we recognize there to be six senses: the five ordinary physical senses – seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling and an additional mental “sixth sense”, which simply refers to thinking. These are the six doors to experience or perception. All of our experiences occur at one or another of these doors. The guarding of the senses simply means preventing the mind from cultivating judgments, projections, or extrapolations of reality. Guarding one’s senses keeps the mind at the level of objectivity where we experience each object as it is. This is what allows us to focus and cultivate concentration and wisdom, to which morality is meant to lead. The practice of guarding the senses is a much more essential form of morality from a Buddhist perspective than keeping precepts. The consideration is that extrapolations, judgments, and projections are all immoral, in the sense that they lead more to suffering, distress, and misunderstanding or they lead us to follow our addictions, desires, aversions, hatreds, fears, and worries.

In terms of the senses, morality is simply the bringing of the mind back to reality of the experience - when you see something, let it just be seeing, when you hear something, let it just be hearing and nothing else. When you experience something, have it just be experiencing that thing. This objectivity is accomplished in many ways. One way of accomplishing it is by simply forcing the mind to stay objective. When the mind begins to stray, it is brought back and forbidden to wander. Guarding the mind can be done by clamping the mind down or repressing the desires - this is a conventional guarding of the senses.

Another way to guard the senses is to physically prevent yourself from experiencing things that might give rise to likes or dislikes. When you walk around in the city or drive in a car, you can avoid looking around sightseeing or trying to take in what is going on around you. You can prevent yourself from seeing the things that would create desire, worry or fear. You can avoid going into bars or watching entertaining shows, or listening to music. It is important to know that activities that excite you create habits of addiction and attachment. Obviously, this is only going to be a temporary fix; avoiding will never give rise to concentration or wisdom by itself.

From a Buddhist perspective, true morality has to be something deeper, on an experiential level where even when you see something that would potentially attract you, you are able to be objective about it, able to focus your mind just on the essence of the object. Seeing is just seeing. This is accomplished by something that we call mindfulness. The practice of morality requires this ability to capture the object in

its essence. When you see something, you remind yourself, “This is seeing,” just saying to yourself, “Seeing.” When you hear something you remind yourself, “Hearing.” When you smell, “Smelling.” When you taste, “Tasting.” When you feel, “Feeling.” When you think, “Thinking.” Guarding the senses from any sort of extrapolation or projection. The mind grasps the seeing as just an experience and nothing more. You see the experience just as it is.

This is considered to be morality, because it keeps the mind from any judgment that would cause one to perform immoral actions. Any speech that is spoken as a result of our experiences is therefore free from judgement. Any actions that are performed as a result of our experience of the world are also pure and objective. Instead of getting angry over something we have seen, heard or smelled, and then speaking or acting in a way to cause suffering, we are able to act rationally and with clarity of mind. This is really the very essence of Buddhist meditation practice. It is at this beginning of the path of cultivating morality where we begin to straighten ourselves out, and eventually become accustomed to seeing things as they are, which will give rise to concentration and, in turn, wisdom.

Morality III - Reflection on the use of requisites

The third aspect of morality is reflection on the use of requisites. No matter how simple a life we live as human beings, there are certain things that we require in order to continue living. In the Buddha's teaching, there are four basic categories of things that we all must make use of. We try to use them wisely and with reflection before partaking in their use. The four main requisites in Buddhism are **food, clothing, shelter, and medicines**. These are considered to be four most basic things human beings need to survive. Even when undertaking intensive meditation practice one cannot escape relying on these things.

When using objects and possessions in our lives, there is potential for going outside of the boundaries of what is conducive to meditation practice and becoming distracted or intoxicated by the use of material possessions. Using our possessions for pleasure, indulgence, distraction and diversion will take us away from the meditation practice and away from our goal. Reflection on the use of possessions is an important part of the practice of morality in that it helps prevent us from becoming distracted and intoxicated by the world around us.

We try to see food as something used simply to stay alive. We do not use food for the purpose of entertainment or intoxication, for the strength that comes from it, for fattening our bodies or for building up bulk, beautifying the body or creating a good complexion. We are not concerned with these things. We use food simply to continue our lives and allow us to continue on our spiritual path. We try to use just the amount of food necessary to continue our lives, and not to go beyond that amount, to not to fall prey to our desires, attachments, and addictions to food.

We try to use clothing only to cover the body and to ward off heat, cold, insects and pests of all sorts. We use clothing to cover the body to keep us from being naked and creating the distraction that is caused from us exposing ourselves. We do not use clothing for beautification, sensual pleasure, or indulging in soft or comfortable touch. We try to use just the clothes that are necessary to keep us alive. As monks we perfect this by only wearing a simple cloth. We have three rectangular cloths that we wear, and that is considered just enough to keep us reasonably comfortable without becoming luxurious or engaging in beautification through style or enjoyment of color and beauty.

The third requisite, shelter, is likewise only used for the purpose of protecting ourselves from elements like heat, cold, insects, and pests. Shelter also provides solitude, and is used for the purpose of segregating ourselves from all the things that would normally distract us. When you have your own

private dwelling place, like a room or a secluded place in the forest, it can be a great support for your meditation, especially in the early stages when your mind is still easily distracted by the objects of the senses, or people and activities going on in the world. Shelter is not to be used for indulgence in things that you only want to do in private, like any kind of entertainment or indulgence in sleeping and relaxation. Houses, rooms, and accommodations should be simple and bare. Comfortable or high-end luxurious bedding should be avoided. Care should be taken, because in solitude there also comes the tendency towards engaging in activities that you would not want other people to know about. Try to use your dwelling place simply for what it is meant. Be careful not to fall prey to the comfort and the luxury of a beautiful or luxurious dwelling.

Medicines, the fourth requisite, are only to be used only to the extent necessary to overcome sickness, in order to allow for a mind that is unclouded and free from the effects of sickness and disease and a body that is able to perform the meditation practice and function in everyday life. Medicines are not to be used to cover up unpleasant experiences, pain for example, using painkillers or drugs that are simply for the purpose of creating states of comfort and avoiding unpleasant experiences. Medicines are not to be used like supplements meant to simply strengthen or give a false sense of health and comfort in order to avoid the inevitability of sickness and pain.

Use all of these requisites just for what is necessary. Following these examples, you can apply the same principle to any object or possession. If you have a car, you should use the car only as necessary. If you have a computer, the computer should only be used as necessary. This is wise reflection on the use of our requisites. We should look around ourselves and try to eliminate the material possessions that distract and take us away from the path and the practice, because it is just another outlet that takes us outside of what is not moral, outside of that which supports the meditation practice, which leads towards concentration and focus. Anything that takes us outside of this path we can consider to be immoral. It is a subjective definition, but in a Buddhist context this is what we mean by *sīla* or morality.

Morality IV - Right Livelihood

The final aspect of morality refers to Right Livelihood. One way livelihood affects meditation practice relates to the types of livelihood that will, by their very nature, tend to lead to distraction and corruption of the mind. There are five types of livelihood that are considered to be wrong livelihood, in the sense that they affect your spiritual well-being. The first is the **selling of weapons**. If one sells things like guns or other instruments of violence towards humans or animals, it is considered to be wrong livelihood. Second is the **selling of animals** - live animals or human beings, including slavery. Animals are considered to be beings just like humans, so engaging in the trade of animals has ethical ramifications, especially in terms of having to cage and control them; the selling of animals is considered to be problematic in a similar way to selling humans. **Selling meat** is also considered to be problematic, as you are dealing with killing and engaging with people like butchers and hunters, which is most likely to harm your state of mind. **Selling intoxicants** is also wrong livelihood because you are dealing with drunk people, getting people drunk, and making money off of people's bad habits, something that leads them to intoxication. Finally, **selling poison** is wrong livelihood, so if you sell rat poison or chemicals meant for killing, like pesticides, that sort of thing is immoral. The point here is that the act of selling is not immoral, you are just moving things around, taking money and giving products; however, the nature of the activity is very closely involved with an immoral activity, therefore highly problematic and considered to be wrong livelihood in a Buddhist sense.

On a more fundamental level, the essence of wrong livelihood refers to any type of livelihood, any means of furthering your existence or well-being, gained through wrong speech or wrong action. The engagement in immoral activities like killing, stealing, cheating, or lying for the furtherance of one's livelihood is of course considered wrong livelihood as it is in violation of the five precepts. In relation to meditation practice, however, someone practicing intensive meditation should not engage in any type of livelihood whatsoever. Right livelihood means the giving up of seeking material possessions, even to the extent of seeking possessions for one's personal survival. This means acting and living your life, whether it be during a meditation course or on a broader scale as a monastic, monk, or recluse, by not seeking out remuneration for your actions, by not doing things for the purpose of getting something in return. In other words, by not having any livelihood whatsoever.

This is why monks take vows to give up money, as well as any type of bartering or trading. We are allowed to teach, and when we teach we do so without expectation of remuneration or reimbursement of any kind. We live our lives not hoping for people to praise us, honour us, or support us in any way. We

do it while fully aware that we may receive no support. We know that we may starve, we may be cold, or we may be homeless, and it is a powerful determination, a state of mind of total renunciation where you let your karma take over. You let the universe take over. If people think to give you food or shelter to support you, then they can do it of their own volition, and you make a determination in your mind to be free from any sort of need for livelihood.

For most people this attitude is confined to a meditation course, so during the meditation course you accept whatever you are given as part of the meditation course. When people give you food, you eat. You accept whatever shelter, room, and things you are provided during the meditation course. You also give up your livelihood by refraining from conducting business during a meditation course. In essence a meditator must move away from interest in their own personal well-being, and towards accepting things as they are.

Right Livelihood for a monastic is to give up any sort of seeking. It is true that monks are allowed to go for alms rounds, so, in order for a monk to provide for his existence, the monk can walk through the village and see whether anyone is seeking to give food on that day. The closest a monk would get to actually seeking out food is to find out if there is anyone who wants to give. Monks are allowed to take food if given, but monks must have no interest in livelihood. This is an important determination that helps us to let go of the distractions caused by livelihood, and to let go of the greed and the attachment to personal comfort.

Because some of this might seem quite extreme, remember all of these things are not meant to be rules or commandments, they are meant to be supporting precepts. These are things we undertake voluntarily in order to better our meditation practice. We undertake to abstain from things that the Buddha warned would get in the way of our practice if we engage in them. The abandoning and refraining from certain activities will support our meditation practice. All four of these aspects of morality are guidelines and you can take them as far as you want. You can practice them as little or as much as you like. The more you practice these aspects of morality, the more focused you will be and the more the practice will lead to concentration and therefore wisdom. It is simply for our own benefit.

Morality and Meditation

True morality is a mind state that refrains. Morality is the development of concentration directly. Morality is the focusing of the mind, and that is why morality is said to lead to concentration. There are many immoral things which are not generally considered immoral by society, but they are immoral because they scatter or create chaos in the mind. Anything that makes the mind more chaotic is immoral in a Buddhist context. An act is moral or immoral because of its effect on one's mind; an immoral act has the effect of creating chaos in the mind. Killing has that effect on the mind. Useless speech has that effect on the mind; it dulls the mind, diffuses the mind, and creates chaos and disorder in the mind. Working on morality in isolation is a misunderstanding of morality. When you sit down to practice meditation is when true morality arises. Of course you should keep precepts, and you should know what is right and what is wrong, but that is only a part of the framework that allows you to approach meditation in the right way. Once you know what sorts of things are immoral, then you know what will create diffusion in the mind and what will cause distraction and mental upset. The precepts are to be used as a guide to gain true realization of wrong inclinations, so that they will not arise. Without wrong inclination, you will not use wrong speech; you will not lie, you will not have harsh speech, say bad things, you won't be divisive or try to break people apart. You will give up these kinds of behaviors naturally. That is why morality is tied into concentration and wisdom, because wisdom actually leads back to morality. It is a circle, such that once you have wisdom it is wisdom that brings true morality.

Five Precepts

Taking Refuge Explained

Here we will discuss the procedure for taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, and taking on the basic precepts for a Buddhist meditator. The ceremony is not necessary for someone to undertake the practice of meditation, however some people ask about a ceremony, having a desire to take the precepts and refuges formally, which is an excellent thing. For those people who are interested in a formal ceremony, I would encourage it because the mind is very much affected by concepts. Our minds are able to grasp concepts easily, and they make an impression on our minds. When I first started meditating, we were required to perform the ceremony of taking refuge and precepts, but it was more like, “Let's get this over with,” and over we went, found a monk, and did the ceremony. The sentiment was to just do it to get it done. Later in my course, however, I actually did a ceremony of my own, on my own. I was having a lot of trouble in the practice, and it was a great psychological benefit for me to actually formally go in front of a Buddha statue – not with anyone's help or encouragement, but just do my own little ceremony and read through the taking of the refuges.

It is important to understand that the refuge should not be seen as a kind of worship or prayer, or as trying to get something from the Buddha or some external being. It is for our own psychological benefit. It is a form of determination, like a promise to ourselves – similar to the reason we make New Year's resolutions. We often do not take this sort of thing seriously enough in modern times. We make New Year's resolutions, but I think most people have a hard time keeping them. If your mind is strong, and if you work hard at training the mind, resolutions can be quite powerful. Resolutions can push you in a certain direction and train your mind to think in a certain way, to think positively. They say that people who think positively get positive things to happen to them. Some people say it is the secret to life. But if you apply this to a spiritual path and say, “This is the way I am going. This is the direction I intend to go,” and reaffirm that in a ceremony or ritual, it has an effect on the mind. So, these aren't just empty rituals. They are meant to have some psychological benefit, to remind us of what's important, to keep us aware and thinking about things that are important. This is the essence of Buddhist practice, keeping ourselves focused on what is important.

Taking refuge is all done with chanting in the Pali language. We use Pali because it is very precise, and it is the original language that was spoken in the time of the Buddha. It is a beautiful, melodic language, and it is also a standard in the Buddhist community. All of the countries in our tradition share

this language, and in fact Buddhism of all traditions tends to use either Pali or Sanskrit which are very similar languages. So Pali is a basic language that we all share, wherever we go in the Buddhist world. For this reason, it is good to learn the Pali words and not have to deal with local languages – you will be able to use this universal language everywhere.

The first thing we do is pay respect to the Buddha. When this is done in a formal setting, or before a monk gives a talk, respect will often be paid to the Buddha. This involves thinking about the Buddha, remembering him, and paying respect to the fact that this comes from someone else, so that we do not feel egotistic – we do not think of it as “my” teachings, and we do not put ourselves up as some great teacher. We pay respect to our true teacher, and we do that by reciting three times this form of homage, which is:

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā-sambuddhassa

This recitation is found throughout the Buddhist world. In fact, it contains words that are found also in Hinduism. The words have a general sense of reverence and respect. To break this down:

Namo tassa – *Namo* means homage, respect or veneration. In this case we are paying homage, so we say, “I pay homage” or “This is homage” to someone. In the same way, you may have heard people who have studied Indian traditions say, “Namaste, namaste.” *Namas* is the same as *Namo*, so when we say *Namo*, we are saying *Namas*, which is paying homage. *Tassa* means “to him” or “to that one”, and in this context we are focusing specifically on the Buddha, an enlightened being in this tradition. Not what all people consider to be enlightened beings, or enlightened beings in other traditions and other disciplines, or people who have other beliefs and other ideas of what is the truth. We are thinking of the one who has followed the path of becoming a Buddha in what has come to be called Buddhism.

Bhagavato means “to the Lord”. *Bhagava* means someone who has a share, someone who has a portion. It is pretty easy to see where this came from. In India, it would have referred originally (before it took on a religious significance) to a lord – someone to whom taxes were paid. The farmers would have to pay some kind of share, in the same way as the English word Lord came to be used in a religious significance, because this was considered to be someone you put up on high. Anyone that you put up on high can be called *Bhagava*. In ancient India, it took on a religious significance, so in Buddhism we are just appropriating the word. Use of the word

Bhagava can be found in Hinduism and throughout the religions of India. *Bhagavato* means to the Lord, or to our leader. It refers to someone who is put on high, and we say this type of person is to be respected. This is our preliminary homage of paying respect and having humility by not taking this as something of our own or something we feel proud of. It is something that we have been blessed to have been given by someone else, so we feel grateful. We take this as a gift that someone has given to us.

Arahato means the Buddha is someone who is to be respected or worthy of respect, someone who is exalted. It is just another way of praising someone who is good or worthy of respect.

Sammā-sambuddhassa (the final word) means the Buddha, the person to whom we are paying respect, is someone who has become perfectly self-enlightened. People who become enlightened are of three types. One type of person comes to understand the basics that are required to let go of everything, but they do not understand everything, they do not know everything. For example, they may not know the nature of the cosmos, but they understand themselves enough to let go of everything.

Another class of person is someone who comes to understand the same things as the first type of person, but by themselves. Whereas the first type of person will receive teaching and instruction and requires an enlightened being to pass it on to them, the second type of person comes to let go of everything by themselves, without any help. But they still do not know everything, so they still are not able to teach the path to others.

The third type of person, a *Sammāsambuddha*, is someone who realizes the truth for themselves, and also comes to understand everything, including the way the universe works. They are able, therefore, to explain the path to someone else. They are able to understand the way for all beings to develop the path and to develop themselves spiritually. The third type of person is able to teach it to others. We consider this third type to be quite special because the rest of us just follow what someone else has told us in order to let go, open ourselves up, and come to understand the nature of reality. In the third type of person we have a special being who is actually able to teach all of these things, so one can come to understand the truth by learning from them. If you ever study the Buddha's teaching, you come to realize what a profound thing it is, and how difficult it would actually be, if not impossible, for most of us to be able to put it together at all, let alone in such a clear and easy-to-understand manner.

So, this is the preliminary step that we take. We say this three times *Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā-sambuddhassa*.

After saying “*Namo tassa...*” three times, we begin to take refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, the three treasures or jewels in Buddhism. The Buddha is our teacher, the Dhamma is the teaching, and the Sangha is those who became enlightened by practicing the teaching and have passed on the teaching up to the present day. This is what we take refuge in, and this is really the heart of the ceremony. The ceremony also includes taking the precepts, but making this determination of the three jewels as your refuge is what many consider to be the point where one becomes a Buddhist or follower of the Buddha. In taking refuge, you align yourself with the Buddha’s teaching, affirming that you believe, through your own practice and the realizations you’ve gained from your practice, that the Buddha’s teaching is the right path. You accept that the Buddha’s teaching is the one for you.

In taking refuge in the Buddha’s teaching, you narrow the scope of your spiritual practice, no longer inclining to pick and choose spiritual practices as you like. You know the practice that you want to follow, and that is the teaching of the Buddha. You take a step that some people never take. Many people practice Buddhist meditation but they also follow other non-Buddhist practices like yoga or theism, following a variety of spiritual teachings. For someone who finds something deep and meaningful in the Buddha’s teaching and wants to pursue it as their path in this life and quite possibly for lifetimes to come, they will decide to take refuge in this way. Taking refuge has great meaning; it gives you encouragement and determination to stick to the path that you’ve chosen. If you come to the point where you see that the Buddha’s teaching is for you and you want to follow it wholeheartedly, taking refuge is a great place to start. And again, it is not mandatory – it is just something that is of great psychological benefit.

The process of formally taking refuge is to repeat out loud that you go to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha for refuge. You do this three times. So first we say:

Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

Then you say these three lines again, prefixing each with *Dutiyampi* which means, “for a second time”:

Dutiyampi buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

Dutiyampi dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

Dutiyampi saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

Then you say them one more time, prefixing them this time with *Tatīyam-pi* which means, “for a third time”:

Tatīyampi buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

Tatīyampi dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

Tatīyampi saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

This completes the going for refuge.

The traditional way of formally taking refuge is to repeat after a monk – someone who is trained to lead you through this. The monks will say it first (e.g., *Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*) and then you repeat after them. This is not necessary, but it can increase the sense of reverence for the act and is generally a helpful thing to do.

The meaning of the words are as follows:

Buddhaṃ, Dhammaṃ, Saṅghaṃ means to the Buddha, to the Dhamma to the Sangha. The *m* at the end (the ng-sound), is a declension which, in this case, gives the meaning of *to the* Buddha, *to the* Dhamma, *to the* Sangha.

Saraṇa is an interesting word because it either means “refuge” or “object of recollection”. Recollection of the three jewels is a beneficial practice. When you come to a decision that you have to make, you might recollect on the three jewels as a means of putting aside your own biases in favor of what the Buddha taught. So, after taking refuge, rather than just following after your desires, you think of the Buddha when trying to find direction in your life, giving up your own desires, attachments, and addictions in favor of what the Buddha taught. There may be times where you wish to do something but you will remind yourself, “The Buddha taught that these things are to my detriment, so I am going to take his word and trust him on that.”

Where before even when you knew that actions were wrong, but you wanted to do them anyway, and, although you knew that actions were leading you into suffering, you partook in them anyway, now you say, “The Buddha has clearly explained the path that we should follow and I am going to abstain from these actions that go contrary to it..”

Taking refuge in the Dhamma means that you study the teachings and keep them in mind. You keep the Buddha, Dhamma, and followers of the Buddha in mind. You strive to become one of the Buddha's true followers – the group of people who have given up attachment, aversion, delusion and who are acting in line with the truth of reality and practicing in a way that brings peace and harmony to the world.

The word *saraṇa* actually comes from the same word as mindfulness. *Sati* and *saraṇa* come from the same root or can be derived from the same root. So *saraṇa* means “I will keep in mind the Buddha, his teachings, and the Sangha.” It can also be translated as “refuge” of course; you are placing your trust in the Buddha and you are placing your confidence in his teachings and in the Sangha. This is going to be your path, the people that you respect and look up to, and the teachings that you follow. This is going to be your refuge, and that is really where the greatest psychological benefit comes for someone who is new to meditation. It is something that brings great peace and confidence to a person – the idea of belonging. I have heard that some Buddhists do not have a Buddhist community in their area, so go to church just to feel part of a community and feel love, compassion, caring and the community aspect of having a refuge, of having somewhere to go. People feel the need to be with people who understand and who are kind and empathic. I do not think we should discard this. I think we should see the significance that as human beings, this provides some sort of useful support, at least for a beginner. Eventually we strive to be able to live anywhere, in any situation, even all alone. Eventually we become so much in tune with our own experience that it doesn't really matter where we are. We can be anywhere, we can be alone or surrounded by hostile people without any suffering or stress. In the beginning, however, having a refuge can be a great help. I've found personally that it was a great help for my practice and it probably pulled me through my first meditation course, just because I thought to perform this ceremony when I was struggling on my own.

The third word is *gacchāmi*, which means “I go”. It is the placing of yourself in the care or under the guidance of the Buddha and his teachings, taking the step to become a follower of the Buddha.

Once you have repeated the three lines three times each, that completes the going for refuge, taking these objects as your objects of reference or recollection, taking the step of becoming a follower of Buddhism.

After taking refuge, one will begin preparation to undertake meditation. The first step in preparing for meditation practice is to give up behaviour that is contrary to mental development, starting with the five abstentions that the Buddha taught as basic morality. Even if you are not meditating, they are considered to be, according to the Buddha, those behaviours that all beings should refrain from if they are hoping for spiritual advancement or clarity of mind. Breaking these five abstentions causes the mind to become defiled and that is the opposite of spiritual development.

The five abstentions or precepts are not actually rules, they are determinations. This is important to understand. We are not beholden to anyone in taking the five precepts. We undertake them by ourselves, as a part of our mental training. The Pali word we say is *sikkhāpadam*. *Pada* means “item”, and *sikkhā* means “a training”, so these are training rules, or training items. Each item is a *sikkhāpadam*, which means an item of training or something we train ourselves in. They are part of our practice, things that help us to develop our minds. They are a part of our spiritual development.

First, we undertake not to kill because we value our lives, and we understand that killing brings distress to other beings. To kill another being is one of the most destructive things you can do to another, because suddenly they are cut off from the life that they were leading, and their mind has to find a new direction. Rather than dying naturally, they have been forced out of their life, and that is terribly disconcerting, not to mention painful and fearsome. Death is a terrible thing to have to go through. As a result of the destructive force involved, killing is something that defiles our mind. Killing destroys harmony, sending out karmic ripples into the universe. It has a visible impact on our relationship with the world around us and on our spiritual advancement. Without the benefit of mental clarity through meditation, we may not see the gravity of killing until it is too late, so we take it as a rule, even if we do not yet see the problem with killing. I guarantee that eventually you will, once you gain the clarity of mind to see the causal relationship.

One of the great things about keeping the first precept, all the precepts really, is that you bring safety to all beings. Not only are you helping yourself, but you have given protection to the whole universe. There is no being that has to be afraid of you if you are determined to behave ethically. You have become declawed. You are no longer a source of danger. You have brought freedom from danger and safety to the universe. You have given unlimited safety to an unlimited number of beings by taking the precepts. It is a gift that you give, and it is called *abhaya-dāna* which means the gift of not being dangerous or a source of danger, so that no one needs to be afraid of you. As a result of keeping the precepts, you will see that even animals can sense the harmlessness in you and are more likely to

associate with you. Dogs that you've never met and cats that you've never seen are more likely to be attracted to you because they feel the safety and the security. People as well will never feel afraid or threatened by you because of the vibes that you give off and the confidence that you have based on your stability of mind.

Second, we undertake not to steal. This has the same result as the first precept, where no one has to be afraid of you and your mind becomes more stable. We take this rule with the idea that, even though we might want to steal or it might be somehow to our advantage or that it is not going to greatly hurt the victim, it is just not worth stealing as it obstructs our mental clarity. They say that you will give up your belongings to save your body, but we should always think that we would be better off to give up our body or physical well-being to save our mind. These rules are to keep our minds clear. Even at the point of death, it is better to save your mind and to keep your mind clear, because dying with a clear mind is a much better thing than living with a corrupt mind.

The third undertaking is not to cheat, which basically refers to adultery, sexual or romantic activity that causes emotional damage to other people, and breaking up other people's marriages and relationships with your own sexual and romantic advances.

For number four, we undertake not to lie because lying is something that distorts reality. The fourth precept is the only determination that directly deals with the truth, the nature of reality. The other determinations go against what leads to happiness, but to lie is to go directly against what is real. When you lie to someone and they believe you, you've turned reality on its head, so to speak. You've distorted that being's understanding, making them understand something that is false to be true. Lying is a terribly wicked thing to do and it causes great harm – often harm that we do not foresee. They say, “What a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive.” Lying is something that tangles up reality, and tangles up our universe, so we refrain from doing this through our determination of the fourth precept.

The fifth precept is to not take intoxicants – drugs or alcohol. This one is the most contrary to the meditation practice. All of the precepts are of course contrary to the practice in their own way, but the fifth is most directly contrary, because that is what is wrong with its trespass. You think that you can drink alcohol and not hurt anyone, but you are hurting your own mind's ability to see clearly. Your mind is being clouded as you drink. We drink alcohol because it takes away our inhibitions and so that we do not have to live with the repercussions of our actions. We feel like we can do anything when we are intoxicated, and so as a result we say and do things that we would not otherwise say and do, creating harm

and disruption to ourselves and others. Even the slightest amount of intoxication removes your ability to analyze and think clearly. It allows you to avoid having to deal with issues rationally and it builds up states of delusion and defilement.

We think that when we feel stress or anxiety, intoxication takes the edge off. But that edge is what we are trying to deal with; it is what we are trying to see clearly. In Buddhism we try not to avoid the difficulties in life, we try instead to confront them and deal with them head on. The only way you can deal with difficulties is to let them be and learn to rise above them and not react to them. Intoxicated behavior is something that immediately goes in the opposite direction, towards avoidance, reaction, and repression, and it certainly does not make you better at dealing with life's difficulties. Intoxication in fact makes you worse at dealing with life.

So these are the five rules, the five determinations that we make to abstain from immoral behaviour. They compliment our meditation practice, as the other side of the coin. There are two sides to Buddhist practice: certain things that we undertake not to do and certain things that we undertake to do. Taking the precepts before we meditate thus provides wholeness to our practice, and we should feel happy about having taken them on. I remember when I first took the precepts. I read about the significance of them and how they change your reality. Having taken on the precepts, other beings no longer need to be afraid or suspicious of you, and you will never feel guilty for causing harm. You can feel confident and comfortable with who you are – that you have given these things up. Actually, I remember crying at the time, just being in such joy and such happiness, because I had not kept any of the precepts before I started meditating. Keeping the Five Precepts has great significance and spiritual importance in our practice. Taking the precepts formally helps you to keep them, because even if you do break them sometimes, you take them again, renewing your promise to yourself that you will train yourself in the precepts and use them as a support for your training.

We recite these five precepts in Pali as well.

The first precept is:

Pāṇātipātā veramaṇī sikkhā-padam samādiyāmi

Pāṇātipātā – *Pāṇā* means something that lives and breathes. *Pāṇātipātā* means to take away the life of something that lived. *Veramaṇī* means, “the abstention from this.” *Sikkhā-padam*

samādiyāmi means I undertake, determine, or vow. I undertake to refrain (*veramaṇī*) from taking life.

The second precept is:

Adinnādānā veramaṇī sikkhā-padam samādiyāmi

Adinnādānā – *Adinnā* means something that is not given. *Adinnādānā* means a gift that is not given. I will refrain from taking things that are not given; in other words, stealing.

The third precept is:

Kāmesu micchācārā veramaṇī sikkhā-padam samādiyāmi

Kāmesu is in regards to *kāma*, which means sensuality, and more specifically, sex, romance, or lust. *Micchā* means wrong, *cārā* means behavior. I will refrain from wrong behavior in regard to sexuality, and romance. And mentioned, specifically the things that we consider to be wrong are those that cause emotional damage to other people, such as breaking up relationships or adultery.

Number four:

Musāvādā veramaṇī sikkhā-padam samādiyāmi

I undertake to refrain from *Musāvādā*. *Musā* means false and *vādā* means speech. *Musāvādā* means false speech, speech that is untrue or claiming something to be true that is not actually true. To lie, in other words.

Number five:

Surā-meraya-majja-pamādaṭṭhānā veramaṇī sikkhā-padam samādiyāmi

Surā and *meraya* are different forms of alcohol, one referring to soft liquor like beer and wine, and the other to hard liquor like whiskey and vodka. *Majja* means anything that is an intoxicant and specifically those things that are *pamādaṭṭhānā*. *Pamāda* means intoxication or lack of self-awareness. Intoxicants make you unaware or heedless. *Pamāda* is actually a core doctrine in the Buddha's teachings. The Buddha's last words were *apamāda apamadenasampamādaṭṭhānā* - that we should strive to become *apamāda*. *Pamāda* means negligence, intoxication, or heedlessness. *Apamāda* is the opposite, where *a* means not, thus we should strive to bring about

this state of mindfulness, alertness, and clarity of mind. Intoxicants bring about the opposite of mindfulness. In *pamādaṭṭhānā*, *ṭhānā* means a basis or a foundation, or a support. A *pamādaṭṭhānā* is a basis or cause for us to become intoxicated, negligent, and unmindful. *Apamāda* can be thought of as synonymous with *sati* or mindfulness. Intoxicants lead to mindlessness – they take away our ability to judge and discriminate between a proper thing to do and an improper thing to do; they obstruct our ability to see the true nature of things, to understand reality for what it is.

The five precepts constitute basic human morality. When we undertake a meditation course, we take on more precepts. Meditators will undertake not to eat in the afternoon, not to engage in entertainment or beautification, and to sleep on the floor and practice total celibacy during the meditation course. In daily life it is only absolutely necessary to keep the five precepts. If you can live by these five rules, making them your code of ethics, then you have really done a wonderful thing. It is not a difficult thing to do. It is not something that should be considered impossible for anyone. You may find that it forces you to change your lifestyle, to move away from some of your old associations and habits and stop frequenting bars and worldly parties. Following the Five Precepts forces you to change for the better, leading you to seek out people who are also on a spiritual path and who are also interested in their own well-being; people who are not living their lives recklessly or living for the pleasure of today at the detriment to their spiritual well-being. This sort of change is certainly not a negative thing. Practicing meditation and keeping the five precepts will bring great joy and happiness. In the beginning keeping proper ethical precepts might be difficult but you should not feel upset about that. You should try to see, especially through practice of meditation, that keeping precepts and meditation are incredibly important for your spiritual well-being.

The above should hopefully be a useful guide for anyone who is interested in becoming a Buddhist or following the Buddha's teaching. You can do it on your own; you do not need to be led through it. You may find that it is more impactful to be led through it by a teacher in the same way that you might ordain as a monk or a nun, but if you don't have such an opportunity, you can recite the refuges and precepts on your own. When I first started taking the rules, I had a recording of the ceremony that I used as a guide to perform the ceremony, repeating the refuges and precepts by myself, and that was enough. If you live on your own, performing this ceremony by yourself can be a great empowerment, reminding you of good things and keeping you interested and aligned with them without requiring a community or teacher.

Becoming a Buddhist is nothing dramatic. There are no great vows that you have to take. You make these determinations to be moral, and that you intend to follow the Buddha's teaching, and that is it. You have respect for the Buddha and his teachings, and you intend to follow those teachings to the best of your ability.

Questions and Answers

Paranoia about Rules and Precepts

Q: How do you avoid becoming too paranoid about all these rules and precepts? For example, thinking, did I create any bad karma in this situation today according to the rules, this was wrong action, wrong speech, etc. and end up in an even worse mental state than before?

A: Focusing on paranoia is a great start. This is a great way to look at the problem. “How do I deal with paranoia?” rather than saying, “How do I stop myself from doing any little bad karma? I do bad karma. How do I stop myself?” Instead of approaching the question from a paranoid angle with, “This is horrible, I cannot take it anymore, I am committing so much bad action,” you step back, look, and say “How do I stop being so paranoid about it?” Get rid of the first problem, “How do I stop myself from being upset about it?” because when you are upset, you cannot see the thing you are upset about clearly. It is similar to the question about when you are upset about not meditating - being upset makes it more difficult to get into meditation.

So, the first step is to focus on the paranoia, to see the paranoia clearly. That is not the entire solution, however, because it is an unavoidable reality that when you do bad deeds, you will feel bad about them. It is possible to repress one’s conscience, repress the natural tendency to feel bad for some time, but eventually the guilt and remorse will catch up with you when you are forced to face the consequences of your deeds. It is the natural consequence of bad deeds to feel uncomfortable. An important part of removing bad feelings about our deeds, is therefore to never perform bad deeds. But I would say it goes in that order: first you deal with the paranoia so that you are able to accept what you are doing, and be clear about it and impartial. Once you are impartial, you can look at your actions and see, “Oh yeah, what I am doing now is horrible,” and feel for yourself how harmful your actions are. When you experience the nature of your actions clearly, you naturally give up those that are harmful to yourself and others.

Three Marks of Existence vs. Five Precepts

Q: Did the Buddha stress more on the Three Marks of Existence (impermanence, suffering and non-self), than the Five Precepts?

A: What did the Buddha stress on most? It is hard to say. I mean, *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā* (moral conduct, concentration and wisdom of insight) are key. The Five Precepts are not all that important, because they are conventional. But *sīla*, which is the basis of the Five Precepts, is essential. Seeing the three characteristics is *paññā*, so you need *sīla* and *samādhi* in order to see them clearly. The Five Precepts themselves are an important boundary; if you are breaking the Five Precepts, it will be very hard for you to see impermanence, suffering and non-self (*anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anatta*).

Teacher Who Does not Keep Precepts and Drinks Alcohol

Q: How much progress can one expect when being guided by a lay teacher who does not keep the precepts, so drinks alcohol?

A: Expectations of progress are problematic. There are so many variables, but I hope you can realize that there are other variables involved — what you bring to the table is going to matter a lot in how quickly you practice. Being guided by a lay teacher who does not keep the precepts, so drinks alcohol, is a factor. But even if that lay person comes to you drunk as a skunk and recites the Buddha's teaching on mindfulness, you could take that information and become enlightened, provided you are bringing enough to the table, if your state of mind is such that you are ready to realize the teachings. On the other hand, the teacher who is not drunk would have a better ability to provide not only good information, but encouragement. Especially if you are a beginner, a good teacher can help to encourage you. A person who drinks alcohol is much more likely to give you the wrong advice, especially of course when they are drunk when they are giving advice but even if they are not, the fact that they drink alcohol is a sign that the advice they give may be wrong. The fact that they are a lay person is a good indication that they might be more engaged in bad things, at least sexually, right? They are much more likely to be engaging in sex or romance, entertainment, those sorts of things. However, some lay people can teach far better than most monks; do not just think that because someone is ordained they are automatically wise.

Are Monks' Precepts Binding for life?

Q: Are the monks' precepts binding for life?

A: The precepts are binding for as long as one is ordained; if one relinquishes the monastic life, the precepts are not binding for them any more. The other thing to note is that there is no god that will come down and punish you if you break the precepts and, in fact, breaking some of them is not even immoral. An arahant, an enlightened being, can break certain rules. There are stories of arahants who were the first

ones to break certain rules. An arahant spent the night with a woman alone in a room because she lured him on false pretenses and so he stayed there and taught her the Dhamma all night until she became a *sotāpanna*. The Buddha said, “do not stay alone with a woman because people will say bad things.”

I am not aware of instances of arahants actually breaking a rule that was already established, but it is theoretically possible. One could imagine an example of an arahant breaking a rule. There are community guidelines that are binding; however, if you break a rule, you just confess it. If you break a serious rule, you must undergo penance. If you break a major rule, you are no longer a monk. People have said that if you break one of the major rules, then in that life you can never become enlightened but this has no basis in the Buddhist Canon or Buddhist scriptures. Mahasi Sayadaw talked about this; he mentions a story in the commentaries about a group of monks who committed some form of theft and they disrobed, became *sāmaṇera* or novices, and could never ordain again. If you've committed one of these defeat offenses you are not allowed to ordain again. If a monk stole something worth more than a certain amount, the monk cannot ordain again, but they can ordain as novices and become *sotāpanna*. So the precepts are binding in that you are expected to keep them, but there are many rules that are not even immoral if broken, such as eating in the afternoon. For example, if a person sits down and thinks it is eleven o'clock and then eats some food and then finds out it is actually twelve o'clock, they technically broke a rule but may not be guilty of any fault or irreverence because they thought they were keeping the rule.

When I was in Thailand, I took monastic Dhamma classes and one day a teacher was talking about breaking the precepts. The teacher said, “Here is an example. Suppose I was in my room and I go to my fridge and I pull out a salad at nine o'clock at night and I eat the salad. Then I clean up, put the salad container in a plastic bag, tie it up, and place it at the bottom of my garbage bin. No one knows that I broke this rule. Or do they? Who knows that I broke the rule?” Maybe some devas or monks with magical powers would know. In the end it is you that knows, and if you are breaking the rules, you are the one who has to live with it. Our good and bad deeds are the things that follow us around and when we are alone we have to think about them and that's ultimately the best teacher; that is what helps you to keep the rules.

When I was a young monk in Thailand, many monks did not keep the rules. I would go up to the school and the novices were up there at nine in the evening frying up fish, which is a flagrant violation of monastic rules. It became quite common, however, so I broke some of them, not the eating one, but there were many, such as drinking soya milk in the evening. Eventually it weighs down on you, and you start to

read the Buddhist teaching and see that this is not something that is of any benefit. It is actually a means of degrading the Buddha's teaching and the purity of the Buddha Sāsana. One of the commentaries says that the vinaya is the lifeblood of the Sāsana; the vinaya keeps the Dhamma alive.

Vinaya is about ethics. The vinaya is the protection for the Buddhist teaching, and you can see this most clearly in terms of money because of those monks who use money. It may come as a surprise to Westerners that the majority of Buddhist monastics do carry money around with them. For some of them it is not a problem. For some of them they will be able to use the money in such a way that it doesn't defile their minds. They are doing great things with it and you can admire the fact that they are doing good things. Even for those pure and great monks, however, if you look at the monasteries in which they live, they will be surrounded by monks who will also touch money and are not so pure. It is easy to see how this rule, even though it is only a concept, is incredibly important because although certain monks may not be attached to the money, they begin to attract monks who are attached to the money. New monks will not have the ability to let go, and will have some corruption in their mind. They will be allowed to develop that corruption, and if the monastery becomes famous it will be full of opportunistic monks. The corruption becomes rife, and the monastery becomes a difficult place in which to practice the Buddha's teaching and meditation. You may learn about human defilements from the experience, but, on the other hand, it's quite sad to see the breakdown of the monastic community as a result of not keeping the rules.

The Buddha gave ten reasons for the vinaya, including that bad monks are unable to attain power and good monks are able to live in comfort and at ease; keeping the vinaya suppresses the defilements of the individual monks, gives faith to the lay people, and gives faith to people who do not have faith when they see these people practicing with great discipline. For those people who have faith, their faith is preserved because when rules are broken it is easy for people to lose faith and interest in the Buddha's teaching. The main reason is that the vinaya is a protection for the Dhamma. There are altogether many reasons for keeping precepts, because keeping them holds you accountable. You can see for yourself the results of keeping the precepts and the results of breaking them.

Killing

Joining the Military

Q: *How do Buddhists view military service?*

A: In modern times military service has come to mean many different things; you do not have to necessarily kill people to be in the military. Military organizations can help stop floods, for example. If the military is put to use stopping floods that is a great thing. If you took away all the weapons from the military and gave them shovels and sandbags then it would be a good thing to have a standing army that looks after people's welfare. The main purpose of the military, however, is for doing battle, causing harm, hurting other beings even in defense, and a person who enters the military is doing so with the understanding and the intention that they are going to bring violence to other beings. It is a violent profession by its very nature. In what way would you think that military service would be a positive thing? Is there any way that you can think of it as not being a negative thing? If there were a war, would you be asked to pick up a gun and fight? Many militaries have become quite a bit more than just guys with guns, but you are still given a duty to fight, are you not? Being in the American military, for example, can be a great way to help people; you are given a salary; you are given a lot of equipment and resources and joining such an organization might be a great thing. There is something to be said about the clout of the American military in that sense. But there is still the moral problem of joining an organization that at its very nature is for the purpose of engaging in combat. If your job is for the purpose of helping other people and if through your job you can help other people, then power to you. Even if your job does not help other people, I am not of the opinion that you have to be concerned with anything larger than doing your own job. Some people may have a social conscience that makes them feel like they should not work for certain organizations; similar to the debate about vegetarianism, where some will not eat meat because they feel they are contributing to the killing of animals, or use safety razors because they are contributing to the cruelty towards animals. Some people will not buy certain stocks or products. The Buddha didn't seem to agree with this sort of thinking, as it involves a misunderstanding of good and evil.

There is a story in the Dhammapada commentary of a woman whose husband was a hunter. When she was young she had listened to the Buddha's teaching, practiced meditation, and became a *sotāpanna*, which means she was to an extent an enlightened being. She then got married, because at that time marriage would have been arranged for her by her parents, to this man who was a hunter. Every day she would clean his traps, clean the blood and gore and hair off of these traps and put them out on the table

for him. And every day he would go out and kill animals as his living. The monks asked how it is possible that she could support him in this way, and the Buddha said it is like if you have no wound on your hand you can handle poison, but if you have a wound on your hand then you cannot handle poison. When a person has no bad intentions, the act of cleaning blood and gore off of these killing machines is not considered to be immoral because it is not; it is the same as eating meat. The act itself is never immoral. The Buddha actually taught against the theory of the potency of action, or karma. He said karma is not the important thing; it is the state of mind which has ethical potency. The woman's state of mind was, "Oh, here I am helping my husband, doing my job."

In the Buddha's teaching we deal in terms of experience. The American military is such a huge organization and so many soldiers are not involved with the killing part of it, but there is no avoiding the fact that if you are put in a position where you have to be involved in or encourage the use of force or the distribution of weapons, there will most certainly be ethical considerations. Just be careful that you do not somehow get conscripted in the "you're a soldier, go and fight" order. We are living in hard times; if you have a chance to help people then more power to you, go out and help.

Head Lice

Q: Aside from shaving heads, how should laymen practitioners deal with head lice without breaking the precept and killing them?

A: Well there you go, shave your head.

Gardening

Q: It is said, "One must refrain from killing living beings." Is gardening forbidden, as plants are living beings, too?

A: No, plants are not considered sentient beings. The saying refers to sentient beings, not living beings. That is not even really a direct translation, but that is the meaning of living in that sense. Plants are alive but they are not sentient; so they do not count. Of course, gardening involves insects and that is a problem.

Dealing with Pests

Q: What should we do when confronted by situations where we feel it necessary to perform violent acts? Specifically, in terms of killing sentient beings, such as pests, that are causing suffering for ourselves or those around us. What should we do when we are confronted with a situation where we are facing great physical difficulty?

A: The example given with this question related to a problem with the landlord. The landlord required their tenant, the questioner, to deal with rats. The question is what to do at this point. The theory that we have to come to understand here is the difference between physical well-being and mental well-being. The problem is that we quite often think more of our physical well-being than of our mental well-being. We place our physical well-being ahead of our mental well-being, not even realizing that this is a choice we are making. We will commit egregious acts of violence against other sentient beings, seeking out some sort of physical well-being for ourselves or for others. By performing such violent acts towards other beings, we are actually hurting our mental health and well-being.

In the case of pests or dangerous animals, we often react unmindfully and do not realize that we are actually working towards our own detriment. Acting in such a way may further our physical well-being for some time, but we are actually harming our mental well-being. Is it more important that we live a healthy and strong physical life with a corrupt, evil and unwholesome mind or that we die with a pure mind?

We are often unable to see beyond this human state, beyond what we call this life, this birth, this existence. It seems to be all that there is and we become entrenched in the idea of the human state as some sort of ultimate reality. In this state of mind, we see nothing wrong with committing egregious acts and sully our minds for immediate benefit or pleasure. We accumulate these tendencies in our minds and they lead us to conflict and suffering again and again. The mind, however, does not end upon the death of our bodily form; it continues on and these impure tendencies set us up for greater and greater suffering.

When practicing meditation, it is quite easy to see which acts are unwholesome and leading to negative results. There is a great amount of violence in the world and there are beings in positions to inflict great violence on other beings. This is a result of our accumulated tendencies to perform violent acts on each other. By increasing such acts, we are not in any way helping things. The beings who die and the beings who kill— they all have these tendencies in them and they continue on life after life. Creating

unwholesome states in the mind increases the amount of unwholesomeness that leads to violence in the universe.

The solution is to decrease the amount of killing and teach people to be patient when confronted with revenge. When other beings would inflict violence on us, the solution is to be forbearing and to put an end to the violence. If we are in a threatening situation, we should consider: “If this is my death, then let that be the end of the cycle of vengeance.” To not react, to not reply, to end the cycle of revenge which can span lifetimes. A life is nothing in the face of our mind’s journey in samsara. Our minds continue on and carry our wholesome and unwholesome habits with them.

This is the backdrop to the theory we are discussing here. The basic answer is no; it is not right, it could never be a good thing to kill. It is not good to kill rats that are infesting your house, parasites, dangerous animals, or even an intruder threatening your family. This is due to the difference between physical health and mental health. It is far more important that our minds stay healthy and pure than ensuring our bodies or physical surroundings are in a safe and optimal condition. The question then is: what do you do if it is not in your best interest to perform acts of violence? What do you do when confronted with such situations described above?

There are three methods in line with the Buddha’s teachings when dealing with pests, criminals, murderers, etc. The first is to avoid the situation. The Buddha condoned avoiding situations that would obviously get in the way of one’s meditation practice and mental development. The example he used was of a charging elephant. If an elephant is charging at you, you avoid it. You do not need to stand in its way and just repeat the mantra “seeing, seeing;” you can move to the side. This can extend to a lot of things, for instance avoiding areas where you are likely to be confronted with criminals.

In the case of rat infestations, the solution to keep in mind is avoidance of living in a house that is susceptible to these sorts of things. An ideal form of this would be to leave the home and live under a tree, or a cave, or live in the forest where you do not have to deal with these situations. Living the household life is much more complicated and rat infestations among many other issues are not uncommon. Lice is another common example. If you had lice, would you want to kill them? One means of overcoming this is to shave the head so the lice will not be able to remain. There are many different examples. In the case of violence we should be careful to avoid those kinds of situations that give rise to unwholesomeness. For example, you may want to avoid certain streets or areas of a city at night.

As a monk, I sometimes try to avoid those areas where I might be confronted with prejudice, bigotry, etc. A couple years ago, I was arrested and put in jail simply because I look different. Some people, because of their fear either made some assumptions or were specifically trying to get rid of me. I was put in jail and it was a big deal. It probably would have been in my best interest to just avoid the whole issue and the whole situation and stay in a place that is more accepting. Avoidance of difficult situations is the first answer. We can all restructure our lives in a way to reduce violent confrontations.

The second answer is to find an alternative to violence. Certainly, killing and violence are not the only ways out of situations involving pests, murderers, or criminals. There are always alternatives. For example, someone threatens you and demands your wallet. Maybe you just give them your wallet and deal with the situation mindfully by giving up and letting go. Dealing with the situation by talking to the person can sometimes work, but this is unlikely with hardened criminals and murderers!

In regards to pest control, alternatives to killing have a long way to go. Most of the time spent on these issues has gone into various ingenious ways of killing the pest, but very little effort and creativity has been put into finding other solutions because few consider the importance of it. Killing is deemed as the most efficient response and various methods of killing for different pest infestations dominate. This is tragic, because in many cases a solution does exist and is not very difficult. I have extensive experience with ants, for example. Most people will put out poison to kill the ants. But, a broom and talcum powder will also work. Not as well as poison, obviously, but from a Buddhist point of view it works much better than poison. You sweep the ants away and lay talcum powder down on their paths. If you rub the powder across their trail it will effectively remove the trail as they will not be able to find their way due to the foreign scent. I use this a lot with ants, to great success. An alternative example for rats involves the use of humane traps. These traps are boxes with bait inside. When the rat goes in the box the trap closes and then you can take it away to the forest, or someplace far away, and release the rat. I do this with mosquitos as well. When mosquitos are in your home or in your tent, you take a cup and catch the mosquito in the cup and then take it outside. You do this again and again if you have a closed-off space where the mosquitoes can not come in again.

Finding intelligent, non-violent ways to deal with pests is incredibly important. This is the second answer. One important note to make on this is that sometimes, in self-defense, it is proper to resort to limited amounts of violence. This is in accordance with the Buddha's teaching. If someone is attacking you, it might be best to push them out of the way or to hit them enough so that you can run away. Even monks are allowed to do this; we are not allowed to hit someone who is not violent but we are allowed to

hit someone in self-defense in order to get away. If it means that you have to perform some limited act of violence in order to escape or in order to wake up the attacker or to be able to change the situation and avoid a greater act of violence (armlocks, etc. to control bodily movement) then that is permitted provided that one does not intentionally inflict fatal harm on the other being.

The third answer to keep in mind is to let go of the situation. The issue of rats and the landlord is an interesting example of this because sometimes we have to think outside the box and we have to look outside of our situation and not get confined to an “A or B” mentality where if we do not do this, then that is going to happen. Often, when we let things go, when we are mindful, when we are aware of the situation a “C” alternative arises, almost magically, and A and B disappear completely.

It may be the case when we are confronted by someone assaulting us, that we are mindful and aware. When we are taking it as a Buddhist practice and simply say “pain, pain” when someone is hitting us, it is a good and perfectly reasonable response to the situation that can often have magical results where people have found that suddenly the whole situation is changed and that they were no longer the victim; due to the power of presence the situation completely shifts. The mind is much more powerful than the body and simply the presence of someone who is mindful is often the greatest weapon to overcome these violent situations. In the case of the rats and the landlord, it might be that simply by being mindful and watching the situation unfold and allowing the consequences. If the landlord says they are going to have you evicted, you simply say to the landlord “I’m Buddhist and I do not kill, so do what you will. If it means there will be some sort of conflict then so be it.”

We should try to let such things go and only hold on to what is really and truly important, namely our mental health and well-being. It is being untrue to ourselves to perform violence on other beings when we ourselves do not wish to experience such violence. If someone is going to kill you, the only reason you would kill them first is because you yourself do not want to die. By killing them first, you are being just as hypocritical as the other person here inflicting something on another being that you yourself would not wish for. It is against harmony and against the truth; it is against reality and it will create corruption in the mind. Violence and killing are things that we should strive to do away with rather than increase. By being mindful and aware, by keeping our mind pure, we are able to face such confrontations without contributing to the cycle of revenge.

Insecticide-treated mosquito net

Q: Does the purchase and use of an insecticide-treated mosquito net violate the first precept? What about its use in a Theravada monastery in a Malaria transmission area?

A: You could find some wiggle room because you are not actually killing an animal. For example, if you lay out a deadly trap of some sort you are not actually killing anything. A talented lawyer could find wiggle room out of the first precept, but that is not really the most important question. Who cares whether it breaks or does not break a precept? The question is if it is ethical or unethical.

If you are laying out traps for mice, there is no question that that is an unethical thing to do. It is not going to send you to hell necessarily, but it is still awful. Insecticide-treated mosquito nets are the same. The mosquito is not trying to kill you, although its bite potentially could. Who are you to kill the mosquito? It is like killing a person who has a communicable disease because it might spread. Do we think that is ethical? How is the mosquito any different?

Kill One Person and Save a Thousand...

Q: What would you rather do: kill one person and save a thousand or let one live and one thousand must die?

A: You are only responsible for your own actions. An action is only bad or unwholesome because of the state of mind of the person who performs it. There is no god telling us something is wrong; just because society tells you an action is wrong does not make it wrong. Socrates pointed this out; a man was going to take his parents to court because he thought it was what the gods wanted. Socrates asked him, “Is it right to take your parents to court because the gods say it is right? Or do the gods say it is right because it is right?” Either way you cannot evoke the gods as an ultimate source of right or wrong. There is no entity that can tell you that something is right or wrong. Even an act of killing could be perfectly innocent. There is nothing intrinsic about the act of killing someone that is in any way wrong. If one person kills another it is meaningless to any third party. If one person kills another person, it is totally unrelated to anyone else’s state of mind. There is no relationship, and this is scientific; it is not just Buddhist theory. When you think about it logically and remove your emotions from the equation, you can see it from a scientific perspective. This is why scientists have a real problem with ethics and why they do things like cut up and poison rats and end up horrible people because they are unable to develop a clear code of

ethics simply because, from a scientific point of view, there is nothing wrong with killing. Killing is the end of a life. What does it mean? It means nothing. Most people's only understanding of ethics is a religious concept that has no basis in reality. Buddhism points out that not only does the physical realm exist and go by the laws of physics, the mind also exists and it goes by its own set of laws. At the moment when you kill someone, you create a problem in your mind. When you see someone kill someone else you do not create a problem in your mind. This is the only ethical principle that exists in Theravada Buddhism, that the actions that you perform and the choices that you make will affect your mind. If you watch someone kill a single person or kill a thousand people and you feel anguish, then you are responsible for the feeling of anguish. If you could save those people and you choose to not save them, suppose all you had to do is tell them, "Someone's coming with a gun, go hide," and you do not do that, then you are responsible for that. You are not ever responsible for the killing unless you are the one pulling the trigger or unless you are the one telling a person to kill. If you say to a person, "Kill that man." Then you are still not responsible for pulling the trigger; you are responsible for telling that person to do something irresponsible, responsible for the ethical qualities of mind, greed, anger, and the delusion inherent in the mind at that moment. If you do not kill the person who is going to kill a thousand people, then it may be that unwholesomeness arises in your mind as a result. You think, "let those people die, nothing to do with me, not my problem" and so as a result, you create some kind of worry and anguish afterwards, thinking, "I could have saved them all; all I had to do was kill that one man," but, on the other hand, if you kill that one person then you have to ask, what is worse? This guilt that I have over those thousand deaths, which were not a result of my actions, or the feeling of pulling the trigger?

I think the real reason why people have a problem with this and a problem with understanding things like hunting in general is because they have never done it themselves. If you have never killed a significantly large being like a deer, then you have no real right to argue this question. In the novel *Crime and Punishment* there is an excellent description of the torture that goes through the mind of someone who kills another human being. We cannot even fathom it. Most of us think that it is just intellectualizing; so you kill someone, what is the problem? It is totally different when you actually do it; it is an incredibly powerful act.

If you are just talking about the guilt feelings of not having prevented other people's death when in the end, you should consider that all of those people are going to die anyway whether it be from a bullet wound or from old age. Everyone dies and in horrible ways; you cannot possibly save even a small portion of the people who have to die in horrible ways. If it is just a matter of feeling that kind of guilt from not having prevented the inevitable, then it is far preferable to the horror of having killed a human

being, even an evil human being. I remember reading about how police officers who had to kill humans can end up with post-traumatic stress disorder, or soldiers who return from war and do not want to ever talk about it again. They have just locked up that part of their mind, it is so horrific. If you have never been to war you cannot imagine the horrors of war. Some veterans are not able to sleep at night because of what they have seen and done. There is no intellectualizing in Buddhism. Buddhism is based on experience; you cannot come up with an intellectual theory of morality and call it Buddhist. Buddhism teaches that you are responsible for your own actions, that you can never escape that responsibility, and that you are responsible for nothing else. This is scientific and verifiable. You could never verify what is the guilt of letting someone kill someone else. You can only verify what is the guilt or what is the suffering involved in your own actions. If you choose to feel guilty about something, that is going to create suffering. If you choose to kill a person in cold blood then you have to live with the feelings of horror and nightmares because now you are a murderer and, whether it was justified murder or not, it was a murder.

Euthanasia

Q: *When, if ever, is euthanasia an alternative to natural death?*

A: You cannot be freed from suffering through death alone. It is only through giving up clinging that one is freed from suffering. The view that killing someone could somehow be better for them is delusional because it involves clinging to the aversion towards suffering. If you look at a being who is suffering greatly and think that putting them out of their misery is somehow doing them a favor, you are quite mistaken. Some of the greatest insights and realizations come from bearing with one's suffering and learning to overcome the clinging and aversion that one has towards the suffering.

There are countless stories from people who work with dying patients in hospices, relating a final moment of clarity that comes to someone who is suffering greatly. Just before death, many dying patients will experience a moment of clarity, as though they have gone through something arduous and worked it out, and they are finally at peace with themselves. There comes a clarity of mind and they are able to move on. When you kill, you cut that off. If you kill someone because it is their wish that they should die, then you are helping them to escape from the lesson about overcoming clinging. You are helping them to reinforce their aversion towards pain and suffering. It is even more important to consider the effect of killing on one's own mind, because that is what makes an action immoral or moral.

The most horrible thing about killing someone else is the disruptive nature of killing. When you kill someone who wants to live, it is of course more disruptive than when you kill someone who wants to die; however, it is still an incredibly disruptive act either way. Killing is a very powerful action. For those who have never killed before, it is hard to understand this. Many people have never killed even insects, and it feels abhorrent to do such a thing, and it may be difficult for them to understand how it feels to kill because they have never experienced it. On the other hand, for someone who kills often, such as a person who murders animals and slaughters animals or insects, it is equally difficult for them to see because they have become desensitized to it.

When I was younger, I went hunting with my father, and I killed one deer. It was really a very difficult thing to do. It surprised me because I had no qualms about it. I did not think there was anything wrong with killing at that time. I thought that was a good way to get food, but when it came time to actually kill the deer my whole body started shaking. I did not understand what was going on. Of course later on when I practiced meditation, I had this great wake-up call as to what it was doing to my mind. For all of the memories and emotions that came up, I had to sort them out. I realized that I had to change my whole outlook, which led to a great transformation. Meditation helped me to realize that there is a great weight to killing. I think that truth becomes quite clear when you start to practice meditation. Your mind becomes very quiet, and any little thing that arises can be seen far better than before. When your mind is overly active and full of defilements of greed and anger, you cannot really make heads or tails of anything and it is difficult to come up with any solid understanding of reality. It is hard for some people to understand this reality because they have never taken the time to quiet their mind and see their experiences clearly one by one. Meditation is like fine-tuning a microscope, letting you see things that others are not able to see. Killing becomes very abhorrent through mindfulness practice, and you begin to see how even the slightest anger has a great power. When you kill someone who wants to die, you are changing their karma; it is like trying to help someone who is running from the law. There are repercussions because of the power and the intensity of the act. There is a tremendous explosion of mental energy that is created by killing.

The act of letting someone die is an exception. In some cases you can let people die rather than giving them medication that is only going to prolong their misery. You can also stop life support if it is considered that there is no chance of life or if the mind has left. Apparently that was what happened with Mahasi Sayadaw. It was said that his mind was no longer working, so they took him off life support because he was no longer there. On the other hand, my teacher in Thailand gave an interesting perspective

on this when he said, “Well you never really know. We can say that the person is not going to come back but it is never really clear.” He told a story about someone who everyone thought was going to die, but he was kept on life support for some time and he eventually recovered and lived another ten years and was able to do all sorts of good deeds. My teacher’s point was that human beings have an opportunity in their lives to do good deeds, so you should not be so quick to cut them off because you do not know where they will go when they die. This is why we always say that human life is very precious. If a person's mind is impure, then letting them die or helping them to die is only going to lead them to an unpleasant result. If you can help them to stay and practice meditation, listen to the Dhamma, or be with their family and learn about compassion and love, cultivating wholesome mind states, cultivating patience with the pain, it will be a valuable learning experience. Helping someone to stay is far better than dismissing the person and sending them on their way without knowing where they are going.

Stealing

Retrieving what is mine

Q: *Is it breaking the second precept if you secretly take back what is stolen from you?*

A: If someone stole something from you, then that is stealing. If at some point you give it up and you declare that it is theirs now, but then you take it back, then that is stealing. This is really a technicality, though. If you never did give up that thing that you considered yours, and then you find out who has it and you take it back, it is not considered stealing.

Bankrupt then Monk

Q: *If someone were to declare bankruptcy can they then become a monk?*

A: If you have declared bankruptcy and have gone through with it, and you no longer owe any money, then you could become a monk; however you have to settle it before you become a monk. The problem is that it might be considered stealing. There is an argument that could be made that it is bad karma to declare bankruptcy. Declaring bankruptcy means you are not willing to pay your debt, and you have taken something that you promised to give back. Not giving the money back is a kind of stealing. In modern times it is all twisted around, but technically it is stealing. There are so many people in debt nowadays, which is unfortunate. Do not go into debt if you can avoid it; however, sometimes it is difficult to avoid.

“Should a Buddhist go into debt?” is an interesting question. Everyone should avoid going into debt, but what does it mean to go into debt? Is it a problem? Going into debt is an unwanted complication that is magnified because we try to live our lives as simply as possible, as Buddhists. One could argue for the acceptance of an unpleasant state, rather than going into debt, for this reason. The problematic part of bankruptcy is the promise that was made. At the moment that you make a decision to never pay back a debt, you break the precept on stealing.

Sexual misconduct and urges

What is considered sexual misconduct?

Q: What is considered sexual misconduct?

A: This is a funny question with some funny parts to it. There was a man I met in Colombo who was probably committing adultery; he was going to visit brothels daily wasting all of his money on gambling and women. Kind people gave him money to keep for my benefit, and he ran away with that money. When I was with him, he talked about his adopted son who had some problems. His adopted son had a girlfriend and was going to America, and it turned out that the son was also getting married to a different woman. He was going to sleep with this different woman then go back to be with his girlfriend and go with her to America and get married to his girlfriend. He did not love the first woman to whom he was getting married, but he felt responsible because he slept with her already; he felt like he had a duty to marry her because she was no longer a virgin. I asked the father, “Well doesn't he understand that is breaking the third precept?” Then the father said that he was not breaking the third precept because the third precept states that there are certain types of women that you cannot have relationships with. Technically this may be true, and I am sure that he had heard this from monks who have given people very clever ways out of breaking this precept. Yet here the son was, breaking the hearts of two women. His girlfriend was devastated because she knew all about it and was in his apartment while he went off to marry and sleep with another woman. It did not bode well. I can picture these two going off to America; it would make a good movie. It is absurd. I cannot imagine where these people come up with these things, but he's not doing anything wrong according to these people because the women he was sleeping with were not engaged to anyone.

People get this idea in a passage where the Buddha talked about the third precept; he said that a man should not have romantic relationships with women who are under the protection of someone else, such as their parents or another man. This is a total misunderstanding of what the Buddha said. This is a good advice in relation to this precept, but it certainly is not the whole of the precept. If you are committed to someone, of course you should not have a romantic engagement with anyone besides that one person. If a woman is engaged to another man, is it that you cannot have relationships with her but she can have a relationship with you? Of course not. It is actually worse for her because she is promised;

you haven't promised anything. You can go and have a relationship with the woman without breaking any promise but what you are doing is destroying people's trust and their relationship.

I would broaden the precept even further to say that you break the precept whenever you harm someone with romantic or sexual behavior. This would include rape, which is one of the worst things that could ever happen to someone. I have dealt with people who have been victims of it. I think murder in some cases might be preferable; if you were killed at least you can then forget about it and start fresh. Clearly, rape and sexual assault is something devastating, so it is wrong.

When I say something does not break a precept, it does not mean, by any sense, that it is right. The precepts are kind of curious in this way. I would say in this case rape could be seen to fit in the third precept as would any sensual or romantic engagement with another human being that breaks a trust. Rape breaks a trust because it occurs without the permission of the other party. Adultery breaks a trust because it occurs without the permission of or is against the wishes of a third party. This is how we should understand the third precept.

How to overcome sexual urges

Q: How to overcome sexual urges being 100% celibate? In your own experience how successful are the monks?

This is generally speaking the most difficult attachment for a human being to overcome. There are those for whom it is not so difficult, but for most people it certainly is. The ordinary way of dealing with sexual desire is the repression of it but repressing the things from which we want to be free does not work. Repression is refusal to acknowledge, refusing to even look at our problems. As a result of repression, just like pushing down on a poisonous gas it starts to seep up through the cracks and can become even more wild and unmanageable, as we see in the case of religious figures who attempt celibacy and end up molesting small children.

The Buddha taught something very profound called dependent origination, which many people are familiar with intellectually. To actually use it in your meditation practice, however, is a whole other thing. Dependent origination says that the arising of craving comes in a sequence; it does not just come up by itself, it depends on certain conditions. The sequence begins with a contact between the eye and the

object, so in our practice we start there. If we can catch the mental process at the contact with the eye, where we see something, then we can do away with the craving before it arises. When you see something enjoyable, in this case, seeing something that arouses you, you remind yourself that it is an experience of seeing, not anything more than that.

Second, there is the feeling brought about by the experience of something pleasant. Even before the arising of lust, there is the feeling of pleasure. At this point there is no repression or even any unwholesomeness to repress. Amazingly, once you accept the feelings you have - accept the pleasure that comes from the sexual urge, from the seeing of something which you have a memory of being pleasurable and going through the cycle of addiction again; once you accept this, it loses all of its power over you. When you say to yourself, “happy, happy...” or “pleasure, pleasure...”, you see it as simply that and nothing more.

The third part of the sequence is the craving that follows the feeling, where you say to yourself, “lust, lust...”, “wanting, wanting...”, or “liking, liking...”. In practice, you go back and forth between these three and acknowledge them by saying “seeing, seeing...”, “happy, happy...”, “wanting, wanting...”, etc. You just watch them for what they are. It is not as though overnight the desire will disappear, but it completely transforms your relationship to the experience, turning something that was an all-consuming issue that makes it impossible for many people to stay celibate, into something ordinary without any power over you. It is the same with all of our other addictions and aversions as well; they only have power over us because we give them that power. Once we acknowledge our experiences for what they are and give them their audience, asking, “What are you?” It turns out they are something very simple and insignificant. They are what they are and they do not mean anything; they do not have any significance other than the reality of what they are, and as a result you find the sexual urge loses its power over your mind.

That is in brief how you overcome the sexual urge. The other question regarding how successful are monks I would not really be able to comment. If they are unsuccessful they should not be monks, but it is important to understand that many monks nowadays might not practice meditation to any great degree. People often become monks for the wrong reason and also nowadays it is hard to get in touch with a good teacher. Often people have good intentions and become a monk but because of non-interaction with a qualified teacher they find themselves struggling for a long time. Falling away from the monk's life is a common occurrence. It is obvious that most people are not going to be able to reach nirvana in this life. Monks are supposed to be working on it and, just like lay people who go to do

courses in meditation, they are able to keep at it to a varying degree. It would be very wrong if a monk were unable to be celibate and yet stay a monk, but I imagine that sort of thing probably happens. When they are unsuccessful, then they are no longer a monk.

This is not an easy thing that we are doing, but I hope that some of what I said helps both laypeople and monks to find our way to become free from this deep-rooted attachment. The upside is that once you start to deal with such things it really does bring peace, happiness and an uplifting sense of freedom from the incredible burden of having to seek out things which obviously have no meaning and no inherent benefit.

Lying

Lying to Save a Life?

Q: Say you were strictly following the precepts. You see a terrified man run past you, then another man comes up to you with a knife and asks if you have seen where the first man went. Although you know, would it be appropriate to lie and say you do not know and never saw him, or would you have to tell the truth?

A: This story is often given as supposed proof of how the precepts are a guide not a rule. Some Buddhists believe that there are instances where breaking the precepts is appropriate, and they use this sort of scenario to back up their belief.

Once I heard a Zen Buddhist monk use this scenario in such a way and I asked him, “Well, couldn't you just not say anything?” He said something like, “Oh yeah, I guess you could.” Keeping the precepts does not mean you must do or say anything. Keeping the precepts means not doing things. It does not mean that you have to tell the truth.

There is an interesting article I read recently by Sam Harris, an atheist, well-known for his views on the silliness of theism, and he wrote an article recently about self-defense, arguing that you should react and not just go along when you are being attacked. At first I did not agree with it, but I think some of it is agreeable. Self-defense is allowable, for sure. If someone is trying to rape you, you do not want to have them rape you because it is bad for both of you *and* them. You do not want people to murder you because it is bad for both of you. You want to live yourself so that you can do good things, and you think, “If I die, I do not know where I am going to go, I am not enlightened yet so I better stick around for a while to do more good deeds.” You also wish the same for the person attempting to ruin their minds through their evil deeds.

I heard a story of a Theravada monk in Rājagaha who was walking through India barefoot. He was accompanied by a lay attendant carrying money for their expenses and they decided that they would camp out on Gijjakuta. Gijjakuta (Vultures Peak) is a very famous place where the Buddha and many of his great disciples lived in the early period of the religion. It is a very important place in Buddhism. These two decided to camp there for a night, which was a big mistake. They were confronted by bandits, and the

lay attendant charged the bandits, scuffled with them a little bit, then ran away and jumped down from the top of Gijjakuta into the ravine. He did not break anything but he did get scratched and bruised. The monk sat there, and the bandits said, "We are going to kill you now." They had a knife pointed at his neck and the monk just lifted up his neck as if to say, "Okay if you are going to do it, go ahead and do it." They did not kill him. The point of the story is that there is a power in non-violence. There is a power in letting go that very often makes you immune to evil; as a result of his state of mind it would have been quite difficult for them to hurt him. It would have been quite easy for them to hurt the lay attendant because he was totally unmindful. When he realized that he had left this monk defenseless, he climbed back up and surrendered himself. They had to give the bandits all of their clothes, robes, bowls, money, camera and everything. All they left with the monk was his lower robe (like a sarong), but they left them alive and somehow the two survived and went to stay in a Thai monastery and the story has a happy ending.

Getting back to your question, you certainly do not have to lie. In the case where you are forced to do something unethical, just do not do it, regardless of the consequences. One may say, "Well if you do not stop them, they will perform this unethical act," but what you are saying is that if you do not do something unethical, somebody else is going to do something unethical. You are not responsible for their unethical behavior. It is not your bad karma if someone else does something bad. It would only be an intellectual exercise if you said, "I should do something bad because otherwise these people are going to do something worse." The ethics are quite clear; there is never a need to do something bad in order to avert badness. You are not responsible for other people's acts, knowing that beings go according to their karma.

Of course, one might find it impossible emotionally to let unethical actions occur, for example if one's family was involved. Most people are very much attached to their family, but our attachment to specific people is merely conventional reality, which has nothing to do with how karma works. There is never any reason to perform unwholesomeness because that is your action and your input into the universe, regardless of what someone else is going to do.

Drugs & Alcohol

Fifth Precept (Drugs and Alcohol)

Q: I have read that the fifth precept is a little different to the other four (which are always bad). In the case of the fifth precept, they say the 'bad' is when we take the drug and become careless. Is it okay to take drugs and drink alcohol if you are advanced enough to control yourself and not violate any of the other precepts? And is it possible to become so advanced, that intoxicants do not affect you, or even if they affect you, you are able to fully control yourself?

A: This precept is different from the other four; there is no question about that. Breaking the fifth precept does not directly harm another person and it is not an act in the same way that the others are. It is not the act of drinking that is unethical, it is the intention to intoxicate yourself. I disagree with the interpretation of the fifth precept you mention; the grammar does not really allow for it. The precept says that *surā-meraya* and *majja* are things which are a basis for intoxication. It is not referring to taking them to the extent that you become intoxicated. Some people have the idea that any base of negligence, any base of *pamāda*, which is the opposite of *apamāda*, is breaking the fifth precept but it is not so cut and dried. The precepts are not commandments and the fifth precept is only specifically a vow relating to drugs and alcohol. Someone once tried to tell me that the fifth precept forbids gambling, and I asked them, “What is the first precept?” They said “It is forbidden to kill animals.” I said that was wrong, and that the precepts are not commandments; they do not forbid anything. The precepts are “I undertake to refrain from these things.” It is important to understand that the precepts are a determination not to do something. The fifth precept is a determination not to take drugs and alcohol. You could add other things which are similar bases of intoxication. *Surā-meraya-majja-pamādatṭhānā* means the things which are a basis for negligence in the same way that alcohol is, not in the way that gambling is. If you want to take a precept against gambling, more power to you. A person who does gamble is in for trouble, but they are not violating the fifth precept. Gambling it is not nearly as detrimental as taking drugs and alcohol. Anyone who has practiced meditation and then gone back and taken drugs or alcohol, will tell you that even the smallest amount of any intoxicant will lead you to become at least a little bit intoxicated. It affects your brain, it affects your ability to think clearly and rationally; it has a negative effect on your mind.

The very intention to take drugs and alcohol, is a negative one. The very intention to imbibe poison, something that is actually going to poison your body and affect your ability of the mind to function, is a negative intention in the first place. An enlightened being would never give rise to such an

intention. Why would they need to take drugs or alcohol? The implication here is that they would abstain from it because of the very nature of it. This is something that poisons the body; it is something that poisons the mind as well and it is something that is done for the purpose of escaping.

Abstaining from Alcohol

Q: Is it necessary to abstain from alcohol 100%?

A: I would like to go over the reasons why our practice is to refrain from alcohol entirely. The question was whether it is necessary to abstain from alcohol one hundred percent, when taking alcohol once in a while can bring pleasure. The person even said it is a great pleasure for them to drink alcohol, so what's the problem? I think in general this comes from a lack of understanding of what the moral precepts are for and a general lack of understanding of Buddhist morality. Buddhist morality is not like Christian morality in a classical sense. The Judeo-Christian morality is thought to be based on an injunction from God and focused on the effect our actions have on others. It is immoral to kill, for example, and the general understanding of Judeo-Christian morality is that this is because of the effect killing has on the person being killed. In this sense something is immoral if it hurts someone else. Buddhist morality is totally the opposite; it is concerned entirely with the effect our actions have on ourselves. If you do something based on greed, anger, and delusion, it hurts yourself. In fact, causing suffering for others has a much greater hold over your own mind than the mind of the other person. It is possible to be the victim of violence or theft and escape without any mental suffering whatsoever, depending on one's ability to deal with adversity. A person who commits an immoral act, however, is unable to escape the effect the act has on their mind, because of the inherent greed, anger, and delusion it involves. I think if we understand morality in this way then the fifth precept on not taking drugs and alcohol is the easiest to understand, because it has the most direct impact on one's own mind and is the opposite of meditation practice.

If you practice a little meditation, if you are mindful even a little, you gain a little clarity of mind. If you drink alcohol just a little, you lose a little clarity of mind. If you are very mindful, that has a great effect. If you consume a great amount of alcohol, you will become completely unaware and have little to no clarity of mind whatsoever. The idea that drinking alcohol is harmless because it doesn't hurt other people is totally missing the point that alcohol has a direct impact on one's own clarity of mind. Also the idea that you could have even just a little bit of alcohol without getting drunk is misleading, as there is no actual line separating being drunk and being sober.

A person who has a little bit of alcohol becomes a little bit less alert and aware. This is why people drink alcohol and why there is so much pleasure involved in being drunk. You can ask yourself, “Where is this pleasure coming from?” There is no chemical in alcohol that stimulates pleasure in the mind; what really happens is you lose your sense of shame and morality, and your awareness of what you are doing. When you are intoxicated, everything seems funny and interesting. You become stupid, but you feel like you are intelligent and wise. You might carry out conversations thinking that everyone must be really keen on you and think you are such a great person when in fact they think you are an idiot and you are just making a fool of yourself.

You cannot say that there is any honor or any nobility to be had from the pleasure that comes from alcohol. The pleasure does not bring future happiness; it brings the inability to discern what is right and wrong, and as a result, the ability to do all sorts of wrong things without feeling guilty or upset about them. When you are intoxicated you have a feeling of freedom and lack of inhibition. This does not change the fact that what you are doing is really dumb and wrong and that it affects your mind and your environment. Intoxication inclines you towards social settings and lifestyles that involve people who are immoral and engage in immoral acts without thought or consciousness. This is what happens for people who drink alcohol. It changes your mind and your life, and there is a great number of things that come along with that. It is the opposite of the meditation practice. If the meditation practice brings clarity, and if the clarity from meditation brings goodness, happiness, and peace, then the lack of clarity and the dullness that comes from drinking alcohol will drag you down and turn you into a base and immoral person. It is simply a matter of quantity; if you drink a little bit, it degrades your mind a little bit; if you drink a lot it degrades your mind and your life to a great extent. If you drink once in a while, you are probably not going to go to hell or have a terrible life, but it will have an affect on your present and future life.

This brings us to the following question: what is wrong with taking alcohol once in a while? People will say, “Well, I know the rule, but if I just take it once in a while, it is not going to make me an evil person” and no, of course it is not. A person can take a glass of alcohol and the effect that it has on the mind will wear off and one can develop one's mind again and get back on track. As long as one maintains moderation, one can theoretically get past it. The point is that even one glass of alcohol is a bad thing; it affects your clear mind, it is no good, it is poison. If you take a lot of it will have a great effect on your life, your mind, and your environment. Our reason for keeping the rules strictly and why I would definitely recommend that you keep the rule against taking drugs and alcohol and not engage in it even in moderation, is because of the precedent that decision sets both for yourself and for others. The

fact that you drink means you will be surrounded by other people who drink, and you yourself will cultivate the idea that there is nothing wrong with taking alcohol, so your environment and the places that you frequent will reflect that. The acceptance you give to taking alcohol even in moderation is a way of life that you choose. What that does to your own mind is create an acceptance of things that are unwholesome.

I once heard a monk teach that if you give a bowl of milk and a bowl of alcohol to a dog, the dog will not hesitate; it will go straight for the milk and ignore the alcohol, which they would not touch unless you train them to drink alcohol. They know naturally that alcohol is poison and the fact that we drink it shows that we have some problems in our mind. The fact that we have social structures set up that incorporate alcohol as a normal activity shows that there are problems with our social structures. People engage in alcohol in moderation, but there really is no moderation with something that is poisonous and dulls your mind to the extent that alcohol does. Someone could say watching television and movies also intoxicates the mind but the level of intoxication is very different; there is a direct intoxicating effect and lack of ability to see things clearly that comes from taking alcohol. When you are drunk the mind does not work; the brain is not functioning properly. If you use the brain in this state you will not have the ability to discern what is good and what is bad because your faculties have been poisoned.

By creating a standard for ourselves that we are not going to engage in something of which the only effect is to intoxicate the mind, then we deny that lifestyle; we deny that sort of social structure and we change our way of life. This in turn changes our environment. It changes our friendships, and it sets us on a path that is conducive to clarity, understanding, peace, happiness, and freedom from suffering. For people who are interested in practicing meditation, the fifth precept and all the others are a basic requirement to be kept in full for anyone who is serious about following this path. If you break the five precepts, it has an effect on your life and changes who you are. Because of the effect that alcohol has on us, we abstain from it one hundred percent; we take it as a rule. Even if it does not get you completely drunk, the effect that it has on your mind and the effect it has on your life will be a great hindrance to your meditation practice and progress on the path.

I am sure there are people out there who will disagree with this and will continue to drink alcohol. I am not the judge; I had an old friend who said, "Well, no one can escape their karma; if you do a good thing you will get a good result, and if you do a bad thing you will get a bad result." So, you can see for yourself what the result is.

Alcohol in Food

Q: I realised that there are small amounts of alcohol in some of the ingredients I use for cooking and drinking (0.4 %) and I was wondering if using these kinds of foods are breaking the precept? I am mostly worried if those amounts can affect my meditation practice. I do not feel it affects my mindfulness in the moment but I am worried about it in the long run.

A: The precepts are vows; they are not rules. You take a vow to abstain and that means complete abstention so you are not really keeping the rule if you are not abstaining. The other thing is that it is just a matter of degree, so if you take just a little bit of alcohol it will only impair your mindfulness a little bit but it is still problematic. If it is a tiny amount just in the food then it is not a real problem; it is not a significant problem at all. If it is insignificant on a cellular level, it is not even going to affect you and that is really what the Vinaya means when it says if you cannot smell or taste the alcohol you are not breaking the rule. So if it is gotten to the point where there is really no alcohol there to smell or taste, then it is fine. I know in food sometimes that happens. You cook food with alcohol, and by the time it is cooked you cannot taste or smell the alcohol anymore.

I remember there was this dish that they gave to us as monks once or twice; I think it is rice that they put sugar in and then leave out in the sun until it becomes fermented. I said to a monk sitting beside me, “There is alcohol in this!” He said, “No, no, no, they do not put alcohol in it.” I asked him, “how did they make it?” “Well, they add sugar and put it out in the sun.” he said. I laughed, “Do you want to know how alcohol is made?”

Coffee

Q: Is drinking coffee breaking one of the precepts, since it has so much caffeine?

A: No, but there are a lot of unwholesome things that do not break the precepts. Cigarettes are borderline, but probably not breaking the precepts because they do not impair your mind to the extent that would be necessary to call it *pamādaṭṭhānā*. If you called cigarettes *pamādaṭṭhānā* a grounds for negligence or drunkenness, then so many different things would also be grounds for negligence. A Thai group of meditators were trying to convince me that gambling was breaking the fifth precept because gambling makes you negligent so they translated *pamāda* as negligent. It is quite clear, however, that what is meant

is not negligence, but drunkenness. If gambling truly makes you drunk so that you cannot properly gamble, then gambling is *pamādaṭṭhānā*, but it does not. The mind of a gambler can be very sharp, but it is an addiction. If gambling were in the fifth precept then having sexual intercourse would be in the fifth precept because having ordinary sexual intercourse is intoxicating and yet it is not even a part of the third precept.

The Five Precepts are not all-inclusive; they are not comprehensive. The Five Precepts are a guideline; they are five things which an enlightened being would never do, but there are a lot more things than an enlightened being would not do. I do not let meditators drink caffeine but it is for a more subtle reason. I do not believe caffeine is going to make meditators drunk, but it gives an artificial amount of energy. I used to drink coffee and a lot of monks drink coffee. Monks cannot eat in the evening, so they have coffee, and get overly energetic. I was once staying with a forest monk in Thailand, ostensibly a good monk. While we were talking, I told him that sometimes we practice meditation all night and the monk said, “Great, meditation all night; that is great! That’s how all of our teachers became enlightened.” He had a picture book and he used it to point out how this teacher is an arahant and this other teacher is an arahant and so on. I said, “Well let’s practice all night then.” He agreed and then proceeded to drink cup after cup of coffee and just started talking and talking, and I realized that probably this group of monks is not for me.

Coffee is an artificial form of energy, and when it is gone, you actually have less energy and are even less able to practice than before. Many things are like this; if you take painkillers then you become less able to deal with pain. If you take stimulants you will have a harder time when you are depressed.

In my time as a Buddhist, I have seen two meditators go crazy and I actually had to help deal with them. I spent four nights in a mental hospital with one of them. It turned out that both of them were drinking coffee all night. They were instructed by their teachers to practice meditation day and night, walking and sitting. They thought, “How are we going to do that?” and they both had the same bright idea, “Let’s drink lots of coffee”. There is no question in my mind whether that played a part in their temporary insanity. Of course there were likely other reasons that helped but I think without that coffee they probably would have done a lot better. So, we tell meditators at the beginning of an intensive course not to drink coffee at all. Coffee becomes an artificial crutch, where we are trying in all ways to come closer to nature.

Glossary

anatta - 'not-self', non-ego, egolessness, impersonality, is the last of the three characteristics of existence

anicca - 'impermanent', 'impermanence' is the first of the three characteristics of existence

alms round - going for food dana in the morning

arahant - a being who has attained the fourth stage of enlightenment; a worthy one, has eliminated all defilements and is fully liberated.

Dhamma - a reality, can also refer to the teachings expounded by the Buddha

dukkha - commonly translated as suffering, anxiety, stress, or unsatisfactoriness. It is the first of the Four Noble Truths and one of the three marks of existence.

Eight Precepts - I. not to kill, II. not to steal, III. no sexual or romantic activity, IV. not to lie, V. not to take drugs and alcohol, VI. eat only once a day or during the morning hours, VII. discarding any entertainment or beautification, VIII. sleeping on the floor or on a rug and only sleeping a minimal amount of time

Five Precepts - not to kill, not to steal, not to cheat, not to lie and not to take drugs and alcohol

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā-sambuddhassa - "Homage to him, who is blessed, who is a worthy one, who is rightly self-awakened."

Karma - volitional action, considered particularly as a moral force capable of producing results that correspond to the ethical quality of the action; thus good karma (Pali: kamma) produces happiness, and bad karma produces suffering for the being taking action.

pamādaṭṭhānā - basis or cause for us to become intoxicated, negligent, and unmindful

Paññā - wisdom of insight

Precepts - Moral rules one takes

samādhi - concentration

Sangha - those who became enlightened by practicing the teaching and have passed on the teaching up to the present day

sāmaṇera - novice

Sammāsambuddha - someone who realizes the truth for themselves, and also comes to understand everything, including the way the universe works. They are able, therefore, to explain the path to someone else. They are able to understand the way for all beings to develop the path and to develop themselves spiritually.

Sīla - Morality, ethics

Sotāpanna - - the first type of enlightened being; simply having an experience of nibbāna once means you've irreversibly entered the “stream” leading to full liberation. The Buddha said such a person will only be born a maximum of seven more lifetimes.

The Buddha Sāsana - the Dispensation of the Buddha, the Buddhist religion; teaching, doctrine.

Three Marks of Existence - impermanence, suffering and non-self

The three treasures - the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha

Theravada Buddhism - 'Doctrine of the Elders', is a name of the oldest form of the Buddha's teachings, handed down to us in the Pāli language. According to tradition, its name is derived from the fact of having been fixed by 500 holy Elders of the Order, soon after the death of the Master.

Vinaya - Code of conduct for monks