

# The Five Precepts Are Universal

by Piya Tan

Whether we recite the Five Precepts or not, whether we are Buddhist or not, whether we believe or not, their karmic effects still work on us. This is because the Five Precepts are based on “natural morality.” Natural morality refers to the way of things we see in the universe.

The first precept is against killing, that is, the respect for life. All living beings value life. We don’t even need religion to tell us this. No one invented this truth; it is always there. It is a natural truth.

The second precept is against stealing, that is, not taking what is not given. We all have to work for a living, or we are supported by others who work for a living. Through industry and honesty, we earn our supports for life. If someone were to take this away, it would bring us suffering. When we steal from someone, we are effectively and wrongfully taking away his happiness. This applies to all human beings. It is a natural truth.

The third precept is against sexual misconduct, that is, we should not disrespect the body. We do not like others to do what they like with our body. This is also true of everyone else. In other words, we naturally want others to respect us when we say “No.” This is our natural freedom. When we rape, abuse or kidnap someone (for example), we are taking away that person’s freedom. That person suffers pain.

The fourth precept is against falsehood, against communicating what is untrue, harsh, disharmonious and useless. This is again something natural: if there is no truth, then it is no use of my writing about all this. You would have wasted your time reading this! Truth is the very basis of wholesome human communication.

The fifth precept is against taking anything intoxicative or addictive, such as drinks. The aim here is not to cloud our minds or lose self-control, which will then make it easier for us to break any or all of the previous four precepts. For we have difficulty keeping this precept, we must know how to stop before we get drunk. This fifth precept is like a door leading to mental cultivation or meditation. If our mind is clear, then it is easier to cultivate it.

Reciting the precepts is a good way of reminding ourselves to have greater resolve to keep them. However, when we break any precept, we should not feel guilty, as this is not a commandment, but they are more like the rules of a game. If we break the rules of football, for example, then it is no more fun to play the game.

If we have broken a precept, then we should examine the conditions that caused us to do so. We should work at reducing or removing those conditions. This is what the precepts are about: removing the negative conditions, and becoming happier people.

The Five Precepts are the minimum standards of being human. They are the quality control for our human life. When we keep our precepts well, we will never be reborn in subhuman states (as an animal, a ghost, an asura, or hell-being).

Through keeping the precepts, our good works become truly effective. We are not merely *showing* that we are good: we *are* really good. Through our moral virtue, we will see heaven here and now, and it is easier to become a streamwinner.