

Radical Therapy Buddhist Precepts in the Modern World

by

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The Five Precepts are the basic moral code of Buddhism, undertaken daily by lay Buddhists along with the Three Refuges and regarded as the indispensable foundation of a life governed by the Dhamma. The Five Precepts consist of five training rules of abstinence: (1) from killing, (2) from stealing, (3) from sexual misconduct, (4) from false speech, (5) from intoxicants.

The Five Precepts are designed to discipline and purify the three avenues of human action — body, speech, and mind. Abstention from killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct disciplines bodily action. Abstention from false speech disciplines verbal action. It is also expected under this fourth precept that one should refrain from slander, abusive speech and frivolous talk. The dual discipline of body and speech has a salutary effect on the purity of mind, though complete mental purity can be brought about effectively only through bhavana, mental culture or meditation. The fifth precept against the use of intoxicants attempts to safeguard the mental faculty from degenerating through a bad habit. A man under the influence of intoxicants has no control over himself, and thus is easily tempted to transgress the four other precepts as well.

Traditionally, the Five Precepts are regarded as part and parcel of personal morality, a stepping stone along the path to liberation. However, these Five Precepts also have

a momentous relevance to modern society. Man in the modern world lives in a critical state of illness — an illness rooted in moral negligence. The five rules of training which form the backbone of Buddhist ethics offer a remedy for that illness, a course of therapy that is radical because it strikes at the root of the problem. This I hope to show by an examination of each of the precepts.

The precept against killing

The world today is plagued by various kinds of conflicts: ethnic, racial, religious and ideological. Terrorism appears to reign supreme in many countries. War is not just a threat, it is a continuing actuality all over the globe. The use of nuclear power in war is a worldwide anxiety. The manufacture of firearms is a thriving industry. Are there wars because there are firearms, or are there firearms because there are wars? The two seem to form a vicious circle, and it may be questioned whether conflicts are maneuvered and nurtured in order to find a ready market for the flourishing arms industry.

Enough nuclear power is available today to blow the planet up several times over. Chemical and biological weapons capable of inflicting unimaginable torment have been designed to kill people but leave buildings intact. But it is well to remember that cruelty dehumanizes the victim overtly, and the perpetrators in more subtle ways. The question arises whether life is deemed more, or less, valuable today when man is at the apex of his technological prowess, than in earlier periods of his history.

If a world war erupts there will be no victor to enjoy victory, as the victor, victim, and the uninvolved will all be annihilated. Some realization of this imminent catastrophe seems to have dawned on the nuclear powers at long last, hence the recent negotiations for arms control. But it is a timely question to ask how valuable one individual holds the life of another to be.

When we pay attention to the precarious situation man faces today, we begin to appreciate and marvel at the real value and significance of the precept against killing. If only the scientific community of the proud modern world had observed this simple moral precept of the inviolability and sanctity of life, it might have concentrated only on the constructive uses of science. But what is paradoxical and even ludicrous today is that modern man is foolhardy enough to pride himself on unprecedented scientific achievement when in fact he has brought the entire human species to the very brink of disaster.

Militarism is not the only ill effect of the lack of sympathy for life. It is felt to a very marked degree in agriculture. The free use of insecticides, weedicides, and chemical fertilizers has caused soil pollution with disastrous long-term consequences. The natural chemical and bacterial balance of the soil has been disturbed. As a result the fertility and the productivity of the soil are diminishing at an alarming rate. Rivers and seas too have been polluted by chemical waste and in some areas rivers have

become incapable of sustaining aquatic life. All these have adversely affected human life, and unless man turns over a new leaf with a radical change in attitude this dangerous trend portends disaster. A return to moral values seems a survival imperative.

Another disgraceful inhuman activity we hear of sometimes is the prevalence of baby farms in the Third World countries, where it is alleged that unwanted babies are sold to human tissue banks to provide organs and tissues for transplant purposes. One shudders, overcome with revulsion at this callous and shameful disregard for the life of another.

Money, status, and power seem to be the criteria which determine the value of one person's life as against that of another. Can civilized man, with a clear conscience, use the life of one individual to save the life of another? This shows the extent to which modern man has been dehumanized. Moral discipline is a crying need to impress upon him the inherent worth and dignity of all humanity.

The precept against stealing

Lawlessness and misappropriation of various kinds are prevalent today to an unprecedented degree. The mass media are replete with distressing news about pickpocketing, bribery, smuggling, organized robbery, blackmailing, hijacking, etc. Society today has acquired such perverse values that sometimes daredevil crimes are sentimentalized as acts of valor. Apart from such blatant crimes, modern society is guilty of subtle forms of misappropriation which have far-reaching adverse effects.

Man today uses non-renewable natural resources at the risk of his own survival. Goods of inferior quality are produced so that they have a short span of utility value because a market must be found for their speedily produced replacements. Brain-washed by commercial advertisements to believe in the merits of consumerism, modern man is actually using the earth's resources at a rate which jeopardizes generations yet unborn. Is this not a case of robbing the rights of future generations? If a household prepared food sufficient for ten people, but it was all consumed by four, we would not hesitate to call the behavior of the four selfish and immoral. But when modern man consumes earth's non-renewable resources without regard for future generations, we are foolish enough to call it development and progress.

Periodically the world today destroys thousands of tons of surplus food to prevent the reduction of market prices, when in fact there are millions of people undernourished and dying of starvation. At a time when food preservation techniques and transport facilities are plentiful, and people in all parts of the world are well informed about the situation in other countries, it is appalling to see the wanton waste of usable goods and the lack of fellow feeling and altruism.

The inordinate acquisitive greed of man is the root cause of much misery today. The wanton felling of trees has resulted in severe soil erosion in mountainous regions. Time and again the consequence has been massive mudslides resulting in the destruction of whole villages and the loss of hundreds of lives. The destruction caused to tropical rain forests all over the world has also altered the climatic conditions of the whole planet. Scientists are now warning of the danger of a global temperature rise and the consequent melting of ice-caps in the polar regions. In such an event within the course of the next century vast inhabited coastal areas of all the continents will be engulfed by the sea

All these and many more calamities are the direct effects of modern man's greed, which has assumed intolerable proportions. The first step to curb greed is the observance of the second precept, the positive aspect of which is non-ostentatiousness and the ability to be contented with a simple life where needs are satisfied rather than greeds.

The precept against sexual misconduct

Disdaining the sexual mores of the pre-industrial era, modern man has plunged headlong into a life of uninhibited pleasure, so much so that the last few decades have been characterized by what is called a sexual revolution. The discovery of contraception relieved man of the responsibilities that come in the wake of sex and sensuality has become an accepted social trend. All manners of sexual behavior are practiced with uninhabited openness. Homosexuality, lesbianism, premarital and extra-marital sex have become widespread phenomena. Incest and rape, too, raise their ugly heads with unprecedented frequency. Sexual abuse of children within the family circle is so common that in Britain a telephone service called Childline has been set up which specializes in counseling abused children. It is reported that this voluntary organization receives over 1000 calls a day!

The ill effects of this permissiveness have gradually emerged. The divorce rate has become alarmingly high as couples are incapable of maintaining steady, lasting, emotionally sound relationships. Children have suffered most in broken homes and large numbers of adolescents have become drug addicts and delinquents. Juvenile delinquency is now a serious social problem. Public institutions have been organized to care for unwanted children, and to rehabilitate drug addicts and delinquents. Babies are sometimes battered to death during family crises and measures have been adopted to deal with family violence. Abortion has become so frequent that it is currently a widely debated moral and sociolegal medical issue.

Sexually transmitted diseases have increased by leaps and bounds to assume almost epidemic proportions. The whole world was shaken with a rude shock by the advent of the dreaded disease AIDS, Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, for which medical scientists all over the globe are struggling, without success so far, to find an

effective cure. It is also a well-known secret that one of the causes for cancer of the cervix in women is exposure to several sexual partners.

Already burdened with various other socio-economic problems due to industrialization and urbanization, man now has to face the additional burden of family and health problems. Interpersonal relations have become superficial and brittle, and large numbers of people find themselves alienated, frustrated and mentally ill, without a sense of direction and purpose. The alienated individual has no friend to turn to for solace, and as he is already estranged from religion, psychiatry has stepped in to give some measure of relief.

It must not be forgotten that man emerged from savagery to civilization through family life. The love of the mother for her offspring played a significant role in this march, and the family was the vital social unit in giving the new arrival the comfort and security which he sorely needed. Modern man in his greed for sensual pleasures has sacrificed the sanctity of this vital institution, and he found himself drowning in the very pleasures which he so much wanted to enjoy, reminding one of the traditional simile of the ant fallen in the pot of honey. It is really to safeguard man against such catastrophic disasters that the third precept has been so designed to form part and parcel of the code of discipline obligatory for laymen.

The precept against false speech

When selfish pursuit of personal gain and pleasure largely determines human action, one can hardly expect a high standard of honesty to prevail in society. Today there appear to be discrepancies between words and deeds even at the highest levels of national authority. Nations establish diplomatic relations as a gesture of friendship and goodwill, but from time to time we also hear them accusing each other of employing spy services to pry into one another's internal affairs. This shows that there are double standards and double dealings and often, despite a facade of friendship, the result is mutual distrust and suspicion at the international level.

We also hear of instances of terrorist camps being established in some countries to train men in guerrilla warfare to destabilize the government of another friendly country. Showing a very friendly face, some leaders work with sinister hypocritical motives to stabilize their own political positions at the expense of others.

Recently the papers also reported that a ship laden with toxic chemical waste was going from an undisclosed country to an unidentified destination. Ultimately it is said to have unloaded its "cargo" in a coastal farm in Nigeria, purchasing the consent of the poor farmer without the knowledge of the Nigerian government.

From time to time we also hear reports of scandalous behavior on the part of national leaders. In some instances when their honesty and integrity have become questionable, public pressure has obliged them to resign from high office. Some

have been defeated at elections due to malpractices. When those in the highest social and political positions stoop to such dishonesty, one cannot expect moral standards to be maintained in society at large.

According to Buddhism rulers have to set a good example to their subjects by maintaining a high standard of morality in their public and private lives. It is men of high integrity and moral stature who can command the respect and loyalty of the people. When rulers are unrighteous and morally depraved, social values deteriorate and society gradually sinks into anarchy and chaos (sabbam ratham dukkham seti raja ce hoti adhammiko, A.ii, 74-76).

As man is social animal, mutual dependability is a survival strategy. Dishonesty weakens the very basis of society and the whole social structure breaks down with mutual distrust. Military strength cannot bring unity and harmony in society; it is moral power which infuses resilience and strength to social life.

The precept against intoxicants

Brewing liquor is one of the most profitable industries in the world today and the market is replete with various brands of alcohol. In Sri Lanka the state coffers are handsomely augmented by the revenue earned from the sale of liquor, and the consumption of expensive foreign alcohol is regarded as a luxury of high society. Values have become so perverted that it is the teetotaler who gets cornered in society today. Only a man with high moral scruples and a strong character can decline the offer of a drink at a party despite the embarrassment of being regarded as a wet blanket or one under petticoat government. It also remains a fact that many who end up as alcoholics were first introduced to drinking for social acceptance.

Alcoholism and drug abuse are burning social problems of modern society. They ruin the physical and mental health of the addicts. One does not have to be a habitual drunkard to fall prey to disease. According to a British medical journal, daily beer drinkers are twelve times more at risk of developing cancer of the colon than non-drinkers. It is also reported that even relatively modest social drinking by pregnant women can harm the fetus. The babies are abnormally small, or have small heads or jittery eyes. These are effects associated with what is called the fetal-alcoholism syndrome, which in its extreme form produces very distorted features and a retarded brain. Alcohol also causes irreparable damage to brain cells in adults even when taken in small quantities, while larger quantities can damage vital organs of the body. Drug abuse is even more injurious.

Fully realizing the harmful effects of intoxicants, Buddhism has included abstention from them among the basic moral precepts. The dangers of intoxicants are enumerated in a number of the Buddha's discourses, the most famous of which is the Sigalovada Sutta (D.iii,182). Indulgence in intoxicants causes economic downfall. The episode of Mahadhanasetthi (DhA.iii,129), who squandered a vast fortune by

drinking with evil friends and was reduced to beggary in his old age, is a classic example related in the Pali texts of a wealthy man ruined by alcohol.

Intoxicants can cause disputes, quarrels and family violence. Disruption of family life is often caused by addiction to liquor and drugs, and this brings about a whole chain of other related social problems. The Suttas report that ill health and a bad reputation are also caused by the habit of taking intoxicants, which also destroys inhibitions and weakens wisdom. The situation is aptly summarized by a modern writer who said that man's conscience is soluble in alcohol

Most of the crimes in modern society, as well as serious traffic accidents, have liquor and drugs as the root cause. In spite of the devastating social effects of alcohol that are so evident today, attractive advertisements clutter the mass media depicting liquor as integral to the lifestyle of the affluent, to emulate which is the dream of the common man. People have to be educated and convinced not only of the ill effects of intoxicants but also of the value of will power and strength of character to resist the temptations that society throws in their way. It is only one who is weak in character who will get trapped in these snares.

The individual should also be taught to cultivate a sympathetic attitude toward his own body and mind. They are his instruments of action and it is his own responsibility, and in his own interest, to keep them healthy and efficient. In the meditation on loving-kindness in Buddhism the individual is first taught how to develop a benevolent attitude toward himself. "May I be well and happy" is quietly and mindfully repeated several times each day at the beginning of the meditation to impress upon the mind a compassionate attitude toward himself. When the benevolent attitude becomes deeply ingrained in the mind, the meditator will gradually refrain from habits which are injurious to his own body and mind. It is the paramount duty of all concerned people who realize that society today is in a precarious state, to muster all resources at their command to bring about a change in man's attitude to rescue him from the perils of his own making.

The moral dimension

The scientific man of today has tapped many of nature's secrets and has learned to control the physical forces of universe. But he has yet to learn to master the social and psychological forces that affect his very being, and his relationship to his fellowmen and the environment. Though man in this nuclear age may be an intellectual giant who has achieved technological wonders, emotionally he is a mere dwarf who has barely taken a couple of steps beyond the Stone Age. One writer compares modern man to a person who has one leg tied to a jet plane while the other leg is tied to a bullock cart. Thus man's development is utterly lopsided, and this psychological imbalance seems to be largely responsible for the crisis situation we face. What is needed is the total development of the personality as a whole, and for that the cultivation of the moral dimension is an absolute must.

We have traffic rules to facilitate the smooth flow of traffic. Though they appear to place restrictions on the freedom of the individual, they in fact grant freedom of movement to one and all. Moral laws are similar to traffic rules. They impose certain restraints with the double purpose of granting maximum satisfaction to the individual in the long run, and of preventing the individual from hindering his fellowmen from realizing their own satisfaction. Moral laws coordinate different aspects of human experience so that there are no conflicts within the individual and among individuals.

Conflicts, terrorism, and wars have to be understood as the external manifestations of the internal disharmony of man. Man thinks violent thoughts, therefore there is violence in society. The corrupt mind brings suffering in its wake. This is an eternal truth. If happiness is what we yearn for, we have to entertain wholesome thoughts, and act with wholesome thoughts; then happiness will follow effortlessly like a shadow. To train the mind for wholesome thoughts and healthy attitudes our physical and verbal activities must be disciplined, and this is exactly what the Five Precepts do. They control our destructive potentials and humanize the predatory animal in us.

About the Author

Lily de Silva is Professor of Pali and Buddhist Studies at the University of Peradeniya in Sri Lanka. A regular contributor to Buddhist scholarly and popular journals, she is also the editor of the subcommentary to the Digha Nikaya, published by the Pali Text Society of London. Her previous BPS publications are One Foot in the World (Wheel No.337/338) and The Self-Made Private Prison (Bodhi Leaves No.120).