

Analysis of Moral Impact and Practices of the Five Precepts by Cambodian Buddhism

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Abstract

This study delves into the crucial role of moral ethics in fostering worldwide peace and well-being, with a specific emphasis on the five precepts of Buddhist ethics as observed within the Khmer community. Through an exploration of the meaning of morality, the practical application of the five precepts, and the contextual considerations linked to each precept, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the ethical framework within the Khmer society. Additionally, the study seeks to unravel the benefits of upholding the five precepts, as well as the potential repercussions of transgressing them in both the present life and the afterlife. Furthermore, the paper aims to explore the diverse interpretations and understandings of the five precepts prevalent among Khmer Buddhists, providing insights into the multifaceted nature of ethical principles within this community. By shedding light on the significance of moral ethics and the specific focus on the five precepts within the Khmer context, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the moral and ethical landscape within the Khmer Buddhist tradition and its potential implications for promoting peace and happiness on a global scale.

Keywords: *practice, morality, culpability, benefit, the ways of practice, five precepts,*

Introduction

Looking back to ancient India, we can see the five precepts are tied to the five essential abstinences of Brahminic priests. This led to the abrupt creation of a large number of ascetic organizations in the sixth century B.C.E., of which only Jainism and Buddhism have survived to the current day (Kohn, 1994, p. 173). According to the same author “the five precepts strict prohibition of the four cardinal forms of evil conduct: killing, stealing, lying and unchastely, plus one additional rule - against the appropriation of any short in Jainism and intoxicant in Buddhism” (p. 173).

Humans are more comfortable than animals or inferior planets due of moral rebirth. Humans with knowledge may know what is wrong, right, bad, good, rational, and irrational to build virtues like respecting human or animal rights with loving-kindness and compassion. Defilements distract living beings from attention, so they act harshly, which doesn't lead to bliss.

Buddha's five precepts are a code of conduct for achieving happiness and well-being. Abstaining from all evil is one of Buddha's three teachings, and without universal adherence to these five precepts, there can be no lasting peace, prosperity, or harmony. Buddhism is one of the global faiths that promotes peace, happiness, nonviolence, justice, unity, etc. for current and future life, hence the UN recognized Vaisakha Pūja as an international day observed across

the world. Seeing such enormous benefits, Cambodia recognized Buddhism as its national religion in Article 43 of its constitution, and 95% of Cambodians are Buddhists. Human rights legislation requires individuals to safeguard their rights and interests against threats, abuses, disagreements, and instability that can lead to death and rebirth. Buddhist morality is crucial for harmony, wealth, and peace in Cambodia and the globe.

The meaning of Morality

Morality (*viraticetanā*) means abstaining from bad actions, observing and doing wholesome deeds bodily and verbally or abstinence from precepts (*Sikkhāpada*) or discipline regulation (*Vinayapaññatti*) (Nath, 1967). , Additionally, the term ‘Sīla’ in Pāli means ‘Morality’, ‘Virtue’ which is a mode of mind and volition manifested in verbal and physical action. It is the foundation of the whole Buddhist practice, and therewith three kinds of training which make a threefold division of an eightfold path: morality (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*) (Nyanatiloka, 1970, p. 170). Moreover the Path of Purification (*visuddhimagga*) shows :

“What is Virtue? It is the state beginning with volition present in one who abstains from killing living beings, etc., or in one who fulfills the duties. For this is said in the Paṭisambhidā: what is virtue? There are virtues ‘as volition, virtue as consciousness-concomitant, virtues as restraint, virtue as non – transgression” (*Vism* 7)

In *Mangalasutta* , *Arati pāpā* means refrain from evil. This point refers to physically and verbally good actions leading to have blessed. Nyanissara, (2008) argues “it is of the following three kinds of abstinence (*virati*): (i), *Sampatti-virati*, (ii)*Samādāna-virati* and (iii)*Samucheda-virati*” (p.65).The same source explains that *Sampatti-virati* means avoiding undesirable actions when they emerge, taking into account one's education, age, birth, etc. When the time comes, consider your age, education, nationality, family, and relative standing to prevent misconduct. If a pricey iPhone is left on a restaurant table, you may think, "I'm honest, clever, and nice; I shouldn't steal."Even without precepts, you should avoid evil action. Taking precepts to evade immorality is *samādāna-virati*. In Cambodia, observing five precepts, eight precepts, ten precepts, and 227 precepts is *sammādāna virati*. In this example, you decide not to kill creatures because of thinking "I'm a good guy and have precepts. I can't demolish and kill this trash by breaching my precepts". *Samuccheda-virati* implies avoiding unskillful behaviors by removing all defilements. It refers to arahants who have eradicated suffering's defilements.

The five precepts are the perfection of beings to obtain a happy state and nirvana. Morality can reproduce human life better than animals to have an opportunity to fulfill various virtues. According to Buddhism, creatures need morality to abstain from rebirth in a realm of miserable existence. a moral person goes to wherever have been respected, devoted, admired, and honored by human beings and deities so the Path of Purification says:

“It is more perfect far than all
The other perfume is in the world
Because the perfume virtue gives
Is borne unchecked in all directions” (*Vims* 57)

Moreover, the immoral person lives 100 years so his life is useless. It is said by the Buddha

“And If anyone were to live for hundred years, wicked and unconcentrated, living for one day, would be better for him virtuous and meditating” (Dhp110).

In Pāli literature, *Cakkavattirāja* (emperor) observed five precepts with seven jewels. He has loving-kindness and compassion for his people and unites different states to have peace and avoid war. However, the stream-winner (Sotāpannas) has Complete five precepts. In *Uttarakurudipa*, humans have observed *Pañca sīla*, they always take rebirth in happy states.

Nyanissara (2008) claims that “sīla is the foundation of three training rules. Without sīla, we have no samādhi, but we need samādhi, to attain pāññā. Training rules are interrelated and should be practiced by you at the same time” (p. 26). Buddha encourages humans to observe not only five precepts but also eight precepts, ten precepts, etc. as well as to develop concentration meditation and insight meditation. The Cambodian regard dāna as great merit unless they have pure morality. The same author (2008) Concludes “they are very educated people, but they possess no morality, they can be called educated bad hearts. They are people who have very good people, but they possess no morality, they can be called bad hearts”. (pp. 16,18)

The Way of Observing Five Precepts (*nicca sīla*)

Wherever a ceremony relates to the performance and cultivation of the merits for the blessing and happiness of Cambodia, the *nicca sīla* (five precepts observed permanently) or the *pañca sīla* (Five Precepts) is celebrated and guided by the Achārya. Cambodian Buddhists, having taken refuge in triple gem, are named *upāsaka* (layman) and *upāsikā* (laywoman). When taking *nicca sīla* or *pañca sīla* is a technique or way of precept observance from other persons – Bhikkhu (monks) or *Sāmanera* (novices), they should chant brief Dhamma to salute and pay respect to the virtues of the triple gem, and then request the monks or novice to provide *nicca sīla* (uninterrupted observance of virtues) as well as acceptance of three refuges in Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha as follows in Pāli and Khmer translation (Sou & Nath, 2003)

Blemish of immorality and Consequence of morality

A person without five precepts always becomes heedless in different manners such as job, professional, supporting children and wife, cherishing parent, etc. moreover, the unvirtuous persons commit various causes of ruin: addiction to gambling, association with fools, indulgence in woman, and drunkard which have been causes of property destruction and family’s defamation. The persons without moral practice will obtain four evil culpabilities at present time: (i) loss of property, (ii) defamation (3) embarrassment, and coward in meeting (4) distraction and forgetfulness in the death moment (Soeurt, 2002, p. 12).

The consequence of morality consists of (i) producing property by right conduct, (ii) causing renown which is charming, pleasing, and pervasive (iii) Looking brave and powerful in the crowd (iii) having mindfulness, even near death. Candidates seeking government and private sector positions throughout the world are more likely to be virtuous and to have adopted precepts. Before being chosen, candidates are subject to background checks wherein the

institution requests a criminal record, a letter of testimony, and letters of reference from current or former employees. Thus, the institutions will be familiar with the virtues and accomplishments of the chosen applicants. Moral people have the guts to get their hands dirty or stand out in a crowd and express themselves. However, they have been respected and recognized by their superiors, employees, friends, and family. A woman's physical attractiveness, financial stability, family ties, and children are the five powers that will keep a guy or husband from leaving her, according to Theravada belief. Because it reveals and reflects women's conduct and attitude, the fifth morality is superior to the previous four powers and ensures a high social standing for the husband and his family. Drinking alcohol or engaging in adultery are considered signs of low character for women in Cambodia. The five woman's powers are expounded by the Buddha in *mātugāmasamyutta* but the power of virtue is superior and better than the four others (S.IV.248). Unfortunately, if death arises very closely, the virtuous man will be not only reassured but also concentrated to the death, confiding "I'm virtuous, and observed precepts (morality) which have been priceless wealth for being the bridge to enter happy states and for freeing the hell. In contrast, those who are the offender of a crime or cheat and have bad behavior in their former institution when applying for a job will not be selected. Observing the five precepts will gain different consequences as follows:

Not killing living beings will gain a good physical shape and appearance, and have a long life. Not stealing something not given will possess stable, imperishable, and persistent wealth and property which will be not destroyed by dangers including thief, fire, flood, etc. Not indulging in and committing sexual misconduct will protect and preserve family safety. Not telling a lie will have a sweet sound, and will not be accused and reproved by others. Not drinking alcohol and using the drug will get good memory, great intelligence, and keenness (Ñoem, 1956, pp. 37-38).

The Meanings and Explanations of Each Precept

The First Precept

creatures love their lives, hate death, and constantly seek property, eat meals, etc., to live, and don't want to see their relatives die also. As Buddha says:

All tremble at violence; all fear death. Comparing (other) with oneself, one should not kill or cause to kill. All tremble at violence; to all life is dear. Comparing (others) with oneself, one should not kill or cause to kill (Dhp 129-130).

From the Buddhist perspective, the first precept forbids persons from destroying other living beings¹. But Harvey (2000) finds "It corresponds to Hindu and Jain concepts of *ahimsā* (non-hurting), and is generally regarded as a distinguishing mark of *Dhamma*" (p. 69). Riyaz (2018) concludes

¹ Living beings refer to all beings created by Karmas: moral and immoral in spite of insects. According to abhidhamma, there are three kinds of living beings: *kāmabhūmi*, *rūpabhūmi* and *arūpabhūmi*.

It is of five conditions regarded as killing: (i) The fact and presence of a living being, human or animal, (ii) the knowledge that the beings are living beings, (iii) intent or resolution to kill, (iv) The act of killing by an appropriate noun, and (v) the resulting death (p. 217).

The six ways of killing are: (i) killing with one's own hands, (ii) causing another to kill by giving an order, (iii) killing by shooting, pelting with stone, etc., (iii) killing by digging trenches, etc. and entrapping (iv) killing by the power of occult means (v) killing by mantras or occult science (ibid, page 75). Depending on the sort and number of live beings killed (little, huge, moral, immoral), the crime may be minor or major. Large creatures, like elephants, cows, etc., will have serious repercussions. Killing ants, mosquitoes, etc. has minimal detrimental impact. Humans are superior to animals, thus murdering them is worse. The killing of lay followers, monks, and novices is worse than killing criminals and cruel people. Murdering the father and arahant has too much blame, considered *anantariyakamma* (matricide, patricide, killing arahant, injuring a Buddha, and causing a schism in the Saṅgha). If the victims slain have the same excellent traits, the crime is determined by the Payoga (means) used to kill them. A weak effort wasn't a significant offense, but a strong effort was.

The Second Precept

Abstaining from taking what is not given is the second precept. It refers to something that is not offered by the body, such as writing a letter, or by speech, such as speaking to give. If the owner does not let the goods be given away, the immoral act of taking the object will be considered theft, regardless of the size of the item or object. Jainism and Mahatma Gandhi consider this precept as Asteya², and so this precept is likewise elucidated by Gandhi in two messages: (i). other's belongings and property must be not taken away if the owner of these does not allow to give them, and (ii) keeping and holding in possession of such things not needed is forbidden (Riyaz, 2018, pp. 219-220).

Humans do the job, seek property, and earn money for supporting themselves and sharing benefits with society, considering the property as their own thing and needing anyone to steal it. The precept aims at teaching and educating human beings not to take something not given. The second Precept includes deception, cheating, forgery, and denying debt. The Upāsaka sila sutra regards it as breached by demanding more restitution for theft than is fair, taking two robes when one only needs one, and delivering to one monk what one has promised to another (Harvey, 2000).

Five factors can be as stealing: (1) Property owned and maintained by others, (2) knowing that the property legally belongs to and is controlled by others, (3) having sinful attention to steal, (4) having immoral endeavor to steal, and (5) illegally getting the property by immoral endeavor (Saddhatissa, 1987, p. 87).

The offense of stealing is based on wealth, object or property. If belongings or properties are very costly, it is a serious offense. If these things are valueless, the offense is a little. If

² Asteya (Skr) means abstinence from stealing But in pāli, it refers to addinādāna

belongings and property have the same price, the offense is judged depending on the virtues of the property's owner.

Recently, Buddhist text which has been studied shows “here are six ways of stealing: (i) stealing by one's own hands, (ii) Stealing by false measure and weight, (iii)Stealing by force, (iv)stealing concealment, (v) stealing by design and (vi) stealing by forgery” (Riyaz, 2018, p. 219)

Those who have never studied Buddhism do not comprehend the precepts that their behaviors are sinful and rooted in defilements such as greed, hate, and ignorance. For instance, if they work in the government or private sector, they may defraud their workplace institution to obtain advantages by submitting a false report; this may occur due to their greed and lust. Therefore, to adhere to the second principle, the theft must be avoided under all circumstances, without regard for little or useless commodities. Therefore, Livia Kohn (1994) contends that “the precepts against stealing means that you must not take anything that does not belong to you, be it owned by someone or without obvious owner, as little as one single proper coin” (p. 184).

The Third Precept:

abstaining from misconduct in sexual pleasure is the third precept of the moral conduct of the universal five precepts that the Buddha preached. This implies that a sexual connection with a particular woman is regarded as sexually taboo (Burma, 2019). Someone commits sexual misbehavior with women protected by their mother, father, mother and father, brother, sister, or relatives; by their Dhamma; with a spouse; whose violation carries a punishment; or with one already engaged (Bhikkhu Bodhi 2012, p. 1519)

The last four refer respectively to: (1) a woman protected by her co-religionists, (2) one already married or even promised to a husband at birth or in childhood, (3) one with whom sexual relations entail punishment, and (4) a girl who has been garlanded by a man as a sign of engagement (p. 1855).

Cambodia adheres to its own culture and tradition relating to the third precept to avoid criticism by society and to maintain its family's reputation and honor. Present-day, some people believe that if a daughter in the family committing illicit intercourse with a man, dead spiritual relatives or ancestors will be angry and cause the living relatives of the girl to have various diseases. Just in case, Cambodian people have regarded the third precept as one important moral conduct of the five precepts for their family and society.

The third precept breach can result in conflict inside the family, thus when their parents are deoiced, children experience a variety of big problems due to the faults of others. When their daughter is raped or assaulted physically, those who commit adultery and illegal relations should consider that their parents would be outraged and ashamed.

Unlawful sex acts can arise because of controlling mindfulness. Therefore, *mahāsatipatthānasutta* is a very important discourse of mindfulness on body, feeling, mind, and Dhamma (D. II.302) taught by Buddha:

Herein, O bhikkhu, a brother, when within him is sensuous desire, is aware of it, reflecting: ‘I have within me sensuous desire.’ Or again, when within him is no sensuous desire, he is aware of this.

And he knows of the uprising of such desire unfelt before, knows too of his putting aside that uprisen sensuous desire, knows too of the non-arising in future of that banished sensuous desire. (p. 335)

Sensuous desire in Abhidhamma is an unwholesome mental property associated with greed (*lobha*), and arises all the time when objects³ appear and contact with five sense doors. The sensuous desire -lust attachment- develops relying on internal factors (untamed and undestroyed defilements) and external factors (objects: small, middle, and big) accompanied by pleasure feelings. Hence, the more pleasure objects are the stronger greed becomes. Sexual desire and sexual misconduct always arise because of fast-growing science and technology, resulting in most people with social media and other digitals watching phonograph, porn movies, and sexual contacts.

The fourth Precept

The fourth precept refraining from falsehood is equal to *sammāvācā* “right speech” in the eightfold path. Those who speak true and beneficial words at the right times make themselves praiseworthy and respected by others. They have to do whatever they say, but if some true words that are spoken out cause others to lose benefits or have suffered, this true speech should be avoided to speak, for example telling a patient about terminal illness. As Buddha says.

Monks, if a word has five marks, it is well-spoken, not ill-spoken, nor is it blameworthy nor blamable by the wise. It is a spoken season, it is spoken in truth, it is spoken softly, it is spoken about the goal, it is spoken in amity. Verily, monks, if a word has these three marks, it is well-spoken, not ill-spoken, nor is it blameworthy nor blamable by the wise⁴(A.III.243).

Therefore, we should speak whatever is beneficial for ourselves and others. The fourth precept is one part of three wholesome verbal actions and ten wholesome deeds, and also belongs to one of three *viraticetasikas*⁵ of twenty-four beautiful mental concomitants. The Theravada’s

Jataka mentions developing Bodhisattva may sometimes breach all precepts, except the fourth precept, and Theravadins also consider truthfulness (*Sacca*) as Bodhisattvas’ Perfection. Similarly, Mahāyana, Sāndideva states that Bodhisattva never perceptively speaks an untruth, not to save his life. (Harvey, 2000, p. 74)

The Fifth Precept

The Fifth Precept prohibits intoxicants, fermented beverages, and drugs. Alcohol and drug use is neither one of the ten immoral deeds nor the four vices of conduct but a breach of one precept. Buddhists, learning the Buddha's teachings, should not drink alcohol and intoxicating liquor. The drunk can't regulate their awareness; therefore, they perpetrate wickedness, cruelty, and criminality and breach the first four precepts. Intoxicants and fermented liquor impair mental and physical

³ Object: there are six: visible object, sound, taste, taste, odour, body-impression and mind-object (see Nyanatiloka (1946), page 20)

⁴ Cf. § 167 of A. iii,195; also, *Sn.* P.78; *S.i.*,188.

⁵ According to abhidharma, Virati means abstinence or abstentions and is divided into three kinds: abstinence from wrong speech, wrong (bodily) action and wrong livelihood, corresponding to right speech, action and livelihood of the eightfold path (Nyanaponika, 1970, p.199)

health, causing heart disease, liver damage, cancer, lung infection, stomach distress, birth defects, etc. Cambodians utilize alcohol to treat ailments and injuries. Most Indians are Hindu and rarely consume alcohol, while most Buddhist countries, like Cambodia, do.

Furthermore, drinking alcohol causes various obstacles, so in *Saṅgālovāda sutta*. Buddha states:

There are young householders, these six dangers through being addicted to intoxicating liquors: actual loss of wealth, an increase of quarrels, susceptibility to disease, loss of good character, indecent exposure, impaired intelligence. (D.III.182-183),

Undeniably, five conditions constitute the immoral conduct of the fifth precept: (1) this water is intoxicating liquor, (2) resolution to drink intoxicating liquor, (3) the act of drinking by appropriate means, (4) intoxicating liquor leaks into the throat (Soeurt, 2002, p. 83).

The extent of moral guilt relies on different kinds of drinking intoxicating liquor. Drinking intoxicating alcohol mixed in medicines or meals to reduce and avoid bad smells is no moral guilt. Nonetheless, drinking liquor by thinking it is medicine is a less moral guilt, but if monks, novices, and laypeople undertake precepts, their precepts will be broken.

Unfortunately, Cambodia is known as a Buddhist country. However, in some events and ceremonies of either blessings or religions, alcohol is drunk as well. This is a bad attitude and behavior of people in Buddhist countries to drink alcohol at festivals or ceremonies because events are held to enhance moral actions through body, speech, and mind.

Different concepts of Khmer people on breaking five precepts

From my experience, when I always meet and hear Cambodian people talking about morality, most of them say that they are still young so it is not a chance to observe morality (precepts). According to Khmer concepts, their stages of age are divided into threefold: (i) young age, (ii) middle age and (iii) old age. They always say to observe the precepts at the time of old age because at the first two ages are education, earning money, and property are main need, Therefore, they fail to undertake precepts. Most Khmer in rural catch fish and kill birds or animals for food, thinking killing animals, birds, and fish isn't evil because of not observing the rules. To feed their family, impoverished rural people commit *pāṇātipāta*, breaking five precepts. People with in city t can locate meats and fish in the marketplace.

The second precept concerns theft, robbery, or swindling. Humans scam others for advantages, assets, honor, and respect out of greed. Some people work for both government and private organizations but aren't honest; they always steal property or money, thus they're the second precept breaker. When others see their actions, they lose faith in them.

Third precept: sexual impropriety with others' wives and daughters. Modern scientific advancement has increased humans' sexual passion and desire, making sex interactions easy to think about on social media. The third precept breach is caused by drinking. Inversely, drunkard can be drunkard.

Fourth precept relates to dishonesty and lying to take others' rights and interests. If cheating and lying are unavoidable, they should not hurt others or oneself. Certain deceptive persons not

comprehending the valuable truth always have false speech. When their actions are understood simply, they will lose honor and won't be trusted.

The break of the fifth precept resulted from several problems such as no alcohol laws, social media heavily promoting alcohol, alcohol ads everywhere, the concept of no drink no friend, and drinking for a business connection. Some mockery shows that a young person who doesn't drink should be a monk or nun.

Conclusion

Analyzing the practice and influence of five precepts in Cambodian Buddhism brings information to Cambodians of all ranks and castes via meaning and practice. They recognize the effect of morality and good results in this world and the next. Bad people always suffer and fear the future. Virtuous individuals experience happiness and tranquility now and in the future. Some Cambodian adolescents and ex-monks don't practice the five precepts, considering it's embarrassing and bashful to do so at a young age. When people understand the meaning and techniques of this practice, their minds will be tranquil and pure, allowing them to do positive body and speech activities. If everyone acts morally, the family, society, and the globe will be calm and joyful.

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