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Ethics: the second Paramita

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In Buddhism there are many aspects to ethics, but the most basic are the five precepts, which are observed by everybody, both lay and monastic. These are the precepts not to take life, not to speak untruth, not to take that which is not given, not to engage in sexual misconduct, and not to indulge in intoxicants.

The first precept is the fundamental precept for cultivating non-violence. The precepts are simply guidelines for how to live in this world harmlessly. These precepts are not commandments issued from on high, they are basic principles for living in this world with sanity. An enlightened being such as an Arhat, would naturally observe all these precepts since they are the natural expression of a liberated mind. By observing these precepts, we are trying to bring our lives into conformity with that of an enlightened being.

These precepts are like the ground map to enable us to understand how to live in a way that causes no harm for ourselves or for other beings. This means not only human beings but animals, insects, fish. All beings would know that in our presence they have nothing to fear from us because we're not going to kill them, we're not going to take their property, we are not going to cheat or lie to them nor sexually abuse them. Since we are not intoxicated we can act with control and so they are safe with us. This is a very important matter. Imagine if everyone just observed these five precepts, it would be a completely different world. Actually, if all Buddhists just kept these five precepts, it would be a different world. These basic precepts are a support for the Dharma life, so that, when we sit in meditation, our minds are not distracted by regret for things we have said or the way we have acted.

The first precept of not taking life or killing is fundamental since to every being its own life is most dear. Just as we would not want anyone to hurt us or take our life, likewise all beings feel the same way about themselves, even small insects. If something threatens us, we feel fear and we try to escape from that danger. Therefore this first precept is saying to all creatures: "Don't worry, I'm not going to hurt you." This precept is based on a sense of empathy with all life. This is the basis for our wishing not to harm.

In the Mahayana tradition, there is a practice of exchanging ourselves with others, putting ourselves in someone else's shoes. If one does that, even for a short time, it's very easy to understand the appropriate behaviour towards others because nobody wants to be hurt.

The second precept is against taking what is not given which means stealing. Again this is based on the fact that we do not like it when others take things from us and likewise others don't like if we take things from them. Again people can feel safe that their property will not be taken by us, that we are trustworthy. This might seem like an easy precept since none of us are likely to be thieves. But it also extends to borrowing.

How many people borrow other people's books, DVDs, CDs, and they are not returned! If we borrow a book for example, we should take care of it, even more than if it were our own book, and definitely return it in good condition. That is our responsibility, otherwise it's stealing. In our nunnery we had a sort of open library: people could come and borrow books and DVDs – we have a lot of Dharma DVDs – all marked Please Return to DGL Nunnery! But how many of these items just walked away! It's a difficult situation even though the borrowers are serious Dharma students.

Before I became a nun I used to work in a library in London and there you saw the way people treated books, which were public books and not their own property. Many people would underline and otherwise mark the books. I remember that one book came back with a rasher of bacon used as a bookmark! We should be much more respectful of other's people property and treat it as we would want other people to treat our property.

The third precept is that of abstaining from sexual misconduct. Again, this means treating our sexuality in a way which could bring no harm to ourselves or to others. In other words, it means taking responsibility for our sexual conduct. In old traditional texts, there's a long list of the kind of women that are not allowable and so forth, like your daughters, your mother, and it's always from the point of view of men, of course, since they wrote the books!

But really, the point is: Could this action create any trouble for anybody? Not just the two people involved but anyone else, now or in the future. We have to be genuinely adult about our sexual relationships and not use sex as a way of exploiting others.

We have to understand what “adult” means. Nowadays there are these places called “adult sex shops”. But these so-called adult shops are really for the childish. The kind of sex that they are exploiting is something that adolescents might think exciting. There’s nothing adult about them at all. To be genuinely adult is to be mature and responsible for your actions, which would not cause any trouble to anybody. Since the sexual urge is a very strong power, *we should be in control instead of controlled by it*. Obviously actions like adultery, rape and sex with minors and so forth is not allowable. But any kind of sex which in any way exploits another being, is breaking this precept.

The fourth precept is a very important one dealing with speech, since we are very affected by what people say and how they say it. The precept is worded as not telling untruths or lying, but it also includes our abusive and divisive speech and idle gossip. Divisive speech means saying things that get people fighting with each other; instead of bringing harmony.

First of all our speech should be truthful. People should trust that what we are saying is an accurate account as far as we know or remember. We should be honest and we should not try to cheat anybody. This is part of our integrity that we can be trusted. However it’s not enough that we should merely speak the truth. Some people pride themselves on speaking honestly. But their truth is usually unpleasant, negative truth because it is just a conduit for their own inner anger and negative emotions.

Therefore speech should not just be truthful, it should also be kind. If people say something harsh, then we remember that forever. We forget all the kind words they have said, but those harsh words are like a knife in our heart. We should be very careful with our speech that we make people feel better. Even if they’re doing something wrong, how to tell them in a way, which will make them improve but feel better at the same time.

It is worth remembering how vulnerable and fragile so many people are inside themselves. They look outwardly to be very strong. Inside they are like very tender baby chickens. Men or women it is all the same. People put on an outer façade, but inside they are often very sensitive and we should appreciate that and not do or say anything that can hurt them. Therefore we should be responsible for our speech.

For example sometimes a couple can be locked in this way of relating to each other, each one putting the other one down. They often don’t even realise it any more because they’ve just got into this habit of negative exchange. Often the actual words seem harmless but the tone is negative. It’s a very good practice for us to stand back, as it were, and just listen to ourselves speaking. Listen to our words; listen to the tone of our voice. This is a good exercise in being mindful, being present and listening without judgement.

The third aspect of this precept is speech which divides people. Our conversation should bring people together and create harmony. It would be very useful for us to make the commitment to only speak well of others. We should not say anything about anybody that we would not want them to hear. Especially with people who are friends or are part of our sangha, group or community, we should be very careful to spread harmony and not disharmony.

The Buddha spoke again and again about the importance of a harmony within the sangha and the importance of having good friends. One time Ananda, the Buddha’s attendant, said to the Buddha: “You know, I think that good companionship is half of the spiritual life.” And the Buddha said: “No, Ananda, good companionship is the whole of the spiritual life.” We should take this very seriously: how to live in harmony with our community and with our families and with our work colleagues and with the world.

The point with all these precepts is that we endlessly break them, but we try again. It’s not that the Buddha’s up there in the sky with a lightning rod, like Zeus, about to strike us down if we break one of our precepts, although there is the karmic repercussions. But as we break our precepts, we recognise what we have done, we

feel remorse for that and we arouse the determination to do better next time.

It is like small children, toddlers, when they're first starting to walk, their legs are very weak, they pull themselves up and take one or two steps, then they fall down. They try again, they get up, they walk a little bit, and then they fall back down. Again and again and every time, they just add a little bit more. Now if the child thought to itself: "This is too difficult! Clearly my legs are too weak, no use even trying. Every time I stand, I fall down. Those grown-ups, they've got big strong legs, they can walk. But me, I'll never manage it." They just sit there not moving. But of course children are not so stupid. Children know that if others can do it, so can they. Gradually their legs get stronger, they are able to keep standing and they learn how to walk and soon they end up running everywhere.

It is the same principle with our keeping precepts. We try, we wobble and we fall down. Then we stand up again and we keep going until finally we can walk without effort. It is a good idea also to take the precepts formally as a way to remind ourselves.

Now, the fourth aspect of these speech precepts is the one against idle gossip. This means endlessly talking, chattering about politics, sport, family, neighbours and the government. Mostly people just talk for the sake of talking. They don't really have anything of any importance to say. They're afraid of silence.

Often we go into people's homes and they have the television on even though there's nobody watching. They feel the need to have noise of voices in the background. Even in India you go to a beautiful quiet

place and then somebody is there with the radio playing as loud as possible. In fact nowadays in India, all the temples have loud speakers and they blare out at top volume all day and night.

It is also helpful not to keep talking to ourselves so much in the mind either, but to try to maintain a calm awareness that allows the internal chatter to stop. Gossip doesn't mean only what we are saying but also what we listen to. I don't know if that completely turns off your television! Sorry! We should limit what rubbish we allow into our minds and also what nonsense we allow to come out of our minds through our mouths. We should at least limit if we cannot stop.

The fifth precept is about alcohol. Basically this means not imbibing alcohol or any other kind of drug, which interferes with the control of our mind. Probably again a glass of wine with meals is fine, but if one glass ends up as three more glasses, then we're in trouble. We should remember that we cannot drink more if we never started with one. Usually when people get drunk, that opens the doors for all the negative behaviours to come up. We lose control. Buddhism is about becoming the masters of our minds instead of the slaves. To become intoxicated is counterproductive and so often leads us in the opposite direction to where we are trying to go.

The problem is that drinking alcohol sometimes looks quite innocent, but it can lead to other things such as drunken driving or abusive behaviour. As we know, nowadays much of the crime is committed under the influence of drugs and alcohol. The reason that intoxicants are to be avoided is that they not only poison our minds but likewise our speech and actions also.