

BUDDHIST WAY OF LIFE

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The morality (*sila*) of the Aryan Eightfold Path is classified into different codes or stages suited to the various levels of mental and moral progress reached by different men, in different walks of life. For the monk who has made absolute renunciation of worldly life and who has therefore developed a certain degree of self-restraint a higher ethic is prescribed. This higher ethic is enshrined in the Vinaya while the social ethic for the layman is included in the suttas like Parabhara, Vyagghapajja, Mangala etc.

Social ethic

Sila or morality is at the social level the negative abstinence from wrong or unwholesome (**akusala**) action. Just as in a garden before new seeds are sown, it is necessary that noxious growths and weeds are uprooted and the soil is prepared, so in the Buddhist system of mind culture the first step would be to destroy its inherent tendency to evil which proves an obstacle to the positive cultivation of good qualities. This is done by abstaining from certain practices which are broadly classified under the Five Precepts (**panca sila**):

- abstinence from killing
- abstinence from stealing
- abstinence from excessive or unlawful indulgence in sense pleasures
- abstinence from utterance of falsehood
- abstinence from use of intoxicants

From the nature of these moral precepts it will be clear that the social ethic implied by them is aimed at the dual purpose of promoting individual and social harmony; it does not contain the rigour and depth characteristic of the higher codes enjoined upon the monks. Not only does the layman live in circumstances under which a higher morality cannot be practised, his reasoning powers too are not adequately developed; his code of ethics therefore should be more elementary than that of the monk who is free from domestic obligations or bonds (**gharabandhana**) and who has already developed sufficient control of his mind, capable of pursuing a higher morality.

In the Buddhist system it is recognised that the higher life of absolute renunciation (**nekhamma**) cannot be attained without first regulating the worldly life of socio-economic activity in accordance with **sila**. Hence the

enunciation of **Panca sila** is a social ethic with an objective purely socio-moral in outlook.

- (1) Abstinence from killing does not merely imply the avoidance of murder but that of all forms of injury to others – whether physical or otherwise. It involves the recognition of all life as essentially one and of the equal right of all to live.
- (2) The second moral precept of refraining from taking what is not given suggests respect for others' property and rights. It involves abstinence from all deceptive practices such as bribery that lead to social disintegration.
- (3) The third moral precept of abstinence from excessive or unlawful indulgence in sense pleasures is intended to promote social stability. Unbridled freedom in sex has been the cause of many wrecked families, corruptive social orders and individual misery today. The precept is a restraint on moral laxity; it is a tonic for a diseased age.
- (4) The fourth precept of the avoidance of falsehood encourages mutual trust and understanding between individuals and groups; today civilised life is threatened because this precept is violated through lack of that sense of honesty and fair play.
- (5) The last precept of abstinence from intoxicants that bemuddles the mind fosters an atmosphere of social harmony without which we cannot survive. The drunkard becomes not only a menace to society but an enemy or a hindrance to his own spiritual weal. Use of liquor leads to debauchery, drain of wealth, gambling and other social evils.

From the sociological aspect it would seem, **Panca sila** is an ordering of individual life in relation to the **bonum commune**; in other words, individual good is sought through promotion of collective good and vice versa. By the practice of non-killing, non-stealing etc, the individual not only prevents the arising within himself of those forces of evil **Kamma** that will bring evil consequences upon himself in later life, he also positively contributes to the creation of a peaceful and harmonious society of which he is a member.