

From the Buddha...

“There are, monks, these five gifts, great gifts—primal, of long standing, traditional, ancient, unadulterated and never before adulterated—that are not open to suspicion, will never be open to suspicion, not faulted by wise ascetics and brahmins. What five?

“Here, a noble disciple, having abandoned the destruction of life, abstains from the destruction of life. By abstaining from the destruction of life, the noble disciple gives to an immeasurable number of beings freedom from fear, enmity, and affliction. He himself in turn enjoys immeasurable freedom from fear, enmity, and affliction. This is the first gift, a great gift—primal, of long standing, traditional, ancient, unadulterated and never before adulterated—that is not open to suspicion, will never be open to suspicion, not faulted by wise ascetics and brahmins. ...

“Again, a noble disciple, having abandoned the taking of what is not given, abstains from taking what is not given ... abstains from sexual misconduct ... abstains from false speech ... abstains from liquor, wine, and intoxicants, the basis for heedlessness. By abstaining from liquor, wine, and intoxicants, the basis for heedlessness, the noble disciple gives to an immeasurable number of beings freedom from fear, enmity, and affliction. He himself in turn enjoys immeasurable freedom from fear, enmity, and affliction. This is the fifth gift, a great gift—primal, of long standing, traditional, ancient, unadulterated and never before adulterated—that is not open to suspicion, will never be open to suspicion, not faulted by wise ascetics and brahmins...”

—*from the Numerical Discourses 8:39*



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The Five Great Gifts:

Ethical Guidelines for Buddhist Lay Life

The 5 Precepts

The Buddha taught us that virtue is the foundation for all of the good qualities we hope to develop in the mind. By following five basic training rules we can eliminate worries and regrets that disturb our meditation. As well, we avoid all the unpleasant results of unwholesome actions.

These are the five basic moral rules the Buddha asked his lay disciples to follow:

1. *I observe the precept of abstaining from killing living beings.* This means not intentionally causing the death of any living beings.
2. *I observe the precept of abstaining from stealing.* This means not taking things that do not belong to us.
3. *I observe the precept of abstaining from sexual misconduct.* This means not having sex with people we are not married to or with people against their will.
4. *I observe the precept of abstaining from telling lies.* This means saying only what is true at the proper time.
5. *I observe the precept of abstaining from using intoxicating drinks and drugs.* By following this precept we are committed to having a clear mind at all times.

Daily Life

Buddhists will usually remind themselves of their commitment to keep these precepts by reciting them once a day. They also take the precepts when they come to a monastery.

When we realize we have broken a precept, we can immediately make the determination to follow it in the future. The Buddha taught us that even this intention is extremely powerful for our mental development.

It is important when we have doubts about the precepts to ask a knowledgeable good friend so we can have confidence in our actions. Sometimes we think we have broken a precept when we really haven't. Sometimes we even think it is impossible to keep the precepts because of some misunderstanding.

Even though it is often difficult to keep the precepts, especially at the beginning, we will quickly see the benefits. When we meditate our minds won't be troubled by worry and regret. When we think about the many bad results we have avoided by keeping the precepts, we will have a tremendous gratitude for the compassion of our teacher, the Supreme Buddha.

The Buddha called these ethical guidelines "great gifts" because of the immeasurable peace and comfort that following them brings to those people around us.

Common Questions

Can I break the precepts accidentally?

No, the Five Precepts cannot be broken accidentally. So, for example, if while we are walking we accidentally step on an insect, this does not break the precept of killing. If we unknowingly say something that is not true but we think it is, that does not break the precept of lying.

What if I break a precept?

This is totally normal and should be expected. We can't do anything about the past other than recommit to following the precept in the future. In the moment you realize you have broken a precept, reflect on what happened and determine to follow it in the future. This is why many people recite the precepts in the morning and evening each day. This has the double purpose of reminding us to follow the precepts as well as knowing that we are starting with a clean slate.

What if I broke the precepts in the past?

It's fair to say that most people have broken precepts at some point in the past. The Buddha taught that it is not really helpful to spend time regretting things we have done in the past. What is helpful is trying to keep the precepts now.

Does eating meat count as killing?

No. Killing is killing and eating is eating. However if we tell someone to kill an animal, for any reason, that breaks the precept against killing. If we buy meat that was not killed at our request, that does not break the precept.

Does taking prescription drugs break the 5th precept?

No, not if they are prescribed by a doctor and are taken as instructed.