

1.2.2

The First Precept: Expressing Interconnectedness



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Positive form: *With deeds of loving kindness I purify my body.*

Negative form: *I undertake the training principle of not harming living beings.*

Pāli: *Pāṇātipātā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.*

Introduction

In this text Sangharakshita looks at the First Precept – the ethical guideline that in a sense underlies all the others. The text we are using is condensed from a book on the ten precepts taken on by members of the Triratna Buddhist Order, so Sangharakshita does not pull his punches – he presents the precept as a challenging practice, which at the highest level expresses our solidarity and interconnectedness with other beings. In the process he introduces the idea of the love mode and power mode – terms which have entered the vocabulary of Triratna – and makes some practical suggestions that may be controversial for some people.

One point that is worth noting is that here Sangharakshita talks about the precept in its negative form as not killing other beings, whereas it is perhaps more normal to talk in terms of not harming. The principle is the same – killing is the most extreme form of harming, but whenever we do either we give priority to our own egocentric desires over our solidarity with other beings.

The Principle of Abstaining from Killing Living Beings; or Love

Text condensed from The Ten Pillars of Buddhism, Sangharakshita, Part 2, Chapter 1.

The more important an ethical principle is, the more likely it is to be overlooked. Even Buddhists tend to think that they are observing the First Precept anyway, so there is no need for them to think about it. After all, there are much more interesting and important aspects of the Dharma, and simple and obvious things like the First Precept can safely be left to the dull and unintelligent while one explores the secrets of Tantra or the mysteries of Zen.

But the truth is the First Precept is not to be disposed of in this way. The principle of abstention from killing living beings, or Love, in fact runs very deep in life, both social and spiritual, and its ramifications are not only very extensive but enormously significant. It is the most direct and important manifestation of the act of Going for Refuge. Moreover it is a principle that finds expression in all the other precepts.

Why is killing unskillful?

Firstly, why should killing be wrong? One explanation, of course is that as the expression of a mental state rooted in greed, hatred and delusion (or at least two of these), killing is an unskillful act in that it brings suffering to the doer and prevents him from attaining

Enlightenment. But we can go deeper than that. Killing is the absolute negation of the solidarity of one living being with another. It represents the most extreme form that the negation of one ego by another, or the assertion of one ego at the expense of the other, can possibly take.

The principle of love

Killing is tantamount to the rejection of the most basic principle of ethics, just as the cultivation of love represents this principle in its positive form. As Shelley so finely says:

The great secret of morals is love, or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his own species must become his own.

In the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, or 'Entry into the Way of Enlightenment', Śāntideva gives this principle what is probably its highest expression in Buddhist literature. In his chapter on 'Meditation', after describing how a man stills vain imaginings and strengthens his 'Will to Enlightenment' (*Bodhicitta*), he proceeds:

First he will diligently foster the thought that his fellow creatures are the same as himself. "All have the same sorrows, the same joys as myself, and I must guard them like myself. The body, manifold of parts in its division of members, must be preserved as a whole; and so likewise this manifold universe has its sorrow and its joy in common...I must destroy the pain of another as though it were my own...I must show kindness to others, for they are creatures as I am myself...Then, as I would guard myself from evil repute, so I will frame a spirit of helpfulness and tenderness towards others."

...I will cease to live as self, and will take as myself my fellow creatures. We love our hands and other limbs, as members of the body; then why not love other living beings, as members of the universe?...Thus in doing service to others pride, admiration and desire for reward find no place, for thereby we satisfy the wants of our own self. Then, as thou wouldst guard thyself against suffering and sorrow, so exercise the spirit of helpfulness and tenderness towards the world.

This is what is known as the practice of equality of self and other, and the substitution of self and others. Blake gives succinct expression to the same principle when he declares "To put another before you is the most sublime act."

The Love which is the positive expression of the First Precept is no mere flabby sentiment, but the vigorous expression of an imaginative identification with other living beings. 'Love' is in fact far too weak a word for the positive counterpart of non-killing or non-violence, and even *maitrī*, (*Pāli mettā*) is not altogether satisfactory. Just as killing represents the absolute negation of another's being, 'Love' in this sense represents its absolute affirmation. As such it is not erotic love, or parental love, or even friendly love. It is a cherishing, protecting, maturing love which has the same kind of effect on the spiritual being of others as the light and heat of the sun have on their physical being.

The love mode and the power mode

To operate according to the power mode means to relate to other living beings in such a way as to negate rather than affirm their being. To operate in accordance with the love mode is the opposite of this. Observance of the First Precept means that, as a result of our imaginative identification with others, we not only abstain from actually killing living beings, but operate more and more in accordance with the love mode and less and less in accordance with the power mode. In this way there takes place within us a change so great as to amount to a change in our centre of gravity.

It will not, of course, be possible for even the most faithful observer of the First Precept to operate totally in terms of the love mode, eschewing the power mode completely. We live in a world dominated by the power mode. In this connection two principles may be laid down:

- a. Whenever one has to operate in the power mode, the power mode must always be subordinated to the love mode. A simple everyday example of this is when the parent, out of love for the child, forcibly restrains him from doing something that will harm him.
- b. Within the spiritual community it is impossible to act according to the power mode, for by its very nature it is based on the love mode. Should an Order member so far forget himself as to relate to another Order member in terms of force he places himself outside the Spiritual Community and ceases, in fact, to be an Order member.

Practical implications

Buddhists should do their best to switch from the power mode to the love mode in as many different ways as possible, and to extend the principle of Love into as many different areas of life as possible. Observance of the First Precept will naturally result in one's being a vegetarian¹; in one's refusing to have oneself, or to assist or encourage others in having, an abortion²; in one's feeling concern for the environment; and in one's being opposed to the manufacture of all armaments whatsoever – as well as many other things.

Not that the observance of the First Precept consists simply in doing or not doing a certain stated number of things of this sort. Non-violence, or Love, is a principle, and being a principle there is no limit to the number of ways in which it can be applied. No one is so skilful in his conduct that his practice of this principle could not be better. As the most direct manifestation of one's Going for Refuge, the potentialities of Non-Violence, or Love are infinite.



Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Think of some everyday examples of “one ego asserting itself at the expense of another”, or “negating rather than affirming their being” – in other words, of people operating in the power mode.
2. Think of some examples you have observed recently of people acting from an “imaginative identification with others” – in other words, operating in the love mode.

1 See Appendix 1 below for a fuller discussion of the ethics of vegetarianism.

2 See Appendix 2 below for a discussion of this potentially emotive issue.

3. Think of some situations where it would be impossible or undesirable to act in the love mode.
4. Do you agree that following the First Precept is “the most direct and important manifestation of the act of Going for Refuge?” Why, or why not?
5. How could you extend the love mode into more areas of your life? What specific changes could you make?
6. What is the connection between the first precept and insight or wisdom?



Appendix 1: Vegetarianism and Buddhist ethics

Edited extract from: Vegetarianism (3rd edition), Bodhipaksa, Windhorse Publications,

Non-harm

The Buddha often taught compassion in a very straightforward, direct way. In the Dhammapada, for example, we read:

All (living beings) are terrified of punishment; all fear death. Making comparison (of others) with oneself, one should neither kill nor cause to kill.

All (living beings) are terrified of punishment; to all, life is dear. Making comparison (of others) with oneself, one should neither kill nor cause to kill.

These words are easy to understand. But behind their simplicity lies a deep, radically transforming, and challenging vision of a life lived with compassion, empathy, and respect for the welfare of all sentient beings.

Killing is the absolute assertion of ego, and of indifference to the well-being of others. It involves taking a stance that could be summed up as ‘My desires are more important than your well-being or continued existence.’

We often wish to ignore the inescapable fact that meat-eating requires killing to take place but, in order for meat to appear on a plate, an animal must die. Our appetites drive a chain of events resulting in suffering and death, and meat-eating inevitably entails the violence of the slaughterhouse and farm.

Maybe eating meat is a source of pleasure, and changing our diet seems like a sacrifice we are reluctant to make. However, once we are truly aware of the consequences of our actions, we are in a dilemma. Our deeper, more ethical response is one of compassion for the animals that are harmed in order for us to have meat. This sense of compassion is in conflict with our habits and our desire to keep on doing what seems pleasurable.

In dilemmas of this sort the only effective remedy is to go to the root of the problem and sort out on an ethical level the conflict that exists between our actions and our conscience. We need to remove the source of ethical discomfort by deciding to give up actions that cause harm and by following through that resolution as best we can. Once we have decided to align ourselves with what is best within us and act in accord with it, we’ll find our lives changing for the better.

When, after my visit to an abattoir, I decided to become a vegetarian, my remaining attachment to eating meat withered away very quickly. Many other people have had the same experience. We find that our tastes change. Meat stops looking attractive and starts to look distasteful. We'll find that our friends begin to respect us for having taken an ethical stance – although some may be unsure at first. We may even find that we become more confident having taken a decision that is courageous, going as it does against the norms of our culture. And we may feel a positive pleasure as we eat; knowing that what we're eating did not require an animal to be slaughtered. Giving up meat can prove to be a positive relief.

Interconnectedness and metta

Underlying the Dhammapada verses above is a phenomenon that the Buddha called *anukampa*. A very literal translation would be 'vibrating together', but the closest term in English is 'empathy'.

When we have empathy we're emotionally receptive to others. We are affected by their joys and sorrows – stirred by them, moved by them, touched by them. We are able to put ourselves in their skin and to walk a mile in their shoes or, in this case, hoofs.

Once we see that another being's happiness and suffering are as real to them as our own are to us, there is a part of us that naturally and spontaneously wants to support their well-being and help them escape suffering. This emotional interconnectedness is intrinsic to the goal of spiritual Awakening to which the Buddha's teaching leads us. It isn't an optional extra.

Denying that others suffer as a consequence of our actions, or deeming those consequences to be unimportant or irrelevant, sets up tensions and conflicts in our own mind. Those tensions and conflicts lead to unhappiness. On some level we always know when we're in the wrong. When we act in a way that harms others, or requires others to be harmed on our behalf, we inevitably find ourselves resorting to evasion and self-justification. Every attempt to justify our own wrongness leads to a painful sense of inauthenticity, conscious or subconscious guilt, and conflict. A lack of empathy for others also leads us to act in ways that are insensitive, causing hurt and resentment. Inevitably this rebounds upon us, bringing painful conflicts into our lives.

We exist only in relation to the world, as part of a web of interconnectedness, and there is no part of us that does not exist in a state of relatedness. Our happiness, in fact, depends on the quality of that relatedness. It's impossible for us to be truly happy without recognizing the fact of our interconnectedness and, just as importantly, without changing the way we relate to the world. We can either align ourselves with others' desire for well-being or choose to be in conflict with that desire. The only way in which we can live at a deeper level of happiness and fulfilment is to bring our relationship with the world into harmony, so that we experience the peace that comes from living with mindfulness and compassion, rather than the disharmony that comes from denial and conflictedness.

Although we can't ask them, it's clear that animals don't want to be mistreated, killed, and eaten – any more than we would if we were in their situation. They run away from danger, fight if cornered, and try to escape pain. Once we are empathetically aware that animals desire life and freedom from suffering (and maybe contentment, if not happiness), then the most creative way to remove conflict from our lives is to stop causing harm and to encourage the development of empathic feeling.

To have empathy requires that we understand that another being's suffering is as real as ours. Seeing in this way can be a revelation or a shock, since one of our most persistent and deep-rooted delusions is that there is something uniquely special about our feelings and our suffering. The attitude that can be expressed as 'your suffering is unimportant when compared to my desires' is symptomatic of this delusion. When we approach life empathetically, something begins to shift in our feelings and actions. With the arising of empathy we become more ethical in our actions. Without empathy, true ethics are not possible.

It's easier for us to empathize with humans than with animals. We may have to make a bit more effort to relate to animals in the way I'm suggesting, especially since we've been trained to suppress our empathy for them. But we do, as I've said, have much more in common with animals than not. In evolutionary terms we are animals ourselves, and fundamentally we share most of the drives, instincts, and emotions of other higher mammals. Empathy is itself one of the instincts that we've inherited, and that we share with all mammals. Empathy has been observed not only in more complex creatures such as apes and monkeys, but also in animals as simple as rats and mice. Unlike those creatures, however, we can consciously train ourselves to become more compassionate.

According to Buddhist teachings, we can learn to empathize to such an extent that we no longer see the world in terms of 'self' and 'other'. In this full realization of our interconnectedness we don't act to relieve other beings' suffering in order to make ourselves feel better, but simply because suffering exists, and because those beings desire to be free from it. When we start practising ethics, our approach is bound to be somewhat self-referential, but supported by meditation and deep reflection on the nature of reality we can learn to be more truly selfless. Giving up meat and fish – knowing that it will relieve the suffering of living beings – is a simple and practical step that we can all take to help us move towards that ideal.



Appendix 2: Abortion and Buddhist Ethics

Edited article from: The Ethics of Abortion and the Buddhist Perspective, Vishvapani.³

In recent years, abortion has been debated in western countries with perhaps more passion than any other ethical issue. On one side the feminist lobby argues that a foetus is part of a woman's body and she should have the right to choose what happens to it. On the other side anti-abortionist in the US have even killed doctors who perform abortions, while abortion is against the law in Ireland unless the pregnancy endangers the life of the woman.

While many political debates are abstract and can seem remote from ordinary experience, abortion concerns the mysterious stirrings of life in the deep intimacy of the womb. It involves flesh, blood and tissue. It touches strong feelings, and choices made around it alter the course of lives. Readers of this article may have had an abortion, or considered having one, or have been closely involved with a friend or partner who faced the issue. It is perhaps the most acute ethical problem that many of us are likely to confront in our personal lives. I also think men can and should engage with the abortion issue. It affects men, too, and while the choice will be a woman's, the issues it raises are human, not just personal and subjective.

³ Complete article at: <http://vishvapaniswriting.blogspot.co.uk/2007/02/ethics-of-abortion-and-buddhist.html>

Disagreements about the ethics of abortion point up deeper uncertainties in post-Christian societies. When is the start of life that we can recognise as human? What is life anyway? How do we balance 'the woman's right to choose' against 'the child's right to life'? And in the absence of consensus on these questions, who decides? Political debate about abortion has tended to polarise, but between the opposing stances stand ordinary people, including Buddhists, trying to act ethically, wanting lives that are free and fulfilling, yet do not cause suffering.

Sometimes reasons for having an abortion are intensified by issues of rape, sexual abuse or severe disability. But in the space of this article I want to focus on basic ethical principles. These, however, are not rules, and must be applied in individual circumstances with compassion and imagination. For those who look to Buddhism as a source of wisdom, can the Buddhist approach to ethics point out a path through the maze?

I want to know what these teachings have to say to a woman experiencing the pain of an unwanted pregnancy and contemplating the hardship and thwarted hopes an unwanted child would bring. What can they say to the guilt and confusion of many who have had abortions? Do these teachings simply compound that guilt with yet more religious disapproval? And do they imply that abortion should be made illegal, when doing so pushes it into an unregulated, inequitable back-street economy?

The key question in the abortion debate is, when is the start of life that we can recognise as human? Since Christian morality ceased to define a consensus, western societies have looked to science for guidance and to the law for judgement. The challenge for the law is to define a point at which a foetus should be under its protection. Before this a foetus is considered part of a woman's body, and abortion is equivalent to surgery. After it, the foetus is considered an independent identity and it may not be aborted.

But when should that point be? Virabhadra, a member of the Triratna Buddhist Order and a consultant gynaecologist, is aware of current scientific understanding such as when the brain can support a consciousness that can feel pain, and when a foetus is capable of surviving outside the womb. However, he emphasised that science cannot decide when a foetus is a being in its own right. For example, he said, 'an embryo can't survive without the mother until quite late in the pregnancy, but the point at which a foetus can survive independently has come down as technology has advanced.'

Whatever point one chooses in the embryo's development as constituting life seems arbitrary and artificial. It is one thing to describe changes, another to evaluate their significance, and yet another to decide how one should act upon them. As Virabhadra said, 'Science cannot tell us what life is, nor whether it should be taken.'

The traditional Buddhist answer is more clear-cut. Mainstream Buddhist tradition teaches that life starts with the conjunction of sperm, egg and the gandhabba (consciousness that is reborn). For most Buddhist commentators and for some western Buddhists, that decides the issue. But I wonder if this is adequate. If the Buddhist position on abortion depends on belief in rebirth, it will have nothing to say to those who do not share a conviction that rebirth occurs. This includes western society at large and western Buddhists who are uncertain, agnostic or sceptical about rebirth.

The more one studies what Buddhist traditions have said about rebirth the more mysterious it seems. How can a very simple organism, such as a recently fertilised egg, be conscious in any recognisable sense of the term? And is it meaningful to speak of a consciousness that is seeking to express itself through such an organism? An embryo is a potential human being, but this is different from saying that something has been reborn. So Buddhists use metaphors that combine ideas of presence and potentiality, such as saying there 'is' a 'seed' of consciousness. However an alternative Buddhist tradition (described in the Theravadin *Katthavattu*) argues that rebirth is a progressive process lasting eleven weeks, that occurs as the foetus develops. So what implications might this have for abortion during this time?

It seems best to say that consciousness and human life are mysteries, and one looks in vain to Buddhism for explanations that clarify them. Both Buddhism and science assert that the life of a human is a process that starts with conception. But to draw ethical conclusions one must consider the significance of the stages in that process. A plant is a form of life, and one's finger is 'alive'. But it isn't unethical to dig up a potato, nor to cut one's finger. The issue is not so much whether it is life but whether it is something we call 'human'. The ethical question turns on when this 'life' becomes an 'individual' that will be affected by our actions.

Reflection on Buddhist teachings may suggest why the topic is elusive. If there is no soul or permanent, abiding self, and consciousness is a flux, then how can one speak of what it is to be alive and conscious? One can formulate cogent doctrinal descriptions, but there is something irreducible in the experience of being an individual separate from others, yet connected with them. What is it to think, to experience, to live? How, then, can one say what is reborn? When I reflect on the process of conception, gestation and birth, I feel amazement and – to be honest – fear at nature's mysterious power.

From this perspective one plainly cannot pin down questions of selfhood and identity. Similarly the question of when one should start to treat the foetus as human depends on conscience or moral sensibility.

I have asked many Buddhists from various traditions about their views on abortion and, while the overwhelming majority felt abortion was an ethical breach, their reasoning turned on a gut-felt, intuitive response to the question of when life starts. Within *Triratna*, *mitras* undertake to follow the five Buddhist precepts, including the precept of not taking life, with its implications for abortion. At the London Buddhist Centre *Vimalachitta* [women's *mitra* convenor at the time of this article] reported that in her many conversations on abortion, rebirth rarely figures. She told me, however, that because of intuitive factors the issue is rarely a problem.

'When people start meditating they almost always come to feel that an abortion would be taking life. There are concerns about what would happen in an extreme case (such as pregnancy resulting from rape), but that is understandable. It helps when I explain that this is not a political statement and when I say it doesn't mean you're condemning people who do choose to have abortions.'

This intuitive ethical response seems to me to point to a dimension that has been missing from the debate in the West. Buddhism can learn from the western tradition of ethical reasoning. Learning to think about ethical issues seems to be an important aspect of preparing ourselves to meet them: a crisis such as an unwanted pregnancy is probably the worst time to try to think clearly about right and wrong. But ethics usually concerns human relationships, and

understanding these require intuition, sensitivity and an emotionally integrated awareness of others. Then we need clarity and courage to draw conclusions and stick by them.

While researching this article I spoke to women who have had abortions, and I think their testimonies are important. I have space just for one case study. One dharmacharini had an abortion aged 28, before she became a Buddhist. 'I was a student and a committed feminist trying to understand what it meant to be a woman at that time, the 1970s. I had no desire for kids, and 'the woman's right to choose' was an article of faith for me; and for medical reasons there was also a chance that I would have a spontaneous abortion. So I immediately decided to have one. Moral considerations did not enter at all.'

However, the abortion affected her in unexpected ways. 'I really underestimated the emotional impact. After the operation my response was, "Oh no, how dreadful." The emotional distress I felt stayed with me a long time. I had made my decision intellectually, but in retrospect I think I cut off from my emotional responses. I hadn't anticipated that I would feel grief, and that there had been a death.'

Talking to other women who have had abortions I found frequent echoes of this dharmacharini's experience. They were unprepared for the actual experience of having an abortion, the instinctive sense that the foetus was alive. One person's experience can never represent everyone's, and responses to having an abortion do vary. Some women feel sadness, but not regret. Some say they would do the same thing again, given similar circumstances. Others would not. Intuitions are not arguments, but it seems important to value emotionally-aware responses such as this dharmacharini's and I wonder what happens when political views overlie them.

Ethical decisions involve value judgements, so it is inevitable that subjective factors enter. Scientists' descriptions and legal definitions cannot tell us when humanity starts and the doctrines of Buddhism will persuade us only if we already have faith in them. But perhaps the feeling that abortion is wrong helps us to draw closer to a truth. For Buddhists it is ironic that the law seeks to define identity through separateness. Buddhist ethics are based on the idea that we are not separate, all life is dependent on other life, and for that very reason it is natural to care about each other. Even after a baby is born it could not survive without sustenance and protection of its mother. The language of rights and legal identity in which the abortion debate is framed seems inadequate to the subtle connections between mother and foetus, foetus and baby.

If reality is subtle and changing, then our understanding of it cannot be definitive or absolute; yet it seems wise to err on the side of ensuring that one is not causing harm. I do not know to what extent animals can suffer, but I choose to be vegetarian because I feel that they can, because there is some evidence that they do, and because I know that they might. So while I may not be able to prove that a foetus has consciousness, can experience pain, or should be regarded as a human individual, the fact that this may be the case is a decisive consideration for me.

Western discussions of abortion have been bound up with the legal questions of whether abortion should be permitted. This pulls it into a political arena, which is hardly suited to open-hearted reflection on the nature of life. It also mixes legal and moral issues. We tend to think that if abortion is legal that means it is right, but in fact all it does is merely move moral responsibility from the state to the mother. We speak of an individual's 'right to choose' whether to have an abortion, but we speak too little of what the choice involves.

I like the suggestion of the Buddhist commentator, Robert Thurman, in his book *Inner Revolution*. 'Aware of the serious moral, physical and psychological consequences [of abortion], we should offer every facility and advantage to the woman who chooses to bring her baby to term ... great honour and respect, excellent health care, good adoption programmes ...'. This seems more constructive than the violent protests of American pro-lifers, but I am also aware that the facilities which Robert Thurman advocates are not available to many of those confronted by an unwanted pregnancy.

Abortion presents a challenge to our compassion. This compassion must include the baby and the aborting mother, holding together their conflicting perspectives and their sad collision. So I would add to Thurman's wish-list the kind of sensitive counselling for women considering abortion that helps the decision to be made in an atmosphere free from panic, fear and guilt. The days of 'coffee-break abortions' are long gone, and the decision to have an abortion is rarely taken without strong reasons. I am not arguing for making abortion illegal. The fact that debate has continued unresolved suggests there is genuine room for disagreement.

Buddhism gives us what seem like a clear, simple principle - the ethical precept of not taking life. But as I have explored this issue, spoken to those who have views on it, talked with women who have faced abortions, and considered the traditional teachings, I have understood more fully that the way this principle is implemented is as important as the principle itself. Perhaps the most important thing Buddhism can contribute to this ethical debate is a compassionate and engaged sensibility that seeks to be true to life's difficulty and complexity.