

# SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FIVE PRECEPTS PANCA SEELA OF THE BUDDHISTS IN THE MODERN WORLD

By Ven Maramba Ratanasara Thera

In the countries where Theravada Buddhism is prevalent, the Buddhist laity take the vow of the Five Precepts - Panca Seela - as their chief ethical code. In this so called Modern World where rapid changes with regard to the modes of behaviour, customs and manners take place, we have to consider whether these traditional ethical principles are still fit for our society or not and whether they have to be cast away or to be recast.

Those five Precepts are :-

1. abstinence from killing
2. abstinence from stealing
3. abstinence from wrongful indulgence in sensual pleasures
4. abstinence from falsehood
5. abstinence from intoxicating drinks

By the first of these Precepts, Buddha recognises the right of every being to live. Buddha advises us to live and let others live peacefully, harmoniously and without fear. In this world overwhelmed with greed and hatred one is ready to kill or hurt the other. So Lord Buddha says :

*Sabbe tasanti dandassa sabbe bhayanti maccuno  
Attanam upamam Katva na haneyya na ghataye.*

"All fear of torture; all fear of death. Therefore, one should compare the other with oneself and one should neither kill living beings, nor make others kill."  
Dhammapada X. I.

This contains the Buddha's well known message of non-violence-ahimsa. Of course, Buddha recognised the superiority of man over animals in the case of one of the four major Vinaya rules meant for the Bhikkhu-order, a rule according to which a Bhikkhu who kills a human being is considered to have lost his Bhikkhuhood. But this precept in Panca Seela does not intend any discrimination as to whether the victim is man or animal. As Buddha's compassion is universal and has no spacio-temporal bounds, Buddha does not make any distinction with regard to one's right to living.

The vow of non-injury has its positive aspects in metta-universal friendship. Out of the Buddha's doctrine, this concept of the universal friendship is of the greatest practical significance. To the world, split into power blocks armed with hydrogen bombs that have power to destroy the whole world in the twinkling of a moment, Buddha's doctrine of non-violence is the only hope for its existence.

*na hi verena verani  
sammantidha kudacanam  
averena ca sammanti  
esa dhammo sanantano*

"Hatred will not be pacified by hatred. It will be pacified only by universal friendship. This is an eternal law." (Dhammapada 1.5). If we do not develop the idea of non-violence leading to universal friendship, the advancement of material sciences causing deadly weapons, will lead the whole mankind to ruin.

By the second precept Buddha recognizes the right of every individual to have its own possessions without being dispossessed by the others. Violation of this precept by whatever means either by theft, plundering, deception or negligence of duty, leads the society to discord. This is true now and forever, anywhere and everywhere.

By the third precept Buddha expects the laity to observe self-restraint. Buddha's intention is not to deny to the laity sensual pleasures, but to make them observe the limitations set on such enjoyment by the society itself. For that one needs the control of the senses. It is further explained as not indulging in others wives. The transgression of this precept leads to discord in families. With the family as a unit this fact can be applied to the whole society.

The fourth precept makes us take a vow of truthfulness. Falsehood has links with various other sins such as killing, stealing or adultery. That is why Lord Buddha said: "There is no sin that cannot be done by a person who utters falsehood." - Dhammapada. XIII. 10. So, uttering falsehood is condemned by every civilized being.

Buddha knows the practical problems arising out of telling the truth at all times. Therefore, he sets limitation to that. "One should speak at suitable time; it must be true, pleasant, leading to some good purpose and one should speak out of metta — friendship" (Anguttara Nikaya, 5.20.8.).

The fifth precept is also of great significance. Here the Buddha points out the danger of taking to intoxicating drinks by the word **pamadatthana** which means, "that causes unmindfulness. An intoxicating drink makes ones nervous

system weak. Just as an artificially manured plant loses its capacity to produce fruits normally and needs manuring again and again; so the man addicted to intoxicating drinks also loses his capacity to stand on his own but needs drinks again and again. This weakness produced in the nervous system brings unmindfulness of everything else and around him. It is as a result of this that many a crime in our countries is committed.

One may argue that it is no sin to take intoxicating drinks, as it brings harm neither to oneself nor to another; but then it paves the way to committing sin. One would say that is not avoidable in the cold countries as it is essential in order to bring warmth to the body. But we find many men in the cold countries are teetotallers. The examples of Gandhi and Bernard Shaw stand out prominently in history.

Thus we find that the five precepts are necessary for the guidance of any society in any age of civilization. These precepts may be found elsewhere too. But the characteristic feature of them in Buddhism is that they do not have any exception. Seela (moral virtue) in Buddhism is called Apariyanta - which has no limitations. Either due to caste or creed or any other factor, those precepts or vows cannot be transgressed.

If mankind were to continue to live happily, creating landmarks in civilization some ethical conduct to guide it is very essential. That need is served fully by the observance of these five precepts. They have universal character and as such they suit every society and at all times. So no question of casting them away or recasting will arise.

---

Extract from "Sri Lankaramaya Vesak Annual 1970" Published by Singapore Sinhala Buddhist Association, St. Michael's Road, Singapore.