

FOUR WAYS OF TREATING THE WORLD

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Buddhism upholds the concept of sanctity of all life. It teaches that life is dear to each and every sentient being, whether human or animal, big or small, high or low, beautiful or ugly. To each sentient being its life is the most precious thing in the world. It would do everything within its means to repel any danger to its life and make life comfortable and safe. Though some people selfishly argue that all animals are created for the use of human beings, no animal walks into the slaughter house voluntarily, thinking “I am created for man’s consumption, so let me allow this kind butcher to slaughter me so that man will eat my flesh and be happy”. At least some of us have seen the pitiable struggle the animals engage in to escape from the grip of butchers when these animals sense that there is imminent danger to their lives. Buddhism is a humanitarian teaching of the highest order and its social ethic is built up on this fundamental acceptance of the sacredness of all life. A Buddhist is expected to treat self-interest and others’ interest on a par. He should not neglect himself by over engaging in activities that would benefit others alone. On the other hand he is not expected to mind his own business in a way injurious to the interest of others. Criteria of good and bad in Buddhism are also based on this basic regard for all life. An act that is harmful to the doer is regarded as a bad act. An act that is harmful to others is also regarded as a bad act. An act that is harmful to the doer as well as to others too, is a bad act. Further, an act beneficial to the doer but harmful to others is also a bad act. Likewise an act harmful to the doer but beneficial to others is also a bad act. It is only an act that is not only not harmful to the doer and others or both parties but positively beneficial either to the doer, others or both parties that could be regarded as a good act.

A practising Buddhist should thus have respect for all life and should refrain himself first from killing or causing any damage to life directly or indirectly. Having refrained himself from causing any damage to life himself, he should endeavour to refrain others too from causing damage to life and should speak in praise of people who refrain from causing such damage. He should not rest satisfied with this alone. Whenever possible he should himself do things to make life happy safe and comfortable to other beings and give all support and encouragement to those who engage in activities that are beneficial to many others. This is how a practising Buddhist who undertakes to observe the first of the five basic precepts in Buddhism should behave.

Having refrained from killing and causing injury to life, a good Buddhist should refrain from four other things too, to ensure safety and comfort to all. They are: refraining from stealing, refraining from over-indulgence in sensual pleasures, refraining from uttering falsehood and refraining from taking intoxicating food and drink. As in the case of the first precept, a practising Buddhist should not only adhere to the negative aspect of these precepts, but also should interest himself about their positive aspects too. Thus one should not only refrain from stealing, but whenever possible should give to others things that would be of utility to many; should devote part of his time for social service and if possible give advice and guidance to others to rectify themselves. One should also have complete control over one's sense faculties so that one does not become a burden or source of irritation to others. One should not only refrain from falsehood slander harsh speech and frivolous speech, but should also speak the truth alone, be faithful and trustworthy in all activities, speak in a way to unite the disunited and strengthen the bonds of friendship of those already united, should speak kindly to all in a friendly tone in well refined speech, should speak only meaningful things, at the appropriate time. One should also practise mindfulness and be alert and vigilant always, so that one can have proper control over oneself. Buddhism enjoins its adherents to avoid all intoxicating food and drink because such things tend to make people forgetful and unmindful of what they do and say in addition to making people sick and feeble. For the welfare, peace and happiness of all in society, these five basic precepts have to be vigilantly observed by all.

A man who observes the above precepts mindfully is supposed to treat the world in a four-fold way (**catu-sangaha-vatthu**). He treats the world by being generous, munificent and liberal (**dana**); by kindly speech (**peyyavacca**), by beneficent activities (**atthacariya**) and impartiality (**samanattata**). These are the most sublime ways in which one could serve one's fellowmen. All the activities of a good Buddhist could be included in the four above mentioned categories, and behaving in this manner one is considered as treating the world at large in a very big way.

When people behave in a beneficent way thus, they develop in them four sublime attitudes. They develop in them loving kindness or friendship (**metta**), i.e. they become trained to treat all in a kind and friendly manner. When they are thus well disposed to all they become sympathetic towards those who are less fortunate, thus inspiring them to work hard selflessly to help the suffering people overcome their difficulties and improve their lot (**karuna**). When such magnanimous people see others happy and content and when they see others successful they derive a sense of altruistic joy, a happiness born at the sight of others' good fortune (**mudita**) and lastly they are in a position to hold complete balance of mind – equanimity – in all situations in life.

Such mental diseases as anger, hatred, ill-will, jealousy that debase man and make a brute of him will find no place in a person who has developed these sublime attitudes. The more we find such noble people in a society the better it is for all who live there. Thus it should now be clear that to ensure harmonious functioning of all activities in a society, to ensure progress and happiness, to ensure peace and well-being we have to respect each other's life and refrain from all activities – individual as well as group – that would in any way harm another and on the contrary we have to do everything that will in some way help others to improve their lot.

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