1.2 Exploring Buddhist Practice
The Five Precepts
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1.2.1 Why be Ethical?

Introduction
As we saw in the first part, this course is designed to help us explore the three declarations we make when we become a mitra:

- I think of myself as a Buddhist.
- I am trying to practice the Five Precepts.
- The Triratna Buddhist Community is the context in which I want to practice, at least for the foreseeable future.

In this second section of the course we move on from looking at what it means to be a Buddhist, to looking at what it means to practice the Five Precepts. This week we will look at why ethics is such an important part of the spiritual path. Then in the next five weeks we will look at each of the Five Precepts one by one. In later parts of the course we will broaden the way we look at the second declaration, to include other ways we put Buddhism into practice in daily life, including the practice of meditation, and the practice of applying Buddhist ideas to the way we think about life.

The Threefold Path
The simplest traditional description of the Buddhist path divides it into three stages:

- The stage of ethics
- The stage of meditation
- The stage of wisdom

Practising the precepts belongs to the stage of ethics, so according to tradition it is logical that we should look at this first, before we look at meditation or wisdom. But although this approach is logical according to tradition, it does not fit with the way many of us in the West start to practice Buddhism. Many of us start with meditation, and only begin to think about our ethics as a result of our experience of meditation. Some of us start with a fascination for Buddhist ideas, and only later start to put these into practice in our lives.

With this in mind it is important that we don’t see this threefold path too rigidly. We should not take it to mean that we can’t make progress with our meditation until our ethics are perfect, or that we can’t align ourselves more closely with reality until we are great meditators. We might be better to see our progress as less like following a path – where you must finish one section before setting foot on the next – than like the unfolding of the petals of a flower, where the different petals open together, but the inner ones cannot open faster than the outer ones allow.
But although it is true that many people can make good progress with meditation for some time without paying much attention to their ethics, most people who have been practising for longer come to see that the idea of the threefold path contains an important truth. There is not much point in trying to develop positive mental states for an hour or so each day in meditation if we are developing negative states in most of the other hours of our lives by the way we act and speak. And often the way to improve our meditation is not so much to look at what we do in meditation, as to look at what we do outside it, in the rest of our life. Unless we take our positive mental states off our meditation cushion and start expressing them in our daily activities, after a while our meditation will hit a plateau – or even a brick wall.

**The problem with ethics**

Many people in the West have negative associations with the whole idea of ethics, because this has become mixed up with ideas of ‘good’ behaviour that can limit our individuality and be unhelpful for our development. But a true practice of ethics is not about limiting our individuality – it is about expressing it. The word ‘ethic’ is derived from the Greek word ‘ethos’. To be truly ethical is to live by our ethos: to live by a set of principles and values we have freely chosen, because they reflect our deepest aspirations and sense of meaning. For many of us this idea has become confused with distorted versions of ethics, the most obvious of which are authoritarian ethics and conventional ethics.

In an authoritarian system of ethics, a code of behaviour is imposed on us from outside – rather than springing from our own sense of the deep meaning of life – and then enforced by a system of reward and punishment. Any ethical system based on the idea of a judging, punishing God, who demands that we obey his commandments (or else!) is bound to be authoritarian. This is not to say that all Christians, Jews, or Muslims practice ethics at this low level, but many of us have been exposed to a crude version of theistic religion in childhood, and this has affected our perceptions of what ethics is about.

Another distortion of true ethics is what we might call conventional ethics. These are rules about how we should behave that are mainly about conforming to what is normal in a particular culture, rather than about spiritual values. Such rules are not universal, and will differ from place to place and time to time, but because they are so widely accepted by everyone around us it is easy to take them on them unthinkingly. Examples of conventional ethical values in the Anglo-Saxon and Northern European cultures include the ‘Protestant work ethic’, the extreme importance given to money and livelihood, beliefs about the sanctity of marriage and the nuclear family, aspects of political correctness, and many of the unconscious taboos that prevent us from expressing our individuality, creativity, zest for life, and warmth for others.

Authoritarian ethics and conventional ethics often go hand in hand. Society persuades us to conform by rewarding us when we do so, and by punishing us when we don’t – usually by the approval or disapproval of the people around us. We all get a necessary dose of this socialisation in childhood, before we have developed much of an ethical sense of our own. But later in life, when we are trying to develop our individual identity, we often need to rebel against the rules that have been imposed on us. And because the rules we reject are connected with what we think are religious ethics, many of us are wary of anything that goes by the name of ethics.

**Buddhist ethics**

We therefore need to be clear that the Buddhist idea of ethics is very different from our normal Western view. Buddhist ethics are not about restricting our freedom. They are about liberating
ourselves from the slavery of unhelpful habits, conditioning, and ways of being, and becoming potent individuals with control over the direction of our own lives. They are about behaving in ways that encourage positive emotions, and calm negative states. They are about acting in a way that gives us a sense of wholeness and self-esteem, because we are honestly trying to live up to our vision of what we could become.

In the absence of a judging God we must obey, the words ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ are inappropriate to the Buddhist idea of ethics. Instead Buddhism classes actions as either ‘skilful’ or ‘unskilful’. Skilful behaviour is intelligent behaviour, in that it contributes to our own happiness and the happiness of others. Unskilful behaviour has the opposite effects, but it comes about because we do not see reality as it is, not because we have disobeyed some cosmic authority figure, or because we are ‘bad’.

**The law of karma**

In traditional Buddhism, the need for ethics and the idea of karma go hand in hand. The Sanskrit word ‘karma’ means simply ‘action’. The law of karma extends the idea of cause and effect into the area of ethics, pointing out that all our actions have consequences, for us and for others. To the extent that we behave in skilful ways, our experience in the future will be happier and brighter. To the extent that we behave in unskilful ways, our experience in the future will be unhappier and darker. Traditionally this idea of karma is connected with the idea of rebirth, so that a skilful life is seen as leading us to be reborn in beautiful, pleasant states of existence, whereas an unskilful life leads to rebirth in painful states of suffering. These effects do not happen as a reward or punishment, but simply because the world we experience around us is a reflection of our state of being. If we make ourselves into a heavenly being, we will experience a heavenly state; if we make ourselves into a hellish being, our experience will literally be hell.

Many Western Buddhists accept these traditional ideas of karma and rebirth as embodying important truths that transcend our present understanding of the world. However others find it difficult to accept the idea of rebirth, so it is important to be clear that we don’t have to believe in rebirth to accept the idea of karma. It is easy to show that the law of karma operates just as much in this life as in future lives. Even in this lifetime the way we act now determines the world we will experience in the future.

We all have many strands in our being. Sometimes our thoughts are skilful, sometimes they are unskilful, and usually we have a jumble of different thoughts coming up almost at the same time. If, for example, someone asks us for money for a good purpose, we are likely to have a range of thoughts and feelings. Sometimes there will be generous thoughts, and we will have the impulse to give. Sometimes, even though we can afford to give, our thoughts will be stingy, and we may resent the fact that we have been asked. These two strands in our being may seem to pop up of their own accord, like mental weather. They are the result of our past actions and conditioning, and we have no choice about which comes up at any one time. But we do have a choice about which type of thought we put our will behind, which we identify with, which we give our energy to, and which we act upon. If we give our energy to the generous strand, this will become stronger, and the stingy strand will become weaker. If on the other hand we put our will behind the stingy strand, this will become stronger, and our generous impulses will become weaker in the future.

We are making this sort of choice – and forming our future selves – all the time. Our minds constantly throw up all sorts of thoughts and feelings. We constantly choose which of the many strands in our being we identify with and act upon. In the process we are constantly
choosing to make ourselves either larger, more expansive, and more whole, or else smaller, more cramped, and more fragmented. We are constantly forming the person we will be in the future, and this in turn determines the sort of world we will experience, just as surely as if we were choosing a realm in which to be reborn. We all see the world through the spectacles of our mental states. Even though we humans apparently all inhabit the same physical space, and are subjected to the same range of pleasant and painful experiences, we experience this very differently according to the nature of our being. If we make ourselves into a larger, more positive and expansive being, then we will experience a deep happiness which does not depend on outer circumstances. But if we make ourselves into a smaller, more negative being, then we will have a cramped, dark, unhappy experience, even if our outer circumstances are very pleasant.

It will be obvious from this discussion of the law of karma that the practice of ethics is a crucial part of our path. Choosing skilful rather than unskilful actions is an essential part of the way we change in positive ways, so that we come to express more and more of our spiritual potential. Meditation without a conscious practice of ethics is not enough to allow us to do this, and nor is even the most sophisticated understanding of Buddhist philosophy.

**Aspects of Ethics**

*Beyond the terrible trio*

In fact the importance of ethics is so central to the path that it has many different aspects, and can be expressed in many different ways—although in a sense these are all just different ways of saying the same thing. One way of putting it is simply to say that when we act skilfully we encourage skilful mental states in ourselves, whereas when we act unskilfully we encourage negative states based on ill-will, craving, and delusion. As the whole point of the Buddhist path is to move beyond this terrible trio, it is obvious that acting skilfully is not an optional extra.

*Acting ‘as if’*

Another way of putting it is to say that part of the way we become an Enlightened being is to act as if we were already an Enlightened being. A Buddha is spontaneously skilful, naturally living on the basis of solidarity with others, generosity, freedom from craving, straightforward integrity, and clear awareness. For us these qualities don’t yet always come naturally, although we all carry the seeds of them inside us. So at the moment we often need to make a conscious effort to act on these qualities—acting as if we were Enlightened—to help these seeds to grow. In this way over time it becomes more and more natural and effortless for us to act skilfully, as we grow towards our own Enlightenment.

*Connecting with our higher self*

Another way of putting it is to think in terms of acting on the impulses of our higher self, so that in acting skilfully we strengthen our connection with our own deepest nature. Many people have a sense of having a sort of higher self, which can act as a guiding voice and a source of strength and wisdom. When we are in contact with this higher aspect of ourselves we feel supported and on the right track, whereas when we are cut off from this source of strength we feel adrift and out of harmony with ourselves. Some schools of Buddhism speak in terms of us all having ‘Buddha Nature’, which is usually covered over by the grime of our unskilful habits. When we act unskilfully we cut ourselves off from this higher self, which leaves us weak and miserable. But when we express more of our higher self—we act skilfully—we strengthen our connection with what is best in ourselves, so that we naturally feel stronger and happier. By consistently acting skilfully, we gradually come to express more...
and more of this higher self, so that over time it comes to be a larger and larger part of our being.

**Ethics, self-transcendence, and wisdom**

So far in considering why we need to practice ethics we have talked mainly in terms of how we ourselves benefit. Acting ethically promotes enjoyable positive states, protects us from painful negative states, and helps us to grow and develop, which is the ultimate source of happiness. But this explanation is one-sided, and could give the impression that Buddhism encourages a self-centred attitude to the spiritual path. We do not avoid harming others – for example – because this would harm us. We avoid it because it would harm others! Acting ethically is not just about our own happiness, our own development, or our own mental states. It is about expressing – and therefore strengthening – our sense of interconnectedness and empathy with other beings. This sense of deep connection with the universe around us is an integral part of the experience of Enlightenment.

To see with the eyes of wisdom is to see that we cannot separate ourselves from others and the world around us. We are all part of each other. When we hurt another we hurt ourselves, and when we benefit another we benefit ourselves. Ultimately Buddhist ethics are about cultivating and expressing self-transcending wisdom in our daily lives, which means rising above our own small personal point of view, and acting from a more universal, more spacious, less self-centred perspective. This is to express our ‘higher self’. It is to act in the best interests of our own real self, and in the best interests of other beings and the universe as a whole.

**The five precepts**

To help us act skilfully in the hurly-burly of everyday life we need some simple guidelines we can carry constantly in our mind. The simplest and most general set of ethical guidelines in Buddhism are the Five Precepts. These are guides to how an Enlightened being would behave, which we can follow in order to act as if we were an Enlightened being, and therefore to develop our own potential for Enlightenment.

The Five Precepts express a set of fundamental spiritual principles: kindness, generosity, contentment, integrity, and awareness. Obviously they are not ‘commandments’, and it is important that we don’t take them on as though they were imposed on us from outside. We need to think for ourselves about the principles involved, and to decide whether we agree that they express our own deep values. In doing this it might help to think about what it would be like to aim for the opposite – cruelty, stinginess, craving, dishonesty, and escapism. It is possible that someone might take one of these as a guiding value, but it is very difficult to see how such a person could be a Buddhist! In fact the principles behind the Five Precepts are so basic to any sort of spiritual life that they probably seem self-evident. Accepting these principles as reflecting our own deep values is fundamental to becoming a Buddhist.

Each of the Five Precepts has a ‘positive’ and a ‘negative’ form. The negative forms advise us what not to do – they set alarm bells ringing when we are about to do or say something unskilful. The positive forms express the general principles we should be aiming for, and are the more general and important of the two sets.

**Pitfalls**

There are at least two dangers we need to watch for as we practice ethics. The first is importing concepts of obedience and ‘sin’ from other religious traditions, which can feed a sense of guilt and unworthiness. The second is being unrealistically hard on ourselves. The Precepts are guidelines about how an Enlightened being would behave. We are not Enlightened, and until
we are it is impossible for us to keep the Precepts perfectly. (Imagine, for example, what it would be like to be totally generous, with no sense of anything being ‘mine’.) The Precepts are sometimes called ‘training principles’ and it is important that we see them in this spirit – as practices we train ourselves with, so that we gradually get better at them. Acting ethically is a skill. If with any other skill – say playing the piano – we expected to be perfect from the start, and then mentally beat ourselves up whenever we hit a wrong note, we would soon give up.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What first interested you in Buddhism – ethics, meditation, or wisdom? Which did you practice first?

2. What were your associations with the word ‘ethics’ before you started this course? How had this been influenced by authoritarian or conventional versions of ethics?

3. Do you believe that whether we act skilfully or not now determines whether our future experience is bright or dark? What other factors might contribute?

4. We could see ethics as about developing positive states and avoiding negative ones, about acting ‘as if’ we were Enlightened, about connecting with our “higher self”, or about expressing our interconnectedness with others. Which explanation appeals to you most? Do you think they are connected?

5. Do the principles expressed by the Five Precepts reflect your own values? Are there any you don’t relate to? Are there any other principles you would add to make your own set of precepts? (In thinking about this you might bring to mind someone you admire for their spiritual qualities, and think about what qualities they exemplify.)

6. Do you know the Five Precepts by heart? Do you think this helps us practice them?
1.2.2
The First Precept: Expressing Interconnectedness

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 veramaṇi sikkhāpadam 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 unskilful?
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 unskilful 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 vegetarian; in one’s refusing to have oneself, or to assist or encourage others in having, an abortion; 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.

3. Think of some situations where it would be impossible or undesirable to act 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.
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 gandhabbha (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.
The Second Precept: the Principle of Generosity

Positive form: *With open-handed generosity, I purify my body.*
Negative form: *I undertake the training principle of not taking the not-given.*
Pâli: *Adinnâdânâ veramanî sikkhâpadaṃ samâdiyāmi.*

The fundamental Buddhist virtue

Generosity – dāna in Pâli and Sanskrit – has been called the fundamental Buddhist virtue. Giving to others is a direct way of opening up our tight, painful focus on our own desires, and it can be practised by people whose lives leave them little time for more formal practices like retreats or meditation. For these reasons many traditional Buddhist schools see cultivating generosity as the essential first stage of the path. But at the same time generosity is also in a sense the culmination of the whole spiritual life – the Enlightened person is spontaneously generous, because they don’t see the world in terms of self and other, but instead act from a deep sense of interconnectedness with other beings. As our spiritual life develops, our actions gradually come to express more and more of this self-transcending spirit of generosity.

The practice of generosity attacks our deluded world-view from two directions. On the one hand it undermines our neurotic attachment to possessions – and the anxious poverty mentality this gives rise to. At the same time it expresses and deepens our empathy for others.

Generosity is also the basis on which we build the spiritual community – it allows us to relate to each other on the basis of mettâ rather than economics, from the ‘love mode’ rather than the ‘power mode’. And generosity is highly contagious – when we are generous this releases generosity in others, which in turn releases generosity in an ever-widening circle. This is one of the most important ways we create the Sangha, the spiritual community.

What dāna is not

The Buddhist practice of dāna is not about punishing or martyring ourselves. It is about developing and expressing expansive, warm, liberated states of mind which are highly pleasurable. To move in this direction we may sometimes need to push ourselves out of our present cramped, ungenerous habits, and this process may feel uncomfortable or even painful. A good analogy here might be the effort we need to make to do exercise, give up an addiction, or rise to a challenge – we push through the short term discomfort because we know this will make us happier in the longer term. But if we feel that we are punishing or martyring ourselves, or if we feel resentful about our giving, this tends to indicate that we are seeing our ethical practice in terms of obeying an external authority – maybe ‘God’ or some human authority – rather than seeking to express our own deep values. If so we need to take an honest look at our motivations, scale down or even drop our practice, and then perhaps re-engage with it in the future on a different basis.
Not taking the not-given
In the ‘negative’ sense this precept advises us to avoid actions that express the opposite of generosity – our tendency to grab what we can for ourselves. This implies much more than simply not stealing. The Pāli words clearly mean not taking that which has not been freely given to us. So if an action involves any element of manipulating someone else to get something we want – but which they would rather keep – then this is taking the not-given. So driving a hard bargain or extracting the maximum profit for ourselves from a situation is likely to be taking the not-given. So also is getting what we want by playing on others’ greed or fear, manipulating their emotions, wielding our power or authority, exploiting their weaknesses, or just by outwitting them.

In fact many ways of seeking our own advantage that might be seen as normal behaviour – for example in the business world – actually constitute taking the not given. Much of our economic and social behaviour is governed by the ‘power mode’, and getting what we want at others’ expense within the limits set by custom and the law is seen as an acceptable approach in many of our activities. This is not surprising. As long as we see the purpose of life as satisfying our own desires this inevitably brings us into competition with others – who would like to satisfy their own desires instead – and we are likely to find ourselves tempted over and over again to take the not-given. For this reason making a conscious effort to practice this precept is a difficult and transformative practice. It constantly confronts us with our fundamentally egocentric approach to life, and challenges us to step out into new territory, where we give priority to expressing our connectedness with others rather than to grabbing what we can for ourselves.

Down-to-earth
At a more down-to-earth level, we can start to make an everyday practice of not taking the not-given by becoming conscious of the many small ways we express our grabbiness and attachment, not just for money and material things, but also for pleasures, leisure and attention. Some obvious examples of ways we can practice the precept might be:

- Making sure we scrupulously pay everything we owe, for example for the goods and services we use, or to the tax man – even when we could easily get away without paying.
- Making sure we are completely honest in things like claiming expenses or benefits.
- Making sure we return anything we borrow promptly, especially things that we would really like to keep – books might be an example.
- Making sure we do our share of the chores – at home, at work, and wherever else we are involved – rather than expecting other people to do our part of the work.

Ways of giving
As a positive spiritual principle generosity gets a lot of attention in traditional Buddhist texts. As usual this involves lists – including lists of the various things we can give. For example it is said that we can express our generosity by giving:

1. Material things (including money),
2. Time and energy,
3. Knowledge,
4. Fearlessness,
5. Life and limb, and
Material things
Usually when we think of generosity we think just of the first of these – giving money and material things. This is an excellent place to start, and for many of us this will be the main working ground for some time. However some people don't have much material wealth to spare, and for them the second sort of generosity – giving time and energy – may be a more appropriate practice.

Knowledge
Knowledge is perhaps singled out because making a profit from our knowledge is such a common tendency – but not one we always notice. We think it is quite normal for an ‘expert’ to charge a high price for advice, consultancy, or training, but this is another manifestation of the power mode. In contrast the teacher or adviser who takes delight in sharing their knowledge – and in the benefit it brings to others – is practising a powerful form of generosity.

Fearlessness
The idea of giving fearlessness may seem strange. But we could see fearlessness as standing for any positive mental state. Our mental states have a powerful effect on those around us, and to make the effort to be in a good mental and emotional state is a valuable gift. Many people find that this can be a more powerful motivation for staying in a good state than focussing on their own well-being, and it has the advantage that – because it is an inherently unselfish motivation – it has a natural tendency to expand our small-minded focus on ourselves.

Life and limb
The fourth of these forms of giving – life and limb – might seem impossibly challenging when we first hear about it. But we can probably all imagine a situation where – if we were really pushed to it – we would risk ourselves to save the life of someone we loved. This sort of giving can only spring from a deep sense of relatedness, which at our present level of development we perhaps only feel for a very few ‘special’ people. But one goal of the spiritual life is to increase our awareness to the point that we feel this sort of relatedness to all beings, and there are many stories of advanced spiritual practitioners giving to others in a way that seems almost incredible – until we remember that we would do the same for someone we really loved. In fact love underlies all generosity, to the point that when our sense of relatedness is strong enough we do not think of ourselves as being generous, however much we give.

The gift of the Dharma
It might seem odd that ‘Giving the Gift of the Dharma’ is the last in this list of ways of practising generosity, implying that it is the highest form of giving. This expresses the fact that Buddhists generally see spiritual ignorance as underlying all our suffering. Ultimately the only way to help someone towards real lasting happiness is to help them to discover their spiritual potential, so that they start to look for happiness in the right place. This is what ‘giving the gift of the Dharma’ does, and for this reason it is seen as the highest expression of generosity. To give the gift of the Dharma we don't necessarily need to give Dharma talks – we can do it by befriending people, by setting a positive example, and by staying in a good mental state.

This does not mean we should ignore formal teaching of the Dharma. For many people contact with the Dharma is a lifesaver, and helping to provide the classes that bring people to Buddhism is a very effective form of generosity. But it isn’t just those who actually teach or write who are giving the gift of the Dharma. Their efforts depend on the efforts of many other people who support the Dharma and Sangha financially, or give their time, energy and expertise in many ways to all sorts of activities related to Buddhism. All these people are an
integral part of the making the Dharma available to people, and all are giving the gift of the Dharma.

**Practical ways of developing generosity**

Buddhist ethics are about intention – about expressing and developing positive states of mind, not about keeping to the letter of a set of rules. But does this mean that if we don’t feel like giving, there is no point in giving? Generosity is not real when we give out of a sense of obligation, or because we ‘ought to’. But this does not mean we cannot work to develop our generosity when it is still not fully spontaneous. We all have generous impulses. There are many strands in our being – generous strands as well as stingy strands – and we have a choice about which parts of ourselves we put our energy behind. If we put our energy behind our stingy impulses these will become stronger – we will become narrower, more constricted beings, and we will become less happy. If we put our energy behind our generous impulses these will grow and develop, they will become stronger in the future, and we will feel more open and expansive.

The traditional Buddhist literature is full of suggestions about practical ways to develop our generosity by putting energy behind the generous parts of our being. One suggestion is simply to notice when we have a generous impulse, and then always to follow it through. Because we have both generous and ungenerous strands in our beings, a generous impulse is usually followed by second thoughts. But if we go along with these we put our energy behind the meaner parts of ourselves – we identify with them and strengthen them. On the other hand if we simply act on the generous impulse we strengthen the generous part of ourselves by putting our will and energy behind it. So if we get the impulse to give someone some money, or to offer help in some way, then we just do it, with no second thoughts, and no regrets after the event.

One of the things that stops us giving is simply that we aren’t used to doing it. We are just not in the habit, and we are creatures of habit. We can start to develop the habit by making a point of regularly giving away small, inexpensive things as often as possible. If you spend time around Buddhists you will almost certainly notice that many people have taken this advice to heart – giving cards and small gifts is usually very much part of the general culture around a Triratna centre.

This idea of making a point of regularly giving small gifts can be taken a stage further. Traditionally many Buddhists make a point of giving something away every day. Others – at a slightly more challenging level – make a point of giving away any small personal article that someone says they like. So if someone says, ‘that’s a nice poster, where did you get it’, you simply give it to them then and there. Practices such as this give us a conscious framework for putting energy into generous acts in a way we probably would not do if we simply decided that generosity is a good idea, and left it at that.

**The importance of generosity**

As with all the Precepts, generosity is not just an elementary practice we need to get out of the way so we can get on with the more advanced parts of the Dharma. Generosity runs right through the Buddhist path, and we can practice it at many levels. Developing as a spiritual being is about transcending our narrow ego. As we do this we gradually move from seeing life as being about what we can get for ourselves, to seeing it as about what we can contribute to others and the universe. Spiritual progress and generosity go hand-in-hand. At the moment we may only be able to be generous and transcend our ego in small ways, but ultimately generosity is an expression of the highest wisdom, and the sense of connectedness with all
beings which this brings. An Enlightened being is totally and spontaneously generous, because they see beyond the duality of self and other.

The centrality of generosity in the Buddhist path is brought out very strongly in the spiritual ideal of the Bodhisattva. A Bodhisattva is a being who is following the spiritual path in order to be of use to others. A Bodhisattva sees their whole life as an act of generosity – a way to contribute to the universe – but without any sense of regret or acting against their own best interests. To quote Sangharakshita:

Love is, in the last resort, incompatible with the sense of ownership and, therefore with property, and thinks not so much in terms of Generosity as in terms of common ownership or sharing...

Ultimately, as in the case of the Bodhisattva, Generosity reaches the point where the giver, the gift, and the recipient of the gift, cease to be distinguishable. It is this kind of Generosity which constitutes the positive form of the Second Precept.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Do you agree that it is “better to give than to receive”? Why, or why not?

2. Are there any circumstances in daily life when you tend to take the not-given? (There are for almost everybody!) Is there one area where you could focus on practising the ‘negative’ form of the precept in the week ahead?

3. What tends to stop you from being generous? (A traditional list cites not seeing the benefits, attachment, a poverty mentality, and not being in the habit of giving, as among the hindrances to generosity – you might think in terms of these.)

4. Are there any particular things you find it difficult to be open-handed with, or particular circumstances that block your generosity? What attitudes, fears, or objective circumstances underlie these limitations? How do they affect your mental states?

5. Could you take on a personal precept about generosity for the week ahead – for example to give away something small every day or to do one generous act next week you would not otherwise have done?
Positive form: *With stillness, simplicity, and contentment, I purify my body.*

Negative form: *I undertake the training principle of refraining from sexual misconduct.*

Pāli: *Kāmesu micchācāra veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.*

Introduction: *sex is just one craving*

This guideline is about freeing ourselves from the addictions and cravings that keep us from experiencing peace of mind – it is not about taking a puritanical view of sex. In the traditional negative form of the precept, sex is singled out as probably the most powerful human craving, and therefore potentially the greatest obstacle to contentment. But really we are being advised not to let any desire turn into the sort of neurotic craving that can keep our mind in a whirl – and sex here stands for all our desires. In the negative form of the precept, the idea of ‘sexual misconduct’ does not imply any moralistic attitude to particular forms of sexual activity, such as sex outside marriage, homosexuality, or masturbation. The sort of ‘misconduct’ the precept is advising us against is sexual behaviour that harms others, or ourselves.

Neurotic craving

Practising this precept involves exercising some control over our desires and appetites, to help us experience stillness, simplicity, and contentment. Buddhism sees ‘craving’ as the enemy of contentment, but it does not see all desires as ‘bad’. Many desires are healthy and necessary. When we are hungry, thirsty or cold, then our desires for food, water or warmth are all natural and positive. Our desires for friendship, community, beauty, creativity, and for a productive outlet for our energies, are also positive. Finally, we seem to have an inbuilt desire to fulfil our spiritual potential, and without this we would never grow and develop.

To do away with all desire would condemn us to a life of stagnation. So we need to distinguish between healthy desire, which is necessary for life and growth, and neurotic craving, which keeps us bound to a cycle of never-ending dissatisfaction. Neurotic craving could be defined as desire for something that cannot satisfy the need we are trying to satisfy. For example, if we overeat, we are not eating because our body needs nourishment. Perhaps we are looking for comfort in food because we lack affection or self-esteem. But food can never give us either of these – in fact, overeating will make it more difficult for us to get what we really need.

Becoming creative

Unfortunately a lot of our desire is neurotic. Until we begin to manifest more of our spiritual potential we will experience a sense that something is missing in our lives. Usually we try to satisfy this sense of inner dissatisfaction by grasping at things in the outer world, like pleasures and possessions. But these can only distract us temporarily from our sense of inner need, just as comfort-eating can only distract us from our need for affection. This displaced neurotic desire is the force that drives the consumer society, and it also drives many people’s
lives. It puts us on an endless treadmill, chasing an imaginary carrot. But happiness does not come from catching the carrot – it can never be caught. Instead it comes from getting off the treadmill, and looking for fulfilment where it actually can be found.

For most of us this would mean a radical shift in the way we approach life, and we are not likely to make this shift all at once. But practising this precept gives us a way to start, by beginning to leave behind our more obvious patterns of addictive behaviour based on neurotic craving. This can be one of the main ways we practice becoming creative, rather than simply repeating old comfort-seeking behaviours that deepen our reactive patterns. So for example when we feel the urge to escape from our sense of dissatisfaction by taking refuge in our normal distractions – food, cigarettes, shopping, drink, drugs, sex, or whatever – instead of responding in an unconscious way we can remain conscious, exercise our freedom, and choose to do something different and creative. At first this will mean that we have to face up to some discomfort, because changing old patterns is uncomfortable. But in the longer term – and perhaps quite quickly – we are likely to experience more and more positive mental states, and a growing sense of freedom and power in our lives.

The dangers of distraction

The ways we distract ourselves from our sense of inner dissatisfaction may not be ‘bad’ in themselves, but unless we keep them in their proper place, they can have at least three negative consequences. Firstly, if we orientate our life around them they stop us focusing our attention on what can really satisfy us, so that we waste our lives by constantly looking for fulfilment in the wrong place. Secondly these ways we distract ourselves often become addictive. The more we overeat, drink, smoke, take drugs, acquire property, shop, consume, masturbate, indulge in romantic fantasies, or whatever, the more difficult it becomes to disentangle ourselves from our habits and look for satisfaction in a different, more effective way. Thirdly, our addictive distractions often give rise to negative mental states, so that instead of helping us to be happy they actually separate us even further from the parts of ourselves that could give us real fulfilment. For example, when our desires are thwarted we may well feel anger or ill-will towards the people who stand between us and what we want. In fact our attempt to find happiness by consuming, owning or experiencing things in the outer world may cause a host of negative actions and mental states, including dishonesty, resentment, envy, and anxiety.

Sex

In its traditional negative form this precept focuses particularly on sex, as the most powerful craving for many people. Buddhism does not see sex in itself as ‘evil’, but sex can be a powerful focus for our neurotic desire, so we need to bring our creativity and ethical sense into our sexual lives.

For the lay Buddhist the negative form of this precept was traditionally taken to mean that we should avoid adultery, rape, and abduction. This is not much help as a guideline in present-day society, so we need to go back to first principles. The principle we need to apply is obviously that we should avoid harming others or ourselves through our sexual behaviour.

The following section has been written by a man, from a man’s perspective. For a fuller discussion of this issue from a woman’s point of view, see Appendix 1 below. Whatever your gender, both discussions are likely to have some relevance to you.
Not harming others
Our sexual desires are likely to harm others if we look for our own pleasure without taking other people into account. We should therefore try to see sexual partners as important in their own right, basing our relationships on mettā, and not exploiting others or treating them as sex objects. This would include not entering into unequal relationships where the partner has expectations we have no intention of fulfilling. We should also avoid causing pain to third parties for the sake of sex, for example by having sex with one member of a settled couple. In the present day, pornography too needs to be seen in the light of this precept.

Not harming ourselves
Our sexual desires harm us if we allow them to turn into neurotic craving, or if they are so demanding that they stop us experiencing peace of mind. We need to manage our sex drive so that it does not dominate our experience or set our life agenda – if we let it, sex can control our whole existence. Managing our sex drive means not stoking up our sexual desires unnaturally. This involves what is called 'guarding the gates of the senses' – controlling how we use our senses to reduce the amount of sexual stimulation we receive. We have a choice about where we put our attention, and if we constantly choose to focus on what we find sexually stimulating, then we will find peace of mind very difficult to achieve. Guarding the gates of the senses also involves watching how we use our mind, so that we don’t use sexual fantasies as a way of distracting ourselves from our experience. (In Buddhism the mind is seen as the sixth sense, as it is another gateway through which stimuli can enter our awareness.)

Managing our sex drive in an ethical way involves neither glorifying sex as something sublime, nor demonising it as something evil, both of which give it a power it does not deserve. Our sex drive is part of our animal inheritance – neither spiritual nor demonic.

Abstinence
Complete abstinence from sex has traditionally been seen as an important practice for monks, nuns, and other people seriously following the spiritual path. In the days before contraception this was partly for practical reasons. But celibacy is also an important practice in its own right. Freeing the mind from the constant disturbance caused by sexual desire is an enormous step towards contentment. Abstinence also makes energy available for other purposes, especially meditation. Because of this many Buddhists who are not normally celibate voluntarily refrain from sex for specific periods, perhaps for just a few weeks while on a retreat, perhaps for longer.

Stillness, simplicity, and contentment
The aim of this precept is to help us to become happier. By freeing ourselves from neurotic desires and slavery to biological urges we create a space in which we can experience peace of mind and positive mental states. But in the twenty-first century world craving is not the only enemy of contentment. Our society encourages a fast, hurried pace of life, which leaves little space for more expansive mental states. Many of us work too many hours, at jobs we do mainly for the pay cheque, at a pace that depletes our energies and causes high levels of anxiety. So much of our lives can be spent either earning money or spending it that we don’t have the energy to use our brief periods of rest creatively. ‘Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.’ And our over-active states of mind can become addictive, so that we find it difficult to switch off, and spend our precious leisure time giving ourselves even more input, doing things like watching TV or surfing the web.
Cultivating simplicity

If we want peace of mind – what the precept calls stillness and contentment – then we need to see simplicity as a positive quality, and we need to cultivate it. We may need to make some decisions about our priorities, and to simplify our lives accordingly. We may need to see that having fewer things – and spending less time earning the money to buy them – can make our life richer rather than poorer. We may need to overcome the conditioning that tells us that simplicity equals poverty, and instead see it as beautiful and desirable. Simplicity in life, like simplicity in art, is an aspect of elegant good taste, because it gets rid of unnecessary clutter, and opens up a sense of space, light, and freedom.

Cultivating stillness, simplicity and contentment does not mean that we should sit around doing nothing. We have energies, and we need to use them, or they will turn against us. But in our prosperous societies many of us could live more simply than we do, and this would allow us to spend less time working for purely economic reasons. This is in fact what many practising Buddhists choose to do, reducing the time spent on economic work, in order to spend more time on spiritual practice, altruistic activity, and creative pursuits, as well as making life more relaxed and spacious. For many people this sounds like an attractive idea, but achieving it involves disentangling ourselves from the consumer society – which may not sound so attractive, and requires some determination and strength of character, because it often runs completely counter to the values of our present society.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Do you agree that a lot of the desires that drive human activity are ‘neurotic’? If so, think of some examples.

2. “Happiness does not so much come from getting what we want, as from having fewer wants.” Do you agree? If so, what does this say about the approach to happiness offered by the consumer society?

3. What are some of your neurotic cravings and addictions (we all have them)?

4. How often do you think about sex? To what extent do you tend to seek out sense impressions that will increase your sexual desire, or on the other hand guard the gates of the senses to limit sex desire?

5. Do you see simplicity - in the sense of keeping what we own and consume down to what is necessary for a healthy life - as a positive or negative quality? How much scope do you have for simplifying your life?

6. Is your life too busy, or is it not busy enough? Either way, what could you do about it?

Suggested exercises

1. Give yourself at least an hour alone to do absolutely nothing this week – preferably longer. Notice any underlying sense of boredom, anxiety or dissatisfaction. Notice what you want to do to escape any discomfort. Instead, sit with the discomfort for a while, then do something skilful, such a meditating or exercising.
2. Consider taking a personal precept related to this ethical guideline for a week, for example:

- To give up some minor addiction for the week.
- To avoid television for the week.
- To simplify your life in some small way, like giving away a possession.
- To practice guarding the gates of the senses this week, avoiding sexual stimuli, or avoiding sense impressions that stoke up some other craving that is more relevant to your practice – desire for food might be an example.

3. Decide to go on retreat. Consult an Order member about which retreats might be appropriate, set aside at least a week, and make a reservation.

Appendix: Reflections on the Third Precept for Women
Written by Vajratara.

The introduction to the third precept gives a good overview of the underlying craving that gives rise to neurotic, addictive patterns of wanting, for example, food, cigarettes, shopping and sex. It also gives some suggestions of how we can work with that craving. Sex is used as the most powerful example of craving, and the third precept traditionally focuses on the area of unskilful sexual behaviour: rape, adultery and abduction. The question then arises, how can we practise the third precept in our modern situation, what does it mean for us now? Sex and sexual relationships are certainly a huge preoccupation for many people. This addition to week 4 of the course is from a women’s perspective. In it I offer some suggestions of discussion topics based on themes that I have encountered while exploring how to live a Dharma life and practise ethics as a woman in the UK. From that point of view it is necessarily culturally and socially specific. It may be useful to talk to someone from a different culture about sex and relationships. In the West we can assume our way of multiple relationships is the best, but from another culture’s point of view we can seem restless and unsatisfied. As the Dalai Lama said ‘we have won our freedom, but we lack contentment’. The norms around sex and sexual relationships differ widely in different generations and cultures. This addition to week 4 is not intended to be the definitive answer to the questions that arise when discussing this area, but rather some topics to think about and explore. By their nature they will be more relevant to women, but whatever your gender identification, you may find something of interest to reflect upon.

What do you really want?
In the introduction, neurotic desire is defined as ‘desire for something that cannot satisfy the need we are trying to satisfy’. Of course, sexual relationships don’t always have to be neurotic, but we do have to examine what we really want and whether we are communicating to the other person what we really want. Is it pleasure we want, or comfort, or deeper communication? Do we want friendship or emotional support? Do we want excitement, or a sense of emotional wholeness or engagement? If we examine what we really want, the next question is can sex or a particular sexual relationship really satisfy that need, or are we expecting something from that relationship that it cannot possibly satisfy?

A major issue that has come up in discussion with other women is entering into relationships with unequal expectations. An example of this is when one person wants sex, one person
wants a long term relationship. To get what we want, it is tempting to be unclear about expectations or to agree to what the other person wants despite our own deeper desires. This leads to suffering in the long term as both partners have to face not getting what they wanted from the other person.

A topic that has come up in study groups I have led for women is being vague about contraception, having a buried desire to have a baby that leads to unconscious slips with contraception. We called this getting pregnant ‘accidentally-on-purpose’. Having a child is a huge responsibility and commitment and it is important that both partners are fully behind the decision to bring a life into being. If you want a child, it is better to be honest about that both with yourself and with your partner so that you can go about it in a conscious and careful way, setting up the best conditions possible.

In his book *The Noble Eight-Fold Path*, Sangharakshita talks about the positive counterpart to the third precept, contentment, as ‘a positive state of freedom from using sex to satisfy neurotic needs in general and, in particular, using it to satisfy the neurotic need for change’. It may be interesting to reflect on whether a need for change, or a dissatisfaction with our current situation, is underlying our desire for sex or a sexual relationship. Dissatisfaction with our current state can be very uncomfortable to experience, even painful at times. Sangharakshita calls it ‘the flame of desire that burns unsatisfied from birth to birth until once and for all extinguished in the cool waters of Nirvāṇa’⁴. The Buddha made it clear that there is a certain kind of desire that can only be satisfied by spiritual fulfilment. He called this ‘dharmachanda’ which means desire for the Truth. We may look to sex or romance to fulfil that desire, but only spiritual practice can satisfy that deeper need. In this case devotional practice such as pūjā and mantra recitation can be better than looking for another person to fulfil what is essentially an existential problem.

**Projection**

We are often led to believe that sexual attraction is independent of our will, we are shot through the heart by a flowery bow and arrow! The Buddhist view is that everything that arises, does so in dependence on conditions. This includes sexual attraction. There is a volition to fall in love or be attracted to someone. Often we are attracted to someone because they embody our emergent qualities: qualities that we are developing or would like to develop. Sangharakshita describes this process of ‘projection’ in the following way: ‘Because one does not experience certain qualities in oneself, in the sense of not having integrated them into one’s conscious being, one is unconsciously drawn to finding them outside oneself.’⁵

An exercise that might be useful to explore is to examine why you are attracted to someone – is it their confidence, their spontaneity, their spiritual practice? Once you identify that quality, you can look for it in yourself. It is likely that you do possess that quality, at least in germinal form, and you would like to develop it more fully. The difficulty with getting into a sexual relationship with someone else who we are projecting those qualities onto is that we look to them to embody them, rather than developing them in ourselves. It may also be the case that they don’t embody them at all, it was something we projected onto them. When the projection fails one can experience deep disappointment with them. This doesn’t mean we should never get into a relationship with someone who embodies qualities we admire, but if we do, we

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⁴ *A Survey of Buddhism*, Sangharakshita, Chapter 1.
⁵ *Living Ethically*, Sangharakshita, page 88.
should make sure they really do embody those qualities, and let them inspire similar qualities in us.

**Sex and Power**
The traditional formula of the third precept clearly indicates abstention from forcing someone to do something against their wishes: rape and abduction. The examples are usually taken to be from a man’s perspective. It is important we heed the advice to abstain from any form of violence, but we also need to look at the more subtle manifestations of violence in our own lives: exploiting someone or manipulating them to get what we want. Women are perfectly capable of doing this as well as men. One has to ask oneself honestly if we have ever used our sexual power over someone else to further our desires.

Power used in this way can indicate a deeper lack of self worth. If we lack confidence in ourselves we can habitually use sex and relationships to bolster our sense of self. It is easy to look to sex and sexual attractiveness to feel better about ourselves. If other people find us attractive or desire us in some way, this makes us feel we are worth something. In this way we look to others for approval and affirmation. We want other people to be attracted to us so that we can feel our place in the world. Through Buddhist practice, particularly the *Mettā Bhāvanā*, we can cultivate inner confidence and self worth that means that we no longer have to look outside of ourselves for affirmation. This means that our relationships are healthy; mutually appreciative rather than exploitative.

**Cultivating Aesthetic Appreciation**
Underlying sexual and romantic attraction is the tendency to make oneself a subject in a position of grasping an object. This can happen when we are first attracted to someone as well as when we are in a long-term settled relationship. If we identify someone as an object, we ‘objectify’ them. We enter into a relationship with someone as someone we can have or reject, rather than a person in their own right, independent of our own desires. The Buddhist tradition talks about this as *pema*, ‘sticky attachment’. This means grasping onto someone as an object that we want, that somehow makes us feel complete as a subject. That attachment gives rise to painful mental states, particularly when we don’t get what we want. We feel that somehow our self identification is threatened and we want to hang on to that person at any cost. We can experience jealousy even over quite trivial events if the object of our desire seems to move their attention to someone else. Our attraction can turn to hate if the object of our desires rejects us in any way.

The way to work against this tendency is to cultivate aesthetic appreciation for the other person. Aesthetic appreciation is neither a denial of attraction, nor an identification with it, seeing ourselves as a subject grasping an object. Aesthetic appreciation is akin to mettā. Mettā does not seek to own its object, but to delight in it. If we see a person with mettā we see them as beautiful, but we don’t want to own that beauty. Because we see that person as existing independently of us with their own hopes and fears and qualities, we naturally want to help them to grow and develop, even if that means getting out of their way. As Sangharakshita explains: ‘Metta is disinterested. When it’s a question of lust you want to grab; when it’s a question of aesthetic appreciation, you just want to stand back and contemplate.’ We can relax around our attraction, we can relax with our long term partner. We can delight in them without trying to have or own them.

**Conclusion**
The main message that the Buddha and Sangharakshita give when exploring these issues is to take an honest look at the whole area of attraction, sex and settled relationships. What seems
most important is clarity. What mental state are you expressing in your sexual behaviour? Are you really being free and non-conventional, or are you acting out of craving and fear? What do you really want from the relationship? No one can tell you the answer to that, one has to look inside oneself for one’s true motivation. We also need to examine the likely consequences of our behaviour. We may be attracted to someone who is already in a settled relationship, and they may be attracted to us, but what will be the consequences of following that attraction through? If we read sentimental romantic or erotic novels, or watch films with those themes, what will be the likely effect on our mind?

Sangharakshita advised the Triratna Buddhist Order to ‘move towards complete brahmacarya’, which means a state without sexual polarisation or objectification: celibacy. He said it isn’t a case of some people being totally celibate, and some people being totally non-celibate, we all experience states without sexual polarisation, or more positively speaking, contentment. If we can make more space for contentment in our lives, for aesthetic appreciation and simple pleasures, we will find that we won’t need to be so preoccupied with sexual relationships. They simply won’t take up as much space in our lives. If we are in a settled relationship, it will mean we get into more satisfying, open communication with our partner based on mettā rather than grasping.

Eventually this may lead to periods of time without sex or sexual relationships, perhaps even a lifetime. Most people experience periods of time without sex as very satisfying, for example when we go on retreat, or between relationships. We experience ourselves in a different way. Perhaps we get more in touch with our deeper longings, or with what we really want in life. We put more energy into our friendships and other relationships. We become less preoccupied with our sexual and romantic desires.

This is a radical thing to do in this society where we are given the message that somehow we are not complete unless we are in a sexual relationship or having sex. Sexual relationships are taken as a sign of worth in society, and sexual attractiveness a validation of our femininity. We may be frightened that if we don’t have sex, we will be cutting off our emotions. Emotional intensity and intimacy are associated purely with romance and sex, and if we give up on them, we may feel our emotions will become dry or stagnate. However, it doesn’t have to be that way. We can feel our femininity, our sense of self worth and emotional intensity through other means, particularly through friendships. Perhaps it is better to think more in terms of cultivating deeper friendships than giving up sex. Celibacy, temporary or permanent, doesn’t have to be a colourless state, but a state of contentment, delight and beauty.
The Fourth Precept: the Principle of Truthfulness

**Positive form:** *With truthful communication, I purify my speech.*

**Negative form:** *I undertake the training principle of refraining from false speech.*

**Pāli:** Musāvāda veramanī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.

**Introduction**

How we speak shapes the world we live in. Our speech has a strong effect on us, and on other people. Clearly we need some ethical guidelines about our speech. Of course these need to go beyond truthfulness – for example members of the Triratna Buddhist Order take on a total of four speech precepts – but these extra precepts could all be seen as aspects of other ethical principles, such as kindness, that are covered by other precepts. In the Five Precepts – the most widespread ethical formula in the Buddhist world – the need for truthfulness is the one aspect of speech that is singled out and dealt with separately.

Truthful speech is not an elementary, beginners’ practice. As we shall see, it is a difficult practice that strongly challenges our usual egocentric approach to life.

**The principle of truthfulness**

We could define truthfulness as a courageous respect for reality, even when acknowledging and facing up to the truth goes against what we see as our self-centred goals, or when it might cause us discomfort.

So practising this precept is about developing the qualities of straightforwardness and integrity. This means facing and speaking the truth even when this goes against what our ego wants, and so undermining our tendency to give priority to our self-centred desires over reality. This raises an important side-issue – that the precept is about speaking the truth when this is uncomfortable for us, not when it is uncomfortable for other people. People often object to this precept on the grounds that speaking the truth can be unkind, as though our untruthfulness was usually about sparing other people’s feelings. In fact, for most of us, most of our untruthfulness is about our own selfishness, and it is this we are trying to tackle. When it comes to speaking the truth about others we need to give priority to kindness, which will involve tact and consideration, although it will usually also include speaking the truth, at the right time. (Sometimes we tell ourselves we are lying to spare another’s feelings, when really we are trying to avoid the discomfort we would feel if we told the truth.)

**The dangers of untruthfulness**

If we distort the truth in our speech we harm ourselves directly, we cut ourselves off from others, and we cut ourselves off from the spiritual community.
Untruthfulness harms us
We harm ourselves, because whenever we distort the truth we make it more difficult to be truthful with ourselves – to face up to reality and see ourselves as we really are – which undermines our whole spiritual practice. We undermine our integrity and sense of wholeness, cutting ourselves off from what is best in us, and alienating ourselves from our higher nature – which some traditions call our Buddha Nature.

Untruthfulness cuts us off from others
Distorting the truth also cuts us off from others. We cannot be in communication with others if we are not telling the truth. If we are untruthful, then what we are communicating is not real – so there can be no real communication. One important aim of ethics is to help us to behave in ways that reflect and increase our sense of connectedness with others. Communication is a powerful way of increasing this connectedness and breaking down the barriers between ourselves and others. By cutting us off from true communication, false speech increases our painful, deluded sense of ourselves as a hard, tight, separate ego, cut off from others and in conflict with the rest of the world.

Untruthfulness cuts us off from the spiritual community
Creating the spiritual community is an important part of our practice. We all need a spiritual community – a Sangha – to get far in the spiritual life. We need to be part of a community of people who share a common aspiration and support each other in their practice. We need friendships where we can be open and honest, with no fear that anything we say will be used against us. This sort of spiritual community can only exist when people trust each other, and trust is only possible when people speak the truth. Lying and distortion inevitably creates distrust. So when we lie or distort the truth in the context of the Sangha we cut ourselves off from the spiritual community, with disastrous consequences for our own progress, and we undermine the spiritual community for others.

The extent of truthful speech
In asking us to adopt truthful speech as an aspect of our spiritual training this precept goes beyond what would normally be called lying. Of course it covers the direct lie, but it also asks us to strive to make our speech give a true reflection of reality, avoiding the one-sided distortions that our ego-centred desires give rise to. This would include, for example, not exaggerating – to make ourselves look good, or important, or interesting, or hard-done-by, or to make others look worse than they are. It would include not putting the spin on events that puts us in the best light, or puts us in the right, or gets us what we want. It would include not looking for excuses so as to avoid blame, but owning up to our own responsibility. It would include presenting both sides of the story, and not just our own. It would include avoiding all the omissions and false emphases that give a false picture of what really happened, while staying this side of a direct lie. The precept asks us to be openly and courageously truthful as a spiritual practice, not to stick to the letter of any literalistic rule.

The benefits of practising truthfulness
Truthfulness is a demanding practice. Very often we hold a sort of press conference for ourselves through our speech, constantly trying to edit reality to make ourselves look the way we want to be seen. Often we are not even aware we are doing this – we actually believe our own distortions, and we can react angrily if they are challenged. To consciously set out to change these patterns is a difficult but powerful transformative practice. It makes us more aware of our unconscious motivations, improves our relationships with others, reduces our anxiety levels, and brings about a general improvement in our ethical practice, which is reflected in a general improvement in our mental states.
Developing awareness

To practice truthful speech we have to be aware of our speech. We have to be mindful when this can be most difficult – when we are interacting with other people, with all the reactions and emotions this involves. Often we are not really very conscious of our speech, or of the volitions behind it. So a lot of the time our dishonesty slips by unnoticed, and once some time has passed we may begin to believe our own distortions. But if we consciously decide to tell the truth, then we have to watch ourselves, we have to ask ourselves, as we speak, “Is this true?” This makes us more conscious of our mental processes, and forces us to examine the stories we tell ourselves. If we do not take up the training rule of truthful speech as a conscious practice, then we run the risk of staying in a fog, never becoming aware of the way we twist the truth to suit our own purposes. In which case it will be very hard for us to make any spiritual progress.

The Eight Worldly Winds

Most of the time we distort the truth to get what we want in some way. One useful framework for looking at the way we do this is the ‘Eight Worldly Winds’. These are four pairs of positives and negatives that tend to govern our egocentric responses to the world – we constantly try to get as much as we can of the ‘positive’ side of each pair, and avoid the negative.

The Eight Worldly Winds are:

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<th>gain (of money and possession)</th>
<th>versus</th>
<th>loss</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>praise or approval</td>
<td>versus</td>
<td>blame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pleasure or comfort</td>
<td>versus</td>
<td>pain or discomfort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fame or status</td>
<td>versus</td>
<td>loss of fame or status</td>
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The worldly winds are the ego’s scorecards, which determine whether it thinks it is doing well or badly in the game of life. Normally we distort the truth in the service of winning one or another of these games. We want to gain money or goods, and to avoid losing them. We want to be praised or liked, and to avoid blame. We want to have comfort or pleasures, and to avoid discomfort. And we want to increase our importance in other people’s eyes.

Because our tendency to distort the truth is so directly related to our self-centred motivations, the practice of truthful speech helps us to recognise our egotistic patterns, and to go beyond them. If we are consciously practising this precept, then over and over again in our daily interactions we will be confronted with the fact that we very much want to distort the truth for some self-centred reason, but that our ethical guidelines warn us against this. Usually the motive for untruthfulness will be connected with one of the Eight Worldly Winds, for example we will want to avoid blame or to make someone like us. Our practice of the precept will blow the whistle on this motivation, and we will be led to confront our unconscious volitions. Then, instead of doing what we usually do, we can take the skilful, creative option.

If we really take on this precept in a courageous way it can be a radical and transformative practice, because it tackles our unconscious egocentricity in a large number of everyday situations, making us aware of our real drives and helping us to confront them. The Eight Worldly Winds are so much part of our motivation that we may be tempted to distort the truth almost all the time when we are interacting with other people, so that practising this precept gives us a very fruitful way of bringing our practice into our daily life.
We can reinforce the way truthful speech makes us more aware by involving other people, and asking them to help us. They may point out to us when we drift away from the truth, which will have very positive effects on our mindfulness! Our spiritual friends can hold a mirror up to us, which can sometimes allow us to see our own untruthfulness clearly for the first time.

**Better relationships**

As we begin to practice the fourth precept more consciously we may also notice that our relationships improve. We start to be more genuine, revealing more about ourselves, and letting some of our defences down. People tend to like us more when we stop hiding behind a mask and reveal our vulnerability. And as we become more open, so others become more open with us. Over time the quality of our friendships can become deeper and more satisfying, and our whole life becomes richer and more rewarding as a result.

People value and respond to integrity. As we practice truthfulness people realise that we can be trusted. And because truthfulness allows real communication, people are much more eager to befriend people who practice truthfulness than those who don’t.

**Less anxiety**

Practising truthful speech often helps us to feel more at ease, and less shy and anxious around other people. When we distort the truth to create an unreal image of ourselves, we fear that people will see through the mask we have created to the real person we are trying to hide. This can cause a sense of shyness, and an underlying anxiety in our interactions with others. Being more open and straightforward allows us to let go of this anxiety. We find that if we reveal ourselves more as we really are, people do not respond with disapproval – in fact they actually like and accept us far more.

**A general improvement in ethics**

Finally, if we seriously take on a practice of truthfulness we will probably find that our whole practice of ethics will improve, including areas that at first sight seem to have nothing to do with speech. For example we might realise that we have not been honest with the tax man, or that we have not been honest with some important person in our life, and that if we are going to speak the truth from now on we will not be able to carry on the deception, and need to sort the situation out. So our commitment to honesty will help us to tackle the legacy of past unskilfulness. This has the effect of reconnecting us with our sense of integrity, and putting us more in touch with our higher self. The process may cost us some money, or make us eat humble pie – of course the ego hates the idea of either – but this may be just what our spiritual life needs!

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**Questions for reflection and discussion**

1. Do you agree that distorting the truth has a harmful effect on us? Why, or why not?

2. Think of one occasion when you distorted the truth over the past week. What was the motivation for this? Can you relate your motivation to one of the 'Worldly Winds'?

3. Which pair of 'Worldly Winds' affects you most strongly? How does it affect your speech?
4. Do you agree that practising truthful speech helps to reduce anxiety and increase self-confidence? Why, or why not?

**Suggested exercises**

1. Own up and apologise for a distortion of the truth you have made over the past week. Notice the effect this has on your relationship with the person concerned, and tell the group about it.

2. Consciously take on the training principle of not distorting the truth this week, noticing under what circumstances you find this difficult, and its effect on you. Report back on your experiences.

3. Involve someone you trust and are close to – or more than one person – in helping you to practice the fourth precept. Ask them to point out when your speech distorts what really happened – and notice your reactions to this!
The Fifth Precept: Awareness, not Escapism

Positive form: With mindfulness clear and radiant, I purify my mind.
Negative form: I undertake to abstain from drink and drugs that cloud the mind.
Pāli: Surā-meraya-majja-pamādatthānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṁ samādiyāmi.

The importance of awareness in Buddhism
In Buddhism growth in awareness is seen as an essential part of spiritual development. The enlightened mind that Buddhists aim to develop is a more aware mind. Awareness of ourselves is what liberates us from our past patterns. Awareness of others and the world around us is what transforms our emotional life. Ultimately, awareness of reality liberates us from the delusion that is the root of all our suffering and dissatisfaction.

The meanings of mindfulness
The quality of awareness that Buddhists seek to develop is often called ‘mindfulness’. But this one English word is used for three separate Sanskrit words, which have different shades of meaning.

1. Smṛti (Pāli sati) is usually translated as mindfulness or awareness, but its primary meaning is recollection or even memory. As with the English word ‘recollectedness’, smṛti is normally used to mean the state of being present in our actual experience, which is the opposite of distraction or absent-mindedness.

2. Samprajanya (Pāli sampajañña) literally means ‘clear knowing’. It is used to mean clearly knowing your purpose, and the relationship of what you are doing to your goal. Sangharakshita often speaks of samprajanya as ‘mindfulness of purpose’.

3. Apramāda (Pāli appamāda) means awareness in an active, ethical sense – it is sometimes translated as vigilance. It means mindfully guarding against unskilful actions of body, speech and mind. (The Buddha’s last words were said to be appamādena sampadetha (in Pāli), which is often translated as ‘with mindfulness, strive on.’) Its opposite is pramāda, which means among other things intoxication, carelessness, and laxity.

Taking these three words together we get some idea of the multi-faceted nature of the Buddhist concept of mindfulness, and its crucial importance for the spiritual life. Without smṛti we will not be present to our experience, we will not be aware enough to enjoy what we are doing or the world around us, and in our distraction we will have no hope of having either samprajanya or apramāda. Without samprajanya we will continually forget what our life is about, drifting along aimlessly at the mercy of external events, never achieving our goals or putting our decisions into effect. Without apramāda we will not be able to keep any of the other precepts, so mindfulness could be said to be the foundation of all our ethical practice.
Without mindfulness we are on automatic pilot. We have no real choice, and no freedom – life is living us, rather than us living life. As we develop more and more mindfulness we develop the ability to consciously choose our responses to circumstances, other people, and the workings of our own minds.

**Classifications of Awareness**

Awareness has many aspects or dimensions. In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (The Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness), the Buddha defines the Four Foundations of Mindfulness as:

1. Mindfulness of the body.
2. Mindfulness of feelings.
3. Mindfulness of the mind.

Sangharakshita has expanded this traditional formulation, identifying what he calls the Four Dimensions of Awareness, which are:

1. Awareness of things, or the physical environment.
2. Awareness of self including:
   a. Awareness of body.
   b. Awareness of feelings.
   c. Awareness of thoughts.
3. Awareness of other people.
4. Awareness of reality.

1. **Awareness of the physical environment**

Many people notice that when they start meditating they become more aware of the world around them, and that this enriches their enjoyment of life enormously. The grass, the trees, the ever-changing sky, even the cityscape of buildings, engineering works and artificial light, all start to take on a new clarity, vividness, and beauty. The world we live in is very beautiful, but normally many of us are too distracted and preoccupied to pay attention to it. Learning to pay attention to the world and to take delight in it is one of the greatest favours we can do ourselves. Meditation helps, but we also need to apply our heightened awareness during the routine of our everyday lives. To some extent this is simply a matter of deciding to pay attention. We need to learn to look at the world, smell the world, listen to the world, feel the world, and even taste the world. To do this we may need to devote some time to it – giving ourselves the space to walk rather than taking the quickest way from A to B, and so on. We may also need to restrain our tendency to distract ourselves with artificial inputs, or by indulging our inner fantasies and daydreams.

2. **Awareness of the self**

a) **Awareness of the body**

This is some of what the Buddha has to say about developing mindfulness of the body:

> Here a monk.... sits down cross-legged, holding his body erect, having established mindfulness before him. Mindfully he breathes in, mindfully he breathes out... He trains himself thinking, “I will breath in, conscious of the whole body.” He trains himself thinking, “I will breath out, conscious of the whole body...
When walking, he knows that he is walking, when standing, he knows that he is standing, when lying down, he knows that he is lying down. In whatever way his body is disposed, he knows that is how it is.

When going forward or going back, he is clearly aware of what he is doing; in looking forward or looking back, he is clearly aware of what he is doing; in bending and stretching, he is clearly aware of what he is doing; in carrying his robe and his bowl, he is clearly aware of what he is doing; in eating, drinking, chewing and savouring, he is clearly aware of what he is doing; in passing excrement or urine, he is clearly aware of what he is doing; in speaking or in staying silent, he is clearly aware of what he is doing.

Practising in this way can have a powerful effect, which is impossible to imagine unless we have experienced it. The body becomes suffused with awareness, our mental processes become calmed, our attention is taken away from the anxious chatter of our discursive mind, and is grounded instead in an awareness of our physical being that allows us to experience a sense of grace in even the most simple actions. We also appreciate the world around us in a new way – awareness of the body and awareness of the world around us seem to go together, as both quieten our inner dialogue.

So being more mindful of the body brings many rewards in its own right, but it is also the foundation on which we build all other aspects of mindfulness. When our awareness is grounded in our actual physical experience, we have a firm anchor that lets us become more aware of our inner mental processes without getting caught up and swept along by them. But when we are not ‘in our body’ we have no firm place to stand, and we all too easily get lost in a purely mental world of fleeting thoughts, feelings, imaginations, and anxieties.

Going on a meditation retreat can help us become more aware of our bodies. We can also cultivate mindfulness of the body in our everyday life e.g. by walking and eating mindfully, rather than distracting ourselves from our physical experience by listening to music or reading at the same time. Any form of physical exercise can help, if it is done in the right frame of mind. Yoga and tai chi have developed specifically as aids to body awareness, and are particularly helpful.

b) Awareness of feelings
The word ‘feeling’ as used by the Buddha in this context does not mean emotion, it refers to what is called, in Pāli, vedanā. Vedanā means the instantaneous response of liking or disliking that we get whenever any stimulus impinges on our senses. According to whether it gives us a pleasant or unpleasant vedanā, we try to grab or reject different parts of our experience. Our vedanās arise from our past conditioning, and often they are not connected with any objective good or bad qualities inherent in the thing or experience itself – why should one person love strawberry ice cream, or rainy weather, when another hates it?

When our responses to vedanā rule our life we live in what someone has jokingly called ‘doggy consciousness’ – like a dog chasing smells it likes, shying away from what it dislikes, running this way then that with no fixed aim at all. Responding automatically and unconsciously to our vedanās is what keeps us trapped in our old reactive patterns of behaviour. The gap between vedanā and our response is our point of freedom, where we can escape from past patterns and free ourselves to act in new and creative ways. This only becomes possible when we are aware of our vedanās, without responding – hence mindfulness of feelings in this sense is a crucial part of our effort to liberate ourselves.
Sangharakshita also uses the word ‘feeling’ in a broader sense, to include emotions. Being aware of our emotions is a crucial part of becoming a conscious, self-determining human being, living from the full potency of our hearts as well as our heads. If we are not aware of our emotions they tend to rule us, without us having any conscious choice in the matter. We have all had experience of people who say that they are not angry or resentful, when everything about their body language and tone of voice clearly shows that they are. These may be extreme examples, but most of us could usefully become more aware of the underlying emotions that are driving us.

As we become more aware of our emotional life we have more choice about how we express our feelings. This may start out by us simply refusing to express harmful emotions, especially when we know that these would not be helpful. But as our practice deepens, mindfulness of feelings starts to have a deeper effect, transforming our emotions so that our experience becomes more and more positive. The very act of becoming aware of our emotions has this transformative effect – our unskilful emotions tend to be resolved, and our skilful emotions tend to become stronger and more refined.

c) Awareness of thoughts

Often our heads are full of mental chatter. We are constantly planning the future, regretting the past, worrying about what other people think, imagining what is going to happen, constructing fantasies, making assumptions about other people and their motives, and so on. This constant stream of thoughts gives us little time for peace of mind or enjoyment of the world around us. And what is worse, we often take our mental dialogue completely seriously, and identify with it, so that what starts out as a passing thought becomes a whole fantasy which we take for a reality, and which we then act out in the world.

But in fact most of our thinking is like mental weather – it comes, and it goes, in dependence on past conditions. We do not have to take it so seriously, identify with it, or pour energy into it. If instead we can maintain clear awareness of our mental weather, we have taken the first step in liberating ourselves from it. As with feelings, awareness of our thoughts has a transformative effect. As we learn to watch our thoughts from moment to moment, firstly in meditation, and then in our everyday life as well, we notice that the flow of mental chatter often slows down or stops altogether. This can be a profoundly refreshing experience, which goes along with a deep sense of peace. We also become more able to evaluate our thinking, sifting what is true and objective from what simply untrue, clouded by negative emotion, or based on mere assumptions. We become more able to consciously direct our thinking, so that we can reflect on the subject we choose in a more effective, concentrated way, rather than simply drifting from one thought to another. And we may also find that as our superficial thinking quietens down we become able to think from deeper levels, so that thinking and feeling become fused into one higher faculty, and our intuitions becomes more frequent and reliable.

3. Awareness of other people

Usually most of us are not very aware of other people in their fullness, as beings who feel and experience as intensely as we do, who have a whole inner world as we do, and who are in every way as important as we are. Apart from the few people we are close to, we often see people almost as objects, who either exist for our convenience – to drive our bus or cook our dinner – or else are of no interest at all. One way to change this lack of awareness is simply to pay attention to people, which includes looking at them – their faces, their eyes, their body language. When we really pay attention to people we begin to see them as they are, as human
beings in their own right. We also need to make an effort to pay attention to people close to us, to use our senses and imagination to know what they are feeling, to empathise with them and know their needs. Unless we are aware of other people we cannot feel mettā for them, and we cannot communicate with them.

4. Awareness of reality
In traditional texts this is usually described in terms of relating our experience to Buddhist ideas like the Four Noble Truths. This can allow us to cut through our usual interpretations of events, and see things in a truer light. For example, if we make the effort to remain mindful of the fact of transience, then we will see transience and change everywhere, and our deluded tendency to interpret the world in terms of fixed permanent ‘things’ will be eroded. We may also be liberated from some of our anxieties and negative states – when our car gets dented or we notice some grey hairs, this may not seem so awful or surprising in the context of a cosmos that is one huge process of transformation!

The negative form of the precept
In Sangharakshita’s words, mindfulness “is fundamental to spiritual practice; one cannot begin without it.” So it is not surprising that Buddhist ethical guidelines advise us not to do those things that destroy our mindfulness needlessly. The negative form of the fifth precept therefore calls for us to refrain from drink and drugs that cloud the mind.

Alcohol
Some newcomers to Buddhism have a problem accepting this negative form of the precept, because for many people in Western societies drinking alcohol is an integral part of their social life. But in this respect there are several things we should think about.

Firstly, the precept is advising us not to drink to the point that our mindfulness is impaired. For some people this may not rule out some social drinking, or the occasional glass of wine with a meal. Secondly, as with all the precepts, what is important is that we are moving in the right direction, not necessarily that we immediately follow all the precepts perfectly. Thirdly, it can be unwise to jump ahead in our imagination to a point where we are further advanced in our practice than we are now, and then judge what this might be like from our present position. At the moment, a life without alcohol might seem like a joyless prospect. But by the time we are ready to give up alcohol completely things may look very different. Most practising Buddhists find that, as their normal state of mind becomes happier and their emotions warmer and more easily expressed, they lose the desire to drink alcohol. Many find the dulled awareness caused by alcohol unpleasant.

So we do not need to feel that we cannot be a practising Buddhist unless we give up alcohol. But we should recognise that our practice will lead us in that direction if we want to make serious progress. Many Buddhists in the West drink alcohol occasionally, but few serious practitioners in the Triratna Buddhist Community drink regularly, or to the point of intoxication. Many never drink at all. In particular, when we are trying to make serious progress in meditation it is advisable not to drink any alcohol, as even small amounts affect our meditation the next morning.

As with the other precepts, the advice not to drink alcohol has an other-regarding aspect, as well as protecting our own well-being. Many people are seriously damaged by alcohol, and cause a great deal of unhappiness to themselves and those close to them. Others equate drunkenness with happiness, and spend a lot of their leisure time in a dulled, coarsened state, which must have a long term effect on their spiritual well-being. By abstaining from drink we
make it easier for others to do so, making the world a happier place in the process. By not drinking we also withhold our complicity from the alcohol industry, an exploitative aspect of the consumer society, which profits from creating a great deal of unhappiness.

**Other drugs**
The fifth precept also advises against the use of intoxicating drugs other than alcohol. Cannabis is the most common recreational drug after alcohol in modern Western societies, and paradoxically it may have a more serious effect on spiritual practice than alcohol, precisely because it is not so obviously damaging. If we drink too much alcohol we will quickly be confronted with some stark choices. But it is possible to spend our every moment to some extent dulled by cannabis, particularly as it lasts for many days in the body. Even occasional cannabis use is bad news for mindfulness and meditation.

Lastly, what about other mind-altering drugs like LSD, psilocybin (magic mushrooms), and ecstasy? Some people are attracted to the Dharma because drugs like these revealed the possibility of other states of being, or even opened up something like a spiritual experience. But continued use of these drugs is damaging, and having found the Dharma, with its many much healthier and more sustainable ways of expanding our consciousness, why take the risks involved in the violent chemical alteration of consciousness? (Sangharakshita has described LSD for example as ‘spiritual baby food’ – and as with baby food, when we are more spiritually grown up it is unnecessary and unpleasant.)

**Mindfulness in daily life**
Mindfulness is difficult to maintain, and because it is so crucial to spiritual life we need to do everything we can to develop and maintain it. This could include meditation, retreats, body awareness exercises, giving ourselves the time to be aware of simple pleasures, avoiding too much rush and input overload, and making the effort to be aware of the world around us. Another important way of developing mindfulness is to keep in contact with other Buddhists, to use the conducive environment provided by the Sangha. To quote Sangharakshita:

> If you realise the importance of ...mindfulness...you realise that if you lose it, you lose, in a sense, everything, then you are going to want to do something a little more radical than tying a knot in your handkerchief to make sure you preserve it. And one very effective way is to develop spiritual friendship.

**Questions for reflection and discussion**

1. Has your mindfulness increased since you started to meditate? If so, which aspects of your awareness have been most affected?

2. When are you most mindful of your body? Do you notice any relationship between mindfulness of the body and your mental state, especially anxiety?

3. What could you do to increase your mindfulness of the body?

4. What effects have retreats or periods with little activity had on your mindfulness?
5. Do you accept that it would be a good idea to avoid intoxicants? To what extent do you practice this? If you do not practice the precept perfectly, has your use of intoxicants changed since you started practising the Dharma?