



Lay morality

From *Discovering Buddhism* by Dominique Side

When one becomes a Buddhist, one begins by taking the Three Refuges: Refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. The main commitment this entails in terms of behaviour is that one refrains from harming others and adopts the approach of **non-violence** (*ahimsa*). Non-violence can be said to be one of the most basic, fundamental principles of Buddhist ethics.

Lay people can take one or several of the **Five Precepts**, which are five basic vows that underpin the Buddhist way of life. The Five Precepts are:

- **I vow to refrain from killing**
Killing refers not only to human beings but to all living beings, even mosquitos, spiders and cockroaches.
- **I vow to refrain from taking what is not freely given**
'Taking what is not freely given' means stealing in any of its forms, not just stealing possessions but, for example, wasting your employer's time or infringing copyright. Stealing can happen openly or through deceit, for example through cheating.
- **I vow to refrain from misusing sexuality**
Misusing sexuality is generally interpreted as using sexual relationships in a way that causes harm to someone else. This is very broad and can include adultery, incest, rape, paedophilia and so forth.
- **I vow to refrain from harmful speech**
False or harmful speech includes lying, slander, harsh words and idle gossip.
- **I vow to refrain from taking intoxicants.**
The reason that intoxicants are discouraged is because they cloud the mind and weaken the judgement, and, as a result, one might perform actions that one will later regret. Intoxicants include alcohol, leisure drugs, the misuse of prescription drugs and other substances (like glue), and some modern teachers also include tobacco because it is considered harmful to both body and mind. Lay Buddhists may drink alcohol socially but they refrain from drinking to excess.

Buddhism also encourages positive attitudes and actions. Love and compassion for all beings, tolerance, patience, forgiveness and contentment are all cultivated by Buddhists. In his advice to a young man called Sigala, found in the Pali Canon¹, the Buddha explained how this positive approach can be applied in daily life within the framework of **Six Relationships**:

1. **Take care of your family.** Respect, listen to and obey your parents, and look after them when they are old. Look after your children, see they are well educated, find appropriate work and marry well.



2. **Take care of your marriage.** Be loving and faithful to your partner and work hard at your side of the partnership. Husbands and wives should be fair to each other, trust each other and not squander joint money. They should also enjoy themselves together, and the Buddha even suggests that a husband should buy his wife presents and jewellery.
3. **Keep good company** and choose the right friends. Keep away from those who will have a bad influence on you. Be kind to your friends, keep promises, help them in times of trouble.
4. **Develop good relationships between teachers and students.** Respect your teachers, appreciate their help, be polite to them and work hard. Teachers should respect their pupils and give them the best education possible.
5. **Develop good relationships between employers and employees,** or workers and management. Employers should take care of their workers, give them decent wages and fair work conditions. Employees should respect their employer, work hard and not waste time. Both should work harmoniously together and not complain about each other but praise each other.
6. **Choose a good career** and earn money in a wholesome way. To have money is not bad or immoral in itself, but it should be used wisely to help family, friends and community. This guideline relates to Right Livelihood in the Eightfold Path: choosing a job that does not harm or exploit others, and that does not require one to break the Five Precepts.

The Buddha's advice was very practical, and he often gave the reasons behind his guidance so people would be convinced. For example, he said that drinking alcohol is harmful because it wastes money, leads to quarrels, impairs your health, gives you a bad reputation, leads you to do immoral things you will later regret, and weakens the brain. As for gambling, he said it's harmful because when you lose, you lose money, and when you win you make enemies; in addition, nobody will trust you, friends despise you and nobody will want to be married to you.



Windows into Buddhism is licenced under a Creative Commons 4.0 international licence.

¹ *Sigalaka Sutta*, 'Advice to Lay People', Digha Nikaya 31.