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The Five Precepts & the Behavioral and Psychotherapeutic Aspects of Morality

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Five precepts are observed by all lay Buddhists. Those are: Abstinence from (1) killing (2) theft (3) sexual misbehavior (4) falsehood and (5) intoxicants. The *Sikkhā-sautta (Discourse on Precepts)* elucidates that an individual who practices virtue for his own benefit and for that of others abstains from taking of life and encourages others in undertaking abstinence from the taking of life. He abstains from stealing and encourages others in undertaking abstinence from stealing. He abstains from sexual misconduct and encourages others in undertaking abstinence from sexual misconduct. He abstains from lying and encourages others in undertaking abstinence from lying. He abstains from intoxicants that cause heedlessness and encourages others in undertaking abstinence from intoxicants that cause heedlessness.¹

In the *Mahāvaccagotta-sutta*, the Buddha shows wholesome behavior as abstention from killing living beings, abstention from taking what is not given, abstention from misconduct in sensual pleasures, abstention from false speech, abstention from malicious speech, abstention from harsh speech and abstention from gossip.²

In the *Cunda Kammāraputta-sutta (Discourse to Cunda the Silversmith)*, the Buddha explains to Cunda, the son of the silversmith, how one is to be pure in skillful verbal actions.³ To be skillful in verbal actions, one must purify verbal actions in four ways.

This purification involves abandoning false speech, abstaining from false speech (at occasions such as in a town meeting, a group meeting, a gathering of his relatives, his company, or of the royalty), by saying that he knows when he knows and that he does not know when he does not know, or by saying that he has seen when he has seen and that he has not seen when has not seen. Thus, he does not consciously tell a lie for his own sake, for the sake of another, or for the sake of any reward. By abandoning false speech, he abstains from false speech; speaks the truth and holds to the truth. He is firm, reliable, no deceiver of the world.

Right Speech should be established by abandoning divisive speech. Divisive speech is defined as refraining from telling in another place what he has heard in this place to break those people apart from these people here, and refraining from telling here what he has heard there to break these people apart from those people there. Thus, reconciling those who have broken apart or strengthening those who are united, he loves concord, delights in concord, enjoys concord and speaks things that create concord. By abandoning abusive speech and abstaining from abusive speech, he speaks words that are soothing to the ear, that are affectionate, that go to the heart, that are polite, appealing and pleasing to people at large. Abandoning idle chatter, he abstains from idle chatter.

By speaking in season, he speaks what is factual, what is in accordance with the goal, the Dhamma, and the Vinaya. He speaks words worth treasuring, seasonable, reasonable, circumscribed and connected with the goal. This is how one is made pure in four ways by verbal actions. The *Sāleyyaka-sutta* introduces the three kinds

of bodily conduct in accordance with the Dhamma and four kinds of verbal conduct in accordance with the Dhamma⁴ that are behavioral prerequisites for meditation. The three kinds of righteous bodily conduct in accordance with the Dhamma are (1) abandoning the killing of living beings and becoming one who abstains from killing living beings, (2) abandoning the taking of what is not given and becoming one who abstains from taking what is not given and (3) abandoning misconduct concerning sexual desires and becoming one who abstains from misconduct in sexual desires. The four kinds of righteous verbal conduct in accordance with the Dhamma are;

1. abandoning false speech and becoming one who abstains from false speech
2. abandoning malicious speech and becoming one who abstains from malicious speech
3. abandoning harsh speech and becoming one who abstains from harsh speech and
4. abandoning gossip and becoming one who abstains from gossip

The Wholesome Results gained by keeping the Five Precepts

The following are the wholesome results to be gained by keeping the five Precepts as listed in various suttas.

Keeping the First Precept results in: no physical disabilities, no dry and lifeless look, no weakness and sluggishness, no fear of dangers, no fear of being killed by others, not committing suicide, no many diseases, no loss of friends and no shortened lifespan.

Keeping the Second Precept results in: no poverty, no loss of your belongings to the Five Enemies (water or flood, fire or conflagrations, thieves, tyrants or bad leaders and unloved heirs like bad sons and daughters).

Keeping the third Precept results in: not being hated by many people, no having lots of enemies, having peace, having a happy family, no shame and embarrassment, no physical deformities, not many worries, no separation from your loved ones.

Keeping the Fourth Precept results in: no unclear speech, no crooked teeth, no foul mouth, no dull senses, no lack of honor, no roughness in speech, no lack of calm.

Keeping the Fifth Precept results in: no loss of judgment, not being lazy, not being forgetful, not being insane, a sense of gratitude, moral shame and moral fear.

Benefits of *Sīla*

The benefits of *Sīla* are non-remorse, possession of a large fortune as a consequence of diligence (a great increase of wealth), spread of one's good name abroad (having a favorable reputation), entering the assembly without fear or hesitation (confident deportment without timidity in every society), unconfused death (serene death) and birth in a happy world after death (rebirth in a happy state).⁵

The benefits or blessings of virtue are also mentioned in the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* (discourse on the Great Passing –The Buddha's Last Days)⁶ In that *sutta*, the reward (profit) and blessing of wholesome morality listed in a causal order are: 1. freedom

from remorse, 2. from freedom from remorse comes joy, 3, from joy comes rapture, 4. From rapture comes tranquility, 5. from tranquility comes happiness, 6. from happiness comes concentration, 7. from concentration comes vision and knowledge according to reality, 8. from vision and knowledge according to reality comes turning away and detachment, 9. from turning away and detachment comes the vision and knowledge with regard to deliverance.⁷

The *Abhisanda-sutta* mentions five gifts from the Five Precepts.⁸ The five gifts gained as a result of the practice of the Five Precepts (*pañcasīla*) and these five gifts are so great that they are original, long-standing, traditional, ancient, unadulterated from the beginning and are not open to suspicion, will never be open to suspicion by the knowledgeable contemplatives and monks.

A disciple who abandons taking of life and abstains from taking life gives freedom from danger, freedom from hostility, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings. In giving freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings, he gains a share in limitless freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, and freedom from oppression. This is the same with abandoning and abstaining from stealing, illicit sex, lying and use of intoxicants.⁹

Chavalāta-sutta (*The firebrand/ Wood from a Pyre Discourse*) illustrates that the individual who is engaged in the practice of virtue for his own benefit and for that of others is the foremost, the chief, the most outstanding, the highest and supreme among the four individuals mentioned in the *sutta*. The simile drawn in this context is the skimming of ghee extracted from milk from a cow. The simile drawn for the individual who practices neither for his own benefit nor for others is likened to a firebrand from a funeral pyre, burning at both ends, covered with excrement in the middle, which is used as fuel neither in a village nor in the wilderness.¹⁰

The *Sahassavagga* (The Thousands) of the Dhammapada mentions that it is better to live one day virtuously and meditatively than to live a hundred years in an immoral and uncontrolled manner. “*Yocavassasataṃjīve – dussīlo asamādhito, Ekāhaṃ jīvitam seyyo – sīlavantassajhāyino*”.¹¹ It is better to live one day wisely and meditative than to live a hundred years foolishly and uncontrolled “*Yocavassasataṃjīve – duppañño asamādhito, Ekāhaṃ jīvitam seyyo – paññāvantassajhāyino*”.¹² It is better to live one day energetically and resolute than to live a hundred years slothfully and self-indulgent “*Yocavassasataṃjīve kusītohīnavīriyo, Ekāhaṃ seyyo – viriyamārabhatodalham*”.¹³ Thus, being virtuous, controlled, restrained, strenuous and resolute is a prerequisite for mental development.

The Therapeutic Rewards and Blessings of Morality

According to various *sutta*-s, the rewards and blessings of morality are: freedom from remorse, acquisition of joy, rapture, tranquility, happiness, concentration, vision and knowledge according to reality, turning away and detachment, and the vision and knowledge with regard to deliverance.

Five Advantages through the Practice of Morality

The Buddha preached the following five benefits gained through the observance of the precepts. 1. great increase of wealth and prosperity through diligence, 2. noble reputation, 3. confident deportment without timidity in every society, 4. serenity 5. death after a full life-span, 6. re-birth in a happy state or in a heavenly world.¹⁴

Ethics, Wholesome Behavior and Good Living for Conflict Resolution

Violation of the Five Precepts (*pañcasīla*)¹⁵ causes conflicts in family and social life. The most elementary moral precept in Buddhist teaching is respect for life and prevention from harassing, torturing and taking life. This begins with living a disrespectful life, next harming other beings due to an absence of loving-kindness (*mettā*) and then killing. As a whole, all living beings desire to live, dislike punishment, harassment and are afraid of death. When desire for life is threatened, the response is fear, frustration and anger. The taking of life is not only pertinent to human life but also to all sentient beings. The absence of killing causes no conflicts but brings about peace in the society.

The prevention of stealing is also important in the conflict resolution and restoration of peace in the individual, in society and in the world. Stealing, whether it is committed by individuals wealthy or needy, corporations or nations, occurs because of insatiable intense or unrighteous greed (*visamalobha*).

Falsehoods committed by individuals, politicians, media personnel and other responsible persons in the society takes place in the contemporary world on large scale and it has become part of our culture. This may even lead to conflicts among persons, families and nations destroying even global peace. The 100th verse¹⁶ of the *Sahassavagga* of the *Dhammapada* emphasizes that hearing one useful word which helps one attains peace is better than a thousand useless words.

Sexual harassment and misconduct cause conflicts in family and society, and from the time of the Trojan War, sexual misconduct has also been a cause of war which causes horrendous conflicts. Venereal diseases jeopardize the health of a society. Abandoning all types of misbehavior in sexual desires, becoming one who abstains from misdemeanor in sexual desires and encouraging others to avoid such malpractices as disclosed in the *Sāleyyaka Sutta*¹⁷ prevents conflicts in family and social life.

Minds inebriated by intoxicants cause hot-temperedness, shamelessness, wickedness violation of ethics and entanglement in vices that make the entire society conflict stricken, endangering peace and harmony. It is reported that some innocent men, women and children have been murdered since for giving tips to police on drug trafficking. Drug addiction, domestic and international drug trade have become a social conflict and major impediment to mental and physical health in most parts of the world.

According to the *Sigālaka-sutta*,¹⁸ the four defilements of action (*kammakilesa*)—killing, stealing, lying and adultery, committed due to four causes (*agati*), should be avoided. In most countries, homicide and genocide, plundering and exploitation, destruction of property through wars and riots, dissemination of false and biased

information through national and international mass media etc. take place. These four vices (*kammakilesa*) and the four causes of committing evil actions (*agati*) which make grounds for social conflicts should be avoided.

Enhancement of moral behavior and qualities as skillful bodily actions, skillful verbal actions and mental actions as mentioned in the *Cunda Kammāraputta-sutta*¹⁹, good bodily conduct, good verbal conduct and good mental conduct according to the *Ekamsana-sutta*²⁰ and the *Potaliya-sutta*²¹, threefold purity in Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood elucidated in the *Mahācattārīsaka-sutta*,²² wholesome deportment as revealed in the *sutta-s* such as *Sikkhā*,²³ *Saṅgīti*,²⁴ *Vyagghapajja*,²⁵ *Sāleyyaka*,²⁶, prevent conflicts and bring about harmonious and peaceful living. As a whole, observance of the Five Precepts²⁷ ensures safeguarding of the five major fundamental Human Rights advocated by the United Nations Human Rights Convention (UNHR).

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End Notes

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- ² The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha (MN), 73.WP.p. 595.
- ³ The Book of the Gradual Sayings (AN), Vol. V. 10.176. PTS.p.175.
- ⁴ The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha (MN), 41.BPS.p.380.
- ⁵ The Path of Purification (*Visuddhimagga*), Ch. I. Para 23. p. 9.
- ⁶ The Long Discourses of the Buddha (DN), 16.WP. p. 236 – 237.
- ⁷ The Book of the Gradual Sayings (AN), Vol. V. 10.1.PTS.p. 1 ff.
- ⁸ Ibid.Vol. IV. 8.39. PTS. p.168.
- ⁹ The Book of the Gradual Sayings (AN), Vol. IV. 8.39. PTS. p.168.
- ¹⁰ The Book of the Gradual Sayings (AN), Vol. II. 4.95. PTS. p. 104.
- ¹¹The Dhammapada, Ch. 8. V. 110. p. 103.
- ¹² Ibid. V.111. p.104.
- ¹³ The Dhammapada, V.112. p. 105
- ¹⁴ The Path of Purification (*Visuddhimagga*) Ch.I, (IV), 23, P.9.
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