



The Five Precepts

Buddhism in Every Step (D6)

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The Five Precepts

As a response to the needs of beginners on the Buddhist path, this booklet offers an explanation of the five precepts by examining the meaning of undertaking the five precepts. The content of this booklet serves as a gateway to Humanistic Buddhism.

Undertaking and observing the five precepts represent the practical application of faith. These are the most meaningful activities one can embark upon in life—something truly gratifying and laudable. The precepts form the basis for everything good. Their essential character is one of non-violation, for it is by not violating others that one can perfect the purity of the three karmas of body, speech, and mind. For many, the greatest advantage in human life is represented by the pursuit of fame and fortune, including all the money and wealth such pursuits entail. But in truth, all the advantages in the world added together would fall far short of the value gained by undertaking and observing the five precepts, as well as taking the Triple Gem Refuge, which is explained in the

companion booklet *The Triple Gem*. By undertaking the five precepts, we can develop faith, generate merit, and increase moral strength. By observing the five precepts we can enjoy peace and well-being in the human form, hone spiritual focus, and avoid acting in unwholesome ways. In other words, understanding and observing the five precepts allows us to generate our intrinsic *prajna* wisdom, obtain respect, and, ultimately, produce harmony.

The merit from undertaking and observing the five precepts is limitless and immeasurable. Not undertaking the precepts deprives us of the opportunity to enjoy such merit. It is common to have questions before requesting the conferral of the five precepts. You may ask yourself, “Will I be able to undertake and observe the five precepts?” There is no need to worry. Requesting the conferral of the five precepts can only offer a multitude of benefits without doing any harm at all.

As for undertaking and observing the five precepts, we are often concerned about breaking the precepts once they have been conferred. But, in fact, the precepts are divided into two main types. *Parajika* are grave offenses that are not easily committed. *Duskrta* are minor misdeeds, and although they might be difficult to eliminate all at once, these can be reformed through repentance. Therefore, even if the precepts are broken after undertaking them, the situation can

usually be remedied. Undertaking the precepts does not mean that we will never break them. What is important is that if we do break any of the precepts, we have the ability to reform through repentance, as indicated by this maxim:

*People are not saints,
for who among us is without fault?
Still, knowing one's faults
and changing is the greatest good of all!*

I. Some Issues Addressed

The Five Precepts and Freedom

Many of us think that after undertaking the precepts life will become a matter of you-can't-do-this and you-can't-do-that. We wonder if that isn't limiting us even more. We worry that it will mean a loss of freedom. This is why some people will question: Why should I receive the precepts and end up just limiting myself!

In fact, if we were to go to a prison and make a survey into the reasons for incarceration and the loss of freedom, we would find that every single inmate there had violated one or more of the five precepts. Murder, aggravated assault, and even assault that results in not completely taking someone's

life but still maimed them are all violations of the precept against killing. Graft, embezzlement, stealing, extortion, robbery, and kidnapping are violations of the precept against stealing. Rape, prostitution, sexual abuse, bigamy, human trafficking, and lewd behavior are violations of the precept against sexual misconduct. Defamation, breach of promise, false accusation, false testimony, rumor mongering, planting evidence, and threats of violence are violations of the precept against lying. Drug dealing, drug addiction, drug trafficking, and the abuse of tobacco and alcohol are violations of the precept against consuming intoxicants. Anything taken into the body of either a stimulating, depressive, or consciousness altering nature that can do harm to the spiritual wisdom of human beings is, in actuality, a drug, and using such substances is a violation of the precept against consuming intoxicants. We can easily find ourselves locked up in jail with our freedom taken away because we violated the five precepts. Thus, observing the precepts is also assuring that we will obey the laws of society. Only people who are able to undertake and observe the five precepts and truly understand them can enjoy real freedom. Thus, the true meaning of the precepts is freedom, not limitation.

The Five Precepts and Self Control

Buddhists observing the precepts are similar to students following school regulations or citizens obeying the laws of the nation. What is different is that school regulations and a nation's laws come from an external restraint—stemming from something outside oneself—as a form of control by others, while the Buddhist precepts are guidelines—intentionally placed upon oneself—as a form of self-control. That is to say, secular law employs external force to set the norms of conduct and compel people to refrain from breaking the law. The five precepts of Buddhism, conversely, are something people are perfectly willing to observe on their own, so that they will not run afoul of the five unwholesome behaviors. Thus, the state's criminal law punishes criminal acts that have already occurred, while Buddhist morality guards against criminal acts before they occur. The merit stemming from the belief and practice of these two forms of control is not the same.

The Five Precepts and Being a Vegetarian

Becoming a vegetarian is not a requirement after undertaking the five precepts. Just as in the case of taking refuge in the Triple Gem, there are no special restrictions in the area of food and drink. Although there are no restrictions in terms of the Buddhist

moral code regarding what we can eat and drink after undertaking the five precepts, the Buddhist faith is all about helping us to become more compassionate, more moral, and to value and protect life. The Dharma gives us the optional practices of observing the “three kinds of clean flesh”¹ and “only eating the vegetables of a meat dish.” We can also observe the six vegetarian fast days every month and the daily vegetarian breakfasts, all of which represent a kind of skillful means. The point is that after undertaking the precepts, we work toward self-purification of our mind and body in order to become a more compassionate and moral practitioner.

The Five Precepts and Karmic Retribution

Buddhism teaches about karmic retribution, so sometimes people get the idea that if we eat the meat of pigs, horses, cows, or sheep, we will receive the future karmic retribution of being reborn as a pig, a horse, a cow, or a sheep, that if we swat a fly or squash an ant, we will be reborn as a fly or an ant. In that case, if one kills a human being, one will be reborn as a human being. This is an erroneous understanding of karmic retribution. When we are attached

1. Three kinds of clean flesh. This refers to the meat of any animal that one has (1) not seen being killed, (2) not heard being killed, and (3) not prepared for oneself personally.

to this kind of erroneous view, we suffer from a wrong, or ignorant view. When we have a wrong view, we are in a worse situation than breaking a precept. Breaking a precept is a transgression against the Buddhist precepts, which represents an error in our behavior that can be corrected through repentance. Holding a wrong view is a misunderstanding of the truth, which represents a fundamental error in our thinking. In terms of understanding and comprehension, an individual with wrong views is unable to accept the truth of the Buddhist teachings, and is, thus, cut off from the Buddhist path. Therefore, one can perform repentance for breaking a precept, but not so for holding a wrong view.

In Buddhism, there is nothing shameful in breaking the precepts, for as long as we sincerely repent, we can still be hopeful about life. But for someone with a wrong view, the situation is like an incurable disease that no medicine can treat. The same can be said for those in politics, for the commission of errors in thinking is quite a serious matter. In terms of the Buddhist moral code, mistaken thinking and understanding are like the five kinds of views that cloud the meaning of karma. The five kinds of views are views of the body, extreme views, evil views, views that attach to wrong views as truth, and views attached to immorality. All of these views are sources of affliction and obstruct us on the path. Thus, when

we follow the Buddhist teachings, we need first to develop right knowledge and understanding. We need to know that, when undertaking the precepts, we have a standard of conduct to follow. We need to know how to have self-control, and understand that if the precepts are broken, repentance is still possible. We need not fear the precepts, for it is only by means of the precepts that we can enjoy peace, security, and protection.

The Five Precepts and Unintentional Killing

A common question that arises about undertaking the five precepts is about unintentional killing, for example accidentally hitting a mosquito or a fly, or smashing an ant during the course of daily life. With respect to the Buddhist moral code, the two categories of taking life are *duskrta*, minor misdeeds, and *parajika*, grave offenses. *Parajika* means beyond redemption, an offense that requires expulsion from the monastic order. Only the taking of human life constitutes the grave offense of *parajika*. This represents a major, fundamental precept within the Buddhist moral code, something that cannot be remedied through repentance.

To unintentionally kill cockroaches, mosquitoes, flies, or ants during the course of daily life is a violation of *duskrta*, and constitutes a form of wrong

doing. But although it is also a transgression of the Buddhist moral code, it is not quite the same as killing a human being. The taking of life in these cases can be repented or counteracted through the performance of good deeds. For example, sometimes we might set animals free or work extra hard to protect life as a way of wiping out our past offenses. Sometimes we might undergo repentance and vow-taking as a way of eliminating our negative karma.

The Five Precepts and Repentance

In case we do break the precepts after undertaking them, what can we do? Sometimes people think that undertaking the precepts means that it is impossible to avoid breaking them, so if we do not undertake the precepts, we will not have to worry about breaking them. Actually, the negative karma from breaking the precepts can be lessened when we have a sense of regret and repentance. In this way, we still have a chance to obtain liberation. If we do not undertake the precepts and commit harm without any sense of remorse, then our negative karma is all the more severe, since we do not have a reason to correct our behavior. Such people will be reborn as animals, hungry

ghosts, or in hell.² Thus, it is better to undertake the precepts and show repentance upon breaking them, rather than committing transgressions without even having undertaken the precepts in the first place. It is only through undertaking the precepts that we can obtain the opportunity for liberation. Not undertaking the precepts makes the attainment of Buddhahood impossible. Not undertaking the precepts does not mean that we can commit wrongdoing with impunity, for we will still be in the wrong when breaking the precepts even though we have not undertaken them.

The Five precepts and the Benefits of the Buddhist Moral Code

The benefits of undertaking and observing the five precepts, the Buddhist moral code, constitute the basis for human morality. According to the *Empowerment Sutra*,³ in undertaking and accepting the five pre-

2. Six realms of existence. Depending on our karma we can be reborn in any of these six realms for a time, though our existence there is only temporary. Each realm is populated by different kinds of beings, not all of which can be seen by those in the human realm. These six are (1) Realm of Heaven, (2) Realm of Asuras (a type of celestial being consumed with anger and jealousy), (3) Realm of Human Beings, (4) Realm of Animals, (5) Realm of Hungry Ghosts, and (6) the Realm of Hell.

3. *Empowerment Sutra (Consecration Sutra)*. A sutra on protective rituals, known in Chinese as 灌頂經 (*guanding jing*).

cepts, we are sure to induce the protection of twenty-five Dharma guardians. The *Moon Lamp Samadhi Sutra*⁴ also says that those who observe the precepts purely will obtain ten benefits, which are (1) fulfillment of all wisdom; (2) learning what the Buddha learned; (3) the wise not casting aspersions (on you); (4) unwavering in vows; (5) abiding securely in the practice; (6) freeing oneself from cyclic existence of birth and death; (7) admiration of joy in *nirvana*; (8) obtainment of the mind free from attachment; (9) obtainment of supreme *samadhi*; and (10) no lack of faith or Dharma wealth. When we undertake and observe the five precepts, we will surely experience inexhaustible benefits.

When we go beyond not killing to protecting all life, then we will naturally be healthy and enjoy longevity. When we go beyond not stealing to widely practicing generosity, we will naturally become rich and honored. When we go beyond not engaging in sexual misconduct to always respecting the good name of others, our family life will naturally be harmonious. When we go beyond not lying to sincerely praising others, we will naturally obtain prestige and distinction. When we go beyond not consuming intoxicants to turning away completely from the

4. *Moon Lamp Samadhi Sutra*. A sutra that was especially important to the Madhyamaka School of Buddhism, known in Sanskrit as *Samadhi-rajā sutra*.

temptation of drugs, we will naturally enjoy a healthy body and a clear mind.

The Five Precepts and Beyond

After undertaking and observing the five precepts, should we then try undertaking some other Buddhist precepts? Observing the five precepts is a lifetime undertaking, and not something one does for only twenty-four hours. The five precepts can be undertaken and observed all at once or done so in stages. We can select the one or two precepts that are the easiest to observe, according to our own situation, and then we can practice the precepts more diligently with three or four, till we gradually reach the full five precepts. We can go even further by aspiring to undertake the higher level bodhisattva precepts consisting of the ten major and forty-eight minor precepts. Being able to generate the bodhi mind for enlightenment in order to accomplish the work of enlightenment will not only ensure that undertakings will be successful and family life will be fulfilling in the mundane world, the spiritual world will also become more expansive in the supramundane world. Roaming the Dharma realm freely and peacefully is truly the finest state of human life.

II. The Meaning of Undertaking the Five Precepts

*Precepts are like the bright sun and moon
and also like the pearls of a necklace;
it is through precepts that bodhisattvas—
as numerous as atoms and molecules—
attain perfect enlightenment.*

—*Brahma Net Sutra*⁵

The precepts are the basis upon which unsurpassed enlightened Buddhahood is accomplished, what is known as the practice of the precepts (morality) generating meditative concentration, and meditative concentration generating wisdom. This constitutes the foundation for the threefold training of morality, meditative concentration, and wisdom. Therefore, the first step when we follow Buddhism is to take refuge in the Triple Gem, after which we take the next step by undertaking and observing the Buddhist moral code of rules and precepts. If we do not undertake the precepts, we will still generate negative karma when the precepts are broken, but when we do undertake the precepts, then even if we break them, we will be able to eliminate the effects of negative karma through repentance.

5. *Brahma Net Sutra*. A sutra on the moral code of bodhisattvas, known in Chinese as 梵網經 (*fanwang jing*) and in Sanskrit as *Brahmajala-sutra*.

The First Precept Is to Refrain from Killing

We must not violate or do harm to other people. Life is so precious, as in the expression “Heaven cares about living things.” Buddhism emphasizes the natural process of death, so we must not kill for the desires of our own appetite, the cravings for something good to eat, nor should we kill out of malice and hatred. Even more so we must not ascribe to the erroneous view that considers the weak being preyed upon by the strong as something right and proper. Nowadays we even see the taking of life under the guise of maintaining an ecological balance in an area. Although this practice may sound good, the cycles of cause and effect that stem from such taking of life are unavoidable.

The taking of life, whether it be suicide, killing others, suborning others to kill, becoming pleased upon seeing others killed, and the like, all share in the same negative karma of taking life. Although we might not kill by wielding a knife or aiming a gun, we can still deliver fatal blows with clubs and sticks, do harm with language, or achieve someone’s death through treachery, all inflicting great suffering. In short, any act that harms the mind or body of another, causing them to suffer pain by not being able neither to truly live nor die, constitutes the taking of life.

The idea of refraining from killing is certainly consistent with the spirit of Buddhism’s compassion

that cannot bear harming the life of living beings. The Confucianist Mencius (372-289 B.C.E.) also remarked on the topic:

*Having seen an animal alive,
one cannot bear to see it dead;
having heard its cry,
one cannot bear to eat its flesh.
This is why the gentleman
stays away from the kitchen!*

Clearly, any kind and loving person would have as little to do as possible with the karma of killing.

The Buddhist precept against killing can be divided into minor misdeeds, impersonal deeds, and grave offenses. The precept of refraining from killing means to refrain from the grave offense of *parajika*, killing human beings. This precept is usually quite easy for us all to keep. However, there are times during the course of daily life when animals are killed. We cannot think that we can go around killing them at will just because it does not involve the taking of human life. Still, even the killing of a small animal is still taking life. It is just that the negative karmic effects created will be less than in the case of the *parajika* offense. The taking of life of a being other than a human is the commission of *duskrta* misdeeds, which offers the opportunity for repentance and remedy.

Actually, not only are we enjoined against taking life when we undertake and observe the precept against killing, but we are called to take the next step by saving and protecting life by performing reasonable releases of life. As an ancient worthy has said:

*My flesh is the flesh of sentient beings;
The names differ, but the essence does not.
We all share in having the same nature;
We merely vary in bodily form.
If I left others to suffer in pain;
For the sweet and tender are what I want.
No need to await Yama's judgement;
I know myself what such deeds will cost.*

Buddhism does not force us to become vegetarians. Still, we must not take life carelessly, for as a verse states:

*Strike not that bird in the midst of spring,
for chicks in the nest await mother's return.*

The Second Precept Is to Refrain from Stealing

Stealing is when one appropriates the property of others for oneself by illegal means, that is, taking what is not given. Human life each day cannot be separated from material requirements, hence the

possession of property. Property can be either public or private. Public property includes such things as sunlight, air, oceans and seas, public parks, public roads, public agencies, public facilities, and so on, which we can all use freely; in contrast to this there is property that has an owner, in that we cannot take what is not given.

In the same way, taking what is not given, taking for oneself things that are left unattended, having others take something for you are all quite improper. Engaging in such activities as shoplifting, political corruption, disavowing of loans, embezzlement, misappropriation of funds, on-the-job pilfering, graft, unfair or illegal business operations, insider dealings, gambling and prostitution operations, and loan-sharking—all of which represent ill-gotten gains—are against the Buddhist moral code.

We might consider refraining from stealing as the easiest precept among all the five precepts to undertake and observe, if we are not given to act or have any disposition that involves stealing. But, we often fail to realize that this precept is actually the hardest of all to undertake and observe. For example, there is a cup of tea on the table that no one has said you may drink, but you go ahead and drink it anyway; there is a little flower in someone's garden that you think is pretty, so you pick it without permission and put it in your hair; the office ballpoint pens can be taken

home for one's own use quite easily; and so on. All of this is taking what is not given.

However, the spirit of the precept against stealing is not quite so strict. According to the stipulations of the precept, only stealing something worth five coins (in the currency of the ancient Indian state of Magadha) or above can be considered an act of stealing which breaks the fundamental major precept of *parajika*. But this is not to say that one could appropriate anything below such a value, for that would still have been committing *duskrta*. Such behavior both then and today would still be subject to censure.

The Third Precept Is to Refrain from Sexual Misconduct

According to the Buddhist moral code, wholesome romantic love, marriage for the laity, and remarriage after divorce all constitute the emotional life permitted by Buddhism, as far as they do not violate the laws of society.

It is when we engage in sexual misconduct outside of the marriage or a committed partner relationship that misery is created for the home life and confusion is brought into society. Truly, there is nothing more unwholesome than sexual misconduct! Those of us who become involved in committing sexual

misconduct may think to themselves that extramarital affairs are not that serious, and may even come up with their own excuses: the other person loves me, or it's the other person who was pursuing me. Even though the other person may indeed love us, there are many wholesome and appropriate ways of showing affection. We end up causing great harm when we seek out unsuitable relationships.

Since ancient times, the commission of sexual misconduct has created turmoil at home, harm for the children, financial loss, ethical decline, moral degradation, and even serious brushes with the law, especially considering that the party's family will feel completely humiliated. Truly, one cannot say that the serious consequences that come about through sexual misconduct are insignificant. The Tang dynasty Emperor Xuanzong (r. 712-756 C.E.) is one example. He became enamored with the Lady Yang, originally his daughter-in-law, and took her as his concubine. Because of this he not only committed incest, but it even precipitated the An Lushan Rebellion (755-763 C.E.), which almost destroyed the imperial house and the Tang dynasty itself. Because of his single act of improper sexual conduct over his affections for the Lady Yang, Emperor Xuanzong brought catastrophe to his times; the people who were harmed numbered more than a million. Committing sexual misconduct surely has dire consequences.

Buddhism speaks of humans as sentient beings, but the sense of love must be reasonable, that is, contained within the bounds of the Buddhist moral code, for it to be able to preserve the individual, regulate the family, and benefit society. If we all can refrain from sexual misconduct, then not only will our personal conduct be healthy, family ethics and social morality will be refined.

The Fourth Precept Is to Refrain from Lying

Lying includes harsh speech, duplicitous speech, flattery, and telling untruths. Lying refers to, for example, seeing something and saying you didn't; not seeing something and saying you did; or calling what is right wrong and calling what is wrong right. Lying is also spreading rumors to cause trouble, telling tales to create discord, ruining the reputation of others, and spoiling the good works of other people. We only need to utter a single sentence to actually cause others to suffer enormous pain.

Lying has its many different levels as well. There is bearing false witness with evil intent; there is doing harm through irresponsible and casual remarks. We should also consider as lying the actions of lying with evil intent or the telling of a white lie and anything else that does harm to others.

Speech karma comprises four of the ten unwholesome actions, so the negative karma of *duskrta* regularly created by the words that come forth from our mouths is also quite unavoidable. What the precept against lying is mostly concerned with is the *para-jika* level of grave offenses involving lying. This includes telling lies about ourselves as having already attained enlightenment or some realization, or that we possess certain supernatural powers. Examples of these include falsely calling ourselves “*rinpoche*” or “living Buddha” all of which break the major precept against lying. The negative karma in these situations is quite serious.

The Fifth Precept Is to Refrain from Consuming Intoxicants

This precept in the past referred specifically to abstinence from consuming alcohol, but today we need to include refraining from consuming all intoxicants, since the intoxicants that are available in today’s society include not only alcohol but also the very serious dangers of illicit street drugs. Western countries in the past once tried using drugs, such as opium, to destroy China, because once a person takes drugs, they become despondent and apathetic in spirit, at which point they are unwilling to work and will not improve themselves mentally. This leads to the

ruination of personal fortunes, and all manner of evil negativity can occur as a result. This is also how the epithet “sick man of Asia” came about.

Preventing the spread of illicit drugs must start with controls at their source. Restrictions must be put into place to stop their planting, production, and trafficking, as well as their consumption. Becoming slightly addicted to a drug can eat up our financial resources and consume all of our property as well as destroy our reputations and our personal relationships. Therefore, we should never use illicit street drugs and only use prescription medications with extreme caution.

The same goes for alcohol and tobacco use, as well. Advanced countries nowadays have prohibited smoking in all public places such as restaurants, concert halls, libraries, and airports. In Asia, for example, alcohol consumption has become a blight upon the business world and upon the continent as a whole. It is terribly tragic when we hear or read that a drunk driver behind the wheel of a car has caused an accident, even to his or her regret! Therefore, even though it may be difficult for some to completely abstain from consuming alcohol, at the very least we should stop insisting on repeatedly making toasts and urging others to drink, not to mention drinking too much and getting drunk.

Of course there are also people who ask: Does

the drinking of a little alcohol in which one neither takes life nor does any stealing really generate such serious negative karma? Hardly anyone realizes that the harm done by drinking alcohol is huge; nothing else comes even close. Let me tell you a story: there once was a man who wanted to “just have a little drink,” but he did not have a dish of food to go with it. Seeing that his next-door neighbor was raising an old hen that was cackling away, he stole the hen and killed it to make a dish to eat while he drank his liquor. Thus he had broken the precepts against killing *and* stealing in one fell swoop. When the lady of the house next door came home and asked about her hen, the man told her that he had not seen it, thereby breaking the precept against lying. By now the man was a bit drunk, and seeing how beautiful the woman was, he started flirting with her and touching her in an indecent manner. Consequently, he also broke the precept against sexual misconduct. It was because of consuming intoxicants that all five precepts were broken in one stroke. So how can anyone say that the negative karma of consuming intoxicants, such as alcohol, is not serious?

The five precepts are the major, fundamental precepts of Buddhism, and undertaking and observing the five precepts is not only the direct cause for entering the Buddhist path, but it is also the best medicine for purifying the mind. The extraordinary aspects of

the five precepts are that they constitute the core of morality for how we must conduct ourselves in order not to create harm, as well as the fundamental morality for ethics; they are the direct cause for us to attain liberation from the cycle of birth and death. The entire Buddhist moral code has evolved out of the spirit of the five precepts—the spirit of not violating others. For example, the ten wholesome actions represent an expansion and strengthening of the five precepts: to refrain from killing, to refrain from stealing, to refrain from sexual misconduct, to refrain from lying, to refrain from harsh speech, to refrain from flattery, to refrain from duplicitous speech, to refrain from greed, to refrain from anger, and to refrain from ignorance.

Buddhism fosters the act of giving and Buddhists cultivate this practice. This practice promotes using things outside the body as a way of benefiting others, and only those with a disposition for charitable donations are able to achieve altruism. Undertaking and observing the five precepts and adhering to the ten wholesome actions are a way of employing moral conduct for doing good and refraining from bad to achieve the purity of our mind. We can then bring peace and respect to others, enabling everyone to take care of each other and to enjoy the greatest freedom. This is the merit of not violating others, something far greater than that accrued from charitable giving.

Since the merit of undertaking and observing the precepts is far more precious than charitable giving the Buddha often praised the five precepts as the five great gifts. Transgressing the five precepts is not only prohibited for those who follow the Buddha's path, these transgressions are also either not permitted or not condoned under the laws of secular states. If everybody strictly observed the five precepts, then we would surely have a more caring and joyful nation and society.

III. Freedom of the Heart

In Buddhism's undertaking and observing the five precepts, the spirit of the precepts is freedom. This is so because when we undertake the precepts we will not violate others, and as long as we can discipline ourselves, we will also not be breaking the laws of society. So the restraints of the law are not a constraint upon us, and we are able to enjoy a free and independent life. Buddhism's taking refuge in the Triple Gem asserts that all living beings on earth possess the Buddha nature, that is, everybody is Buddha. This is equivalent to modern politics where anyone can become president because the president is chosen by the people in a general election. This is an expression of democracy in which the people rule. This is why both the Buddha's five precepts and

Triple Gem Refuge actually embody today's ideas of freedom and democracy.

In undertaking and observing the five precepts, no one will be violating others so that each and every one of us can obtain freedom together. In taking refuge in the Triple Gem we all occupy an equal position together, without regard to ethnic origin, nationality, or religion. We all possess the intrinsic Buddha nature; this is such a wonderful example of the equality of democracy.

Not only is Buddhism adapting to the times, it also transcends them. It has taken thousands of years for the world to slowly advance into the modern age of freedom and democracy, but the freedom of the five precepts and the democracy of the Triple Gem Refuge as promoted by the Buddha have been available to us for more than two thousand five hundred years.

*I was lost in oblivion
when the Buddha was in the world
and appeared in this world
after the Buddha's parinirvana.
I repent for all my many karmic obstacles,
that stopped me from seeing
the Buddha's glorious body.*

In undertaking and observing the five precepts, we have viewed them as five separate precepts, however, in fundamental terms, there is actually only one precept: Since freedom is to be respected, do not violate others. To refrain from killing is not violating the life of others; to refrain from stealing is not violating the property of others; to refrain from sexual misconduct is not violating the physical body of others; to refrain from lying is not violating the reputation of others; and to refrain from consuming intoxicants is not violating the health of oneself or others. Great indeed was the Buddha, for if we all would undertake the precepts, then there would be no one left to violate our lives, our properties, our bodies, our reputations, and our possessions. What a truly splendid thing that would be!

The five precepts, along with the Triple Gem Refuge, represent the motivating force for the purification of society. We must not only undertake and observe the five precepts in a passive manner, we must do so actively as well: Not only must we refrain from killing, we must also protect life; not only must we refrain from stealing, we must also practice generosity; not only must we refrain from sexual misconduct, we must also give respect; not only must we refrain from lying, we must give true words; and not only must we refrain from consuming intoxicants, we must also act correctly. This is because the meaning

of the precepts, besides their nonactive aspect as a prohibition against wrongdoing in connection with the specific precepts for the seven groups of disciples⁶ also includes the bodhisattva's three categories of pure precepts as an active encouragement to do good. The three categories of bodhisattva precepts are (1) precepts for proper conduct are the various Buddhist rules and precepts instituted to prevent wrongdoing; (2) precepts for wholesome deeds constitute a vow to practice all wholesome deeds, and (3) precepts for benefiting sentient beings are a commitment to benefit all sentient beings. The precepts are not merely the avoidance of acting in unwholesome ways, they also represent doing good and having moral courage in their active sense.

Together the five precepts and the Triple Refuge constitute the highest spirit for implementing freedom and democracy. Undertaking and observing the five precepts constitutes the wholesome action of respecting others and not violating them. Taking refuge in the Triple Gem represents democracy, while undertaking and observing the five precepts represent freedom. Putting the five precepts into practice enables one to truly fulfill the hope of human life.

6. Seven groups of disciples. These are (1) bhikṣu or male monastic, (2) bhikṣuṇī or female monastic, (3) śrāmaṇera or novice monk, (4) śrāmaṇerikā or novice nun, (5) śikṣamāṇā (woman who observes the six precepts), (6) upasaka or male lay practitioner, and (7) upasikā or female lay practitioner.

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