



The Five Precepts

Buddhism & Vegetarianism

by Chánh Kiên

Every religious or ideological system has a set of ethical guidelines that are designed to help the practitioner live what that group believes to be a moral life. Many of these laws are attributed to a supernatural power outside of the individual and are backed by a system of punishment and reward. However, the teachings of the Buddha are a system in which all the ethical norms are determined by the psychological background or motives of our actions.

Morality is not an end in itself, but an aid in developing wisdom for the purposes of learning to control the opposing forces of ill will, the development of conducive qualities, and laying the groundwork for further mental development with the ultimate goal of totally freeing the mind of all suffering.

Buddhist ethics form part of the Noble Eightfold Path in Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood. In addition, lay followers are offered guidelines in the form of the Five Precepts which ask adherents to withhold from: taking or threatening life; stealing, directly or indirectly; sexual misconduct; lying; and taking mind-clouding substances. "All of the Buddha's teachings," says John Daido Looi, "are really none other than the precepts: the vow to give life to the Buddha." [\[1\]](#)

Not as cut and dried

These Precepts may appear basic at first inspection— don't murder, don't rob a bank, don't rape, don't lie, and don't get drunk— but they are, however, densely layered and require years of practice to understand their full significance. While withholding from sexual misconduct means to not cheat on a spouse or use sex as a tool of violence or force, it also includes the ideal of not using sexuality as a means of coercion, or participating in sexual activity in which you are not wholeheartedly devoted to that person. The Precept of withholding from lying is not as cut and dried as it may seem. While lying is generally considered wrong, it would, however, be a mistake to think you must always tell the truth, which implies dualism— telling the truth is good, not telling the truth is bad. While one should never lie simply because it is profitable or pleasing to ourselves or others, the old standby of "thou shall not tell a lie" does not always apply in a fluid world. A common example is if you were harbouring a Jewish family during World War II, and a Nazi officer came to your door and asked if any Jews were inside, would you tell a lie to protect

them, or tell a truth that would most certainly condemn them to death?

Desire

Withholding from mind-clouding substances appears simple – it is impossible to reveal your Buddha-Nature [2] while your mind is muddled with the effects of drugs or alcohol, or even excessive caffeine – but it has deeper meanings as well. What is the definition of a mind-clouding substance? Could money be this substance? What about a postage stamp? If someone is driven to do immoral acts in the desire to obtain more money, you could consider their mind, their judgement, clouded by this substance. If someone collects stamps and begins to spend considerable amounts of time away from their family in pursuit of this hobby, or spends more money than they can afford to acquire more stamps for their collection, you could also consider their mind clouded by their desire to obtain more stamps. Desire is the key factor in addiction, whether it's conscious or unconscious, desire of the mind or desire of the body, which defines what a mind-clouding substance is.

Obvious

The Precept of not stealing – or withholding from taking that which has not been given – does not just mean obvious theft, like shoplifting or stealing a car. It also includes not stealing from the environment – not stomping through your life being wasteful or disrespectful of nature, or considering everything, every living creature, every plant, rock or stream, as being renewable and therefore not worthy of respect, thought or attention. This Precept also includes not using business or personal relationships to get something that wasn't given wholeheartedly, but from a fear of not wanting to disrupt the status quo, to keep the receiver happy and content, or for fear that not giving would make the giver feel unloved or inadequate. Holding a psychological power over others or using people emotionally, either to gain emotionally or financially, is also a form of stealing. These latter examples, depending on the situation, could also be covered under the Precept of withholding from sexual misconduct.

Eating meat

The ideal of withholding from taking or threatening life seems to be one of the more controversial Precepts. On the surface, this Precept simply means not to harm or kill, or to take part in any aggression, whether vocal or physical, towards any being. But all life is included within this Precept, from the smallest insects and worms, to pigeons, cats, pigs, cows, humans, elephants, and whales. While all Buddhists believe in not killing for selfless and senseless sport, there is much discussion over whether Buddhists should eat meat as part of their diet, and part of the confusion is because there is not really a clear-cut answer on this subject from any of Buddhism's great leaders. Most will say, "yes, be a vegetarian-but there are exceptions," and this has given many Buddhists a loophole to continue eating the flesh of animals. One common excuse for the practice of meat eating is [that it is said] that Shakyamuni Buddha himself ate meat when it was offered to him. But this basis holds no strength when you consider that the Buddha forbade the eating of meat except when it was given as alms and when, because of starvation or very poor growing conditions, there was no other choice. You must consider that during the Buddha's lifetime in India, starvation was a matter of course for many of his countrymen. When alms were given, not only was it seen as a great sign of respect, but as a great sacrifice for the giver to hand over much needed food. Since they were surviving on alms, it is true that the Buddha allowed the eating of meat – you ate what you were given. But it is also true that the Buddha instructed laymen to not eat meat. In that way, eventually, only vegetarian alms would be given to the monks and nuns. [3] "What goes around comes around" can be a good thing.

H.H. Dalai Lama

His Holiness the XIV Dalai Lama is not a strict vegetarian, but eats meat only occasionally on the advise of his doctor. Nevertheless he is a strong proponent of vegetarianism and of the advancement of diets that will help replace meat all together: "Thousands – millions and billions – of animals are killed for food. That is very sad. We human beings can live without meat, especially in our modern world. We have a great variety of vegetables and other supplementary foods, so we have the capacity and responsibility to save billions of lives. I have seen many individuals and groups promoting animal rights and following a vegetarian diet. This is excellent." [4] The Dalai Lama continues, "I think that our basic nature as human beings is to be vegetarian – making every effort not to harm other living beings." [5]

Roshi Philip Kapleau

It has come down through some Buddhist teachings that it is okay to eat an animal if you weren't the one who killed it. This again is ridiculous because just by taking part in the eating of an animal, you are responsible for its death, whether you were the one who put the knife to its throat or not. As Roshi Philip Kapleau, the American Zen master put it: "...to put the flesh of an animal into one's belly makes one an accessory after the fact of its slaughter, simply because if cows, pigs, sheep, fowl, and fish, to mention the most common, were not eaten they would not be killed." [6] Simply put, if you eat the flesh of an animal, you are responsible for the death of that animal and it is your negative karma. If you cause someone else to sin and commit the murder of a being for your own sake, that does not absolve you of wrongdoing.

Responsible

Another common excuse for the murder of animals is that in Buddhism it is often considered that all beings are equal – earthworms, chickens, cows, humans – and while partaking in a vegetarian diet, you are responsible for the death of millions of insects and other small creatures that exist in and around the crops that are harvested for the vegetarian's meal. Is it not better to have the negative karma for one dead cow than for millions of insects? This, of course, is another unmindful statement when you consider that in today's modern factory farm society, more crops are grown to be feed to cattle which will later be feed to man, than is grown for human consumption. Not to mention the crazing of millions of acres of woodlands and rain forests for cattle grazing areas and the displacement, death and extinction of numerous species of animals that follows thereof. Yes, the vegetarian is responsible for the deaths of many small beings in the procurement of their grains and vegetables, but the meat eater is responsible for these same creatures, plus the cows, pigs, chickens, etc., that they ingest, as well as the extinction of species from the flattened rain forests used to produce their meals.

In western civilization especially, there is no excuse to eat a living being. Killing humans is based in ignorance of the Buddha-Nature that binds us all together, likewise killing animals is ignorance of this same Buddha-Nature. We are interdependent, we are all one, and killing an animal is like killing ourselves. Killing any being is the antithesis of compassion, it violates the Precept of not stealing when one takes it upon themselves to steal the life of another living creature, and it is certainly not Right Action, an indispensable cog in the Noble Eightfold Path.

Chinese story of mercy

The karmic consequences of eating meat have long been the subject of Buddhist folk tales, including this ancient Chinese story of mercy beginning at the dinner table:

During the Ming dynasty, a Buddhist called Wang Ch'eng was always willing to help others, especially orphans and the poor. Every day Wang chanted Buddhist sutras, or scripture. In general, he was very pious, but for some reason, there was one rule of Buddhism he did not obey:

he was not a vegetarian. He lived during a bad period. There were many disasters. Bandits and outlaws roamed the country. Wang was worried. He heard that a monk living in a cave practiced Buddhism so hard that he could tell the past and the future. He knew the causes of present conditions and the effects the future would bring. Wang decided to visit him for instruction, even though the way was long and dangerous. Finally, after many difficulties, Wang reached the monk's cave. He addressed the monk, "Your heavenly honour, the world today is full of bandits and outlaws. The people are oppressed by those bearing weapons. We do not know how to keep living. We living creatures are drowning in a sea of disasters. We call upon you, sir, to show mercy by giving us a hand and helping us survive."

The monk smiled. "You are Wang Ch'eng, aren't you?"

Wang was startled. "yes, sir, but how could you know my name? What is your honor's instruction?"

"If you cannot be a vegetarian, you're just wasting our time with these questions."

Wang continued asking questions, but the monk had no more to say to him, so Wang had to go back home and think over what he had learned. He decided that he really did have to stop eating the carcasses of dead animals.

Several years later, Wang presented himself at the cave again. When the monk saw him, he laughed. "That's more like it! You have understood, and you have finally taken the teachings of mercy to heart.

"We live in treacherous times. The country is full of bandits. Only those who do not kill live in peace. That is the balance of the universe."

With that, the monk closed his eyes and continued his meditation.

Wang Ch'eng returned home to tell everybody that nobody who kills any living creature can hope for peace, because killing causes killing. If you eat meat, you are responsible for many deaths, so even if you do good deeds, you cannot enjoy true peace. To enjoy peace, you have to earn it by creating peace, not suffering. The best way to do that is to respect all life and eat only vegetarian food. [Z]

Solid ethical grounding

However, there are many layers to this concept of non-harm, as John Daido Looi relates: "From the perspective of compassion and reverence for life, we should be clear that this precept means to refrain from killing the mind of compassion and reverence. Also, and this is a very subtle point, an aspect of observing this precept includes killing with the sword of compassion when necessary. Several years ago I was driving along the highway and a raccoon walked out under the wheels of my car. I ran over it. Looking in the rear-view mirror, I could see it on the road, still moving. I stopped the car and went back. It was pretty young, badly crushed, and crying out in terrible pain. My own self-centeredness, squeamishness, and fear prevented me from taking its life and putting it out of its misery. I could have just driven the car back over it. But I could not bring myself to do that. I left it on the highway and drove away. In doing so, I killed the mind of compassion and reverence for life that was inside me. I violated the precept 'Do not Kill' because I did not have the heart to kill that raccoon. My own feelings were more important than the agony of that creature."

(8) Having worked in an emergency veterinary facility for many years, I have faced similar agonizing situations nearly every time I stepped into the hospital. It is a situation that requires a clear mind and a solid ethical grounding.

Peace

I was quite surprised how often the Precept of non-harm comes into effect. During a period when I concentrated on that sole Precept, noting any actions or moods that seemed aggressive in any way, I found that I was doing things absent-mindedly stepping on an insect in my driveway, tailgating on the highway, slamming my fist on a table in frustration at my own mistakes, being overly-stern

with my children, and actually feeling violent towards a client at work. What I noticed during all this was an underlying tone of anger that was really based in nothing. The children may be crying, the house needs a new roof, the car need repairs, late for a meeting – it all breeds impatience, frustration, anger and misery. Yet, by being mindful of the root of these actions and feelings they can be eliminated and you can move forward with a kind, loving, open-minded attitude towards all people and situations. The key to living a non-harmful life is fostering peace within oneself. This does not mean that you can't protect yourself or others, and that you must forego action against, for instance, terrorists or serial killers. But in handling these situations, one must always let go feelings of fear, anger and revenge, and work from a place of peace. If you are calm, and you have peace within you, you will look at all situations objectively and act accordingly. The key is peace.

Listen

The "don't do this, don't do that" tone of the precepts shouldn't seem negative, because within all these seeming prohibitions can be found guidelines for a positive, proactive path through life. The Precept of not stealing or not taking also encourages us to give – to give freely of ourselves, emotionally, physically, financially, in any way we can to help increase the joy and decrease the suffering of other beings. Likewise, not stealing from the environment also urges us to give back or to help the environment in any way possible, from simple tasks like recycling or planting a tree, to revising the way you live so that you tread lightly with every step you take on this beautiful Earth. The opposite of not harming or threatening life would be the ideal of opening yourself up to compassion, to initiate kindness, to help rather than hurt, and to use kind words to promote tranquillity rather than harsh words that instil turmoil. One opposite aspect of not lying or using harsh language is to speak with heart and to LISTEN – there is a Buddha within all of us, so listen carefully. Each of the Precepts has its basic face-value message, but each of these messages are built upon a rich tapestry of ideals and guidelines that the Buddhist can gradually dismantle and integrate into their own life.

The Sixteen Great Bodhisattva Precepts

In Buddhism, there is no place for commandments, prohibitions and guilt complexes. Rather, one is encouraged to do good and to withhold from the unworthy actions of deceit, harm and clouding the mind, realizing that we ourselves are responsible for our own actions and the results thereof. When it comes down to it, everyone can decide what precepts, and to what degree, they wish to keep – it all depends on how diligently one wishes to move down the path to Enlightenment. Buddhist monks and nuns undertake to follow over 200 major precepts, and innumerable secondary precepts, many of which were handed down from the Buddha, as well as rules of their particular sect. The variety, content and attention paid to precepts can vary greatly from temple to temple and monastery to monastery. They can cover everything from general rules of speech, to specific eating guidelines for a certain monastery. Reb Anderson Roshi, former abbot of the San Francisco Zen Center, lists his temples precepts: "The Sixteen Great Bodhisattva Precepts can be divided into three groups or sections: the Three Refuges, the Three Pure Precepts, and the Ten Grave Precepts. The Three Refuges express our vow to take refuge in the Triple Treasure: buddha, dharma, and sangha. The Three Pure Precepts are vows to embrace and sustain forms and ceremonies, to embrace and sustain all good actions, and to embrace and sustain all beings. The Ten Grave Precepts teach us to abstain from killing, stealing, misusing sexuality, lying, intoxicating mind or body of self or other, speaking of others' faults in a disparaging way, praising self at the expense of others, being possessive of anything, harbouring ill will, and disparaging the Triple Treasure." [9]

Some teachers will give the Precepts to those with a certain level of understanding or a true dedication to their practice, believing that they are the first step down the Buddhist path and that

those who commit wrong doings after taking them will be more aware of their mistakes. Other teachers find formal ceremonies unnecessary – believing that one must find the meaning of the Precepts and the strength to adhere to them strictly within oneself, and that to realize yourself is to realize the precepts, making transmission from a teacher unnecessary.

While the spirit of the Precepts are to observe them to the best of one's ability, it is important to understand that, as the Dalai Lama says, "lack of inner restraint is the source of all unethical behavior." [10] Our abilities are astounding, and we should never limit ourselves by thinking that we are just not capable of being better people.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Looi, John Daido. *The Heart of Being: Moral and Ethical Teachings of Buddhism*. Boston, Massachusetts: Charles E. Tuttle Company, Inc., 1996, 9.
2. In the Mahayana tradition, Buddha-Nature (Sanskrit = *Buddhata*) is the true, un-tainted nature of all beings which, therefore, makes them able to obtain Enlightenment. The Hinayana take a more restrictive view, saying that not all beings have Buddha-Nature, but does not say does and who doesn't, and why. The various attributes of Buddha-Nature differ from school to school, but from a metaphysical view, Buddha-Nature is considered as a clear state of mind, untouched by disruptive forces, with no form or design, that is the pinnacle of moment-to-moment existence.
3. Bodhipaksa. *Vegetarianism*. Birmingham, England: Windhorse Publications, 1999, 73– 79.
4. Walters, Kerry S., and Lisa Portmess, Eds. *Religious Vegetarianism: From Hesiod to the Dalai Lama*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2001, 88.
5. Ibid, 88.
6. Ibid, 85.
7. Talovich, G.B., trans. *The Love of Life*. Taipei, Taiwan: The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, 2000, 64.
8. Looi, John Daido. *The Heart of Being: Moral and Ethical Teachings of Buddhism*. Boston, Massachusetts: Charles E. Tuttle Company, Inc., 1996, 85-86.
9. Anderson, Reb. *Being Upright: Zen Meditation and the Bodhisattva Precepts*. Berkeley, California: Rodmell Press, 2001, 1-2.
10. His Holiness the XIV Dalai Lama. *Ethics for the New Millenium*. New York: Simon & Schuster Audio Division, 1999.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Chánh Kiên is the dharma name - meaning *True View* - of Gábor Konrád. Chánh Kiên a lay Zen Buddhist. He is a student of the Ven. Thich Truc Thai Tue, abbot of Tâm Quang Temple in Bradley, Michigan. Both Ven. Thai Tue and Chánh Kiên's first teacher, the Ven. Huyen Te, are students of the Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Thanh Tu of the Vietnamese Truc Lam school.