

At this point, please be reminded that the illusory manifestation and existence of all phenomena stem from the karmic forces engendered by sentient beings. So if one thoroughly realizes the conditioned and empty nature of phenomena, one will not be lured and burdened by illusory phenomena, becoming their slave. One will be at ease and free from afflictions and delusions. This is the fulfillment of the practice of liberation from the cycle of birth and death. Anyone who is no longer pushed around by external phenomena can stop producing karma, which binds us to the cycle of birth and death. He can leave behind birth and death, or he can choose to control his own birth and death.

1.6 What Are the Basic Dogmas of Buddhism?

In principle, Buddhism has no dogmas. What are closest to being dogmatic are the precepts. But precepts for Buddhists are not a covenant with God, so they are not mysterious as in some religions. Precepts in Buddhism come from principles of ethics and are hence purely rational.

The basic rules of conduct for Buddhists are the five precepts and the ten good deeds or virtues, although the specific precepts someone takes vary according to what class of practitioner he or she is. For example, for laypeople, there are the five precepts, the ten good deeds, and the eight precepts; for monastics, there are the ten precepts, the bhikṣu precepts, and the bhikṣuṇī precepts; and in the Mahāyāna tradition, there are the bodhisattva precepts. All these precepts, however, are based on the five precepts and ten good deeds. In other words, other precepts are extensions and detailed sub-branches of the five precepts and ten good deeds. Therefore, if one can keep the five precepts and carry out the ten good deeds, the rest will not be so difficult to follow.

The five precepts are abstention from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct (unchastity),^{6*} verbal misconduct, and drinking alcohol. The ten good deeds are extensions and expansions of the five precepts, and require one to perform good deeds as well as abstain from misdeeds, as shown in figure 1.

In summary, the Buddhist precepts are to commit no evil and to perform all good. Any act harmful to one's physical or mental health, family, society, country, to humanity, or to any sentient being falls under the scope of five precepts, and therefore should not be committed.

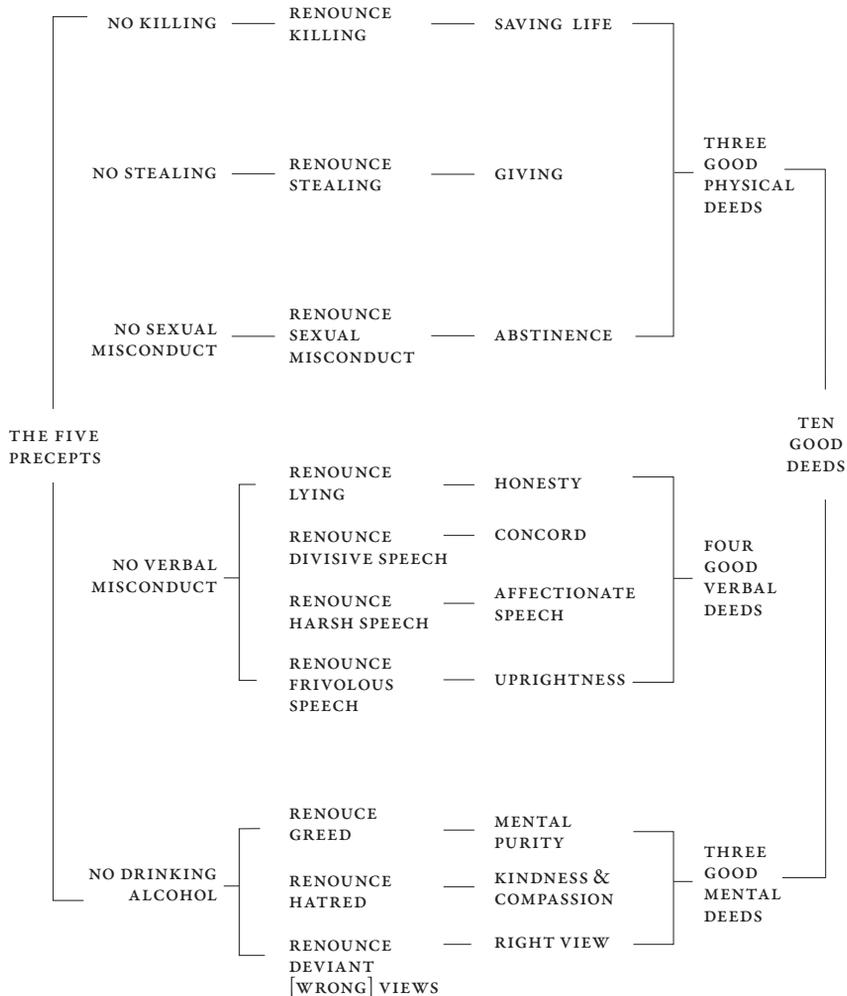


FIGURE 1. THE FIVE PRECEPTS AND THE TEN GOOD DEEDS

Anything truly beneficial to one's own or to another's welfare should be carried out with all effort. To commit evil violates the precepts, and not to perform good deeds violates the precepts, too.

However, Buddhism is broad-minded. If someone is unaware that certain behavior violates the precepts, such behavior does not count as an infraction.^{7*} Also, if someone has no intention to violate the precepts, even if she breaks them she is not guilty [that is, does not generate the negative karma] of the transgression. On the other hand, if someone harbors the intention to break the precepts, even if she ends up not breaking them, she bears some guilt [produces negative karmic energy]. For instance, if a woman is raped, she is still considered pure and not guilty of violating the precepts as long as she does not feel lustful pleasure during the rape, even though physically she was involved in an improper act. One is guilty of fully transgressing the precepts only when one actually, intentionally, and successfully carries out the violation.

3.6 What Methods of Spiritual Practice Do Buddhists Carry Out?

This is certainly a very important question. If one believes in Buddhism without practicing it in daily life, the only benefit one will acquire is the planting of a seed for future Buddhahood. Such a person will hardly gain any benefit in this life.

Buddhist practice is the realization of a Buddhist lifestyle. The four major aspects of practice are faith, precepts, meditative concentration, and wisdom.

Without faith, one has not even entered the gate of Buddhist practice. So, faith is the first requirement to practice Buddhism. And taking refuge in the Three Jewels is the first step to establishing faith.^{9*}

There are many classes of precepts. As a basic requirement, it is enough if one can adhere to the five precepts and ten good deeds. Of course, it is even better if one can take the eight precepts and/or the bodhisattva precepts. For Buddhists, precepts function very much like defensive fortifications do to soldiers holding a garrison during a battle. If someone cannot keep the five precepts and the ten good deeds, she will not even have the disposition of a Buddhist. And if one practices meditative absorptions without keeping the precepts, the meditator will fall into demonic states.

Meditative concentration is the practice of collecting and focusing the mind so that external surroundings will not disturb it. This is a common practice emphasized by many religions, including all the “outer-path” religions in India. The Daoist technique of abdominal breathing called *tuna* and the Christian practice of praying are also kinds of meditation to develop concentration. The purpose of such meditation is to allow the mind to settle on one object. Only when the mind can become absorbed in one object can one truly appreciate the lofty, great value of religion and attain physical ease and mental contentment—an experience clearly superior to sensual pleasure. Once someone experiences this concentrated state of mind, his religious faith will grow progressively faster. It is impossible for such a person not to have faith.

But the practice of meditative concentration is not something unique to Buddhism. What is unique to Buddhism is wisdom, which serves as a guide to meditation and an antidote to craving for meditative absorptions. Because concentration makes one’s mind undisturbed by external surroundings, when someone enters into an absorption state and experiences joy, it is very easy to become attached to the ecstasy and not want to leave the absorption. Upon dying, this kind of person will be reborn in a dhyāna heaven. According to Buddhist cosmology, the dhyāna heavens are divided into eight general levels, corresponding to the four absorptions of form and the four absorptions of formlessness.

All these heavens are in the realms of form and formlessness within the three realms, where one's life expectancy is long; however, one is still unliberated from the cycle of rebirth. So Buddhists regard meditative concentration as one means of practice and not as an end in itself. The Chan school in China therefore stresses enlightenment over meditative concentration even though meditation is central to its practices. Enlightenment is the blossoming of wisdom. Only when one gains the wisdom that penetrates into the true nature of all dharmas can one transcend saṃsāra and leave behind the three realms.

For questions regarding practice, it is best if one can associate with a knowledgeable and skillful practitioner to help show one the way. This entry is only a summary of the basics, and is not intended to be comprehensive.¹⁰

6 Technically, the meaning of the word unchastity (*sītōng* 私通) in Chinese includes (1) adultery (sexual intercourse by a married person with someone other than a spouse) and (2) fornication (sexual intercourse by an unmarried person), but it does not include sex related to prostitution. For men, sex with prostitutes was also considered permissible in Indian Buddhist precepts. To get a more historical perspective on Chinese Buddhist views of sexual morality, see the tables from the Yuan dynasty listing the amount of demerit incurred for various sins, translated in Van Gulik 1974, chapter 9.

In accordance with modern Chinese mores, Sheng Yen states that Buddhists should not patronize prostitutes (see 1999c, chapter 3, sec. 1, subsec. 5, which is an in-depth discussion of the third precept). Perhaps adapting to his audience and contemporary mores, in a discourse to Taiwanese university students in 2001, he indicated that Buddhists could have sexual relations with one, fixed partner (not necessarily a spouse), but not with anyone else. For his presentation of this and other precepts to Westerners, see Sheng Yen 2001a, 63–70. Welch (1967, 365) shows that Buddhist laymen during the mid-twentieth century also had a range of interpretations regarding this and other precepts. *Trans.*

7 Committing immoral deeds—defined in the Buddhist tradition by the first four precepts (S. *prākṛti-śīla*; C. *xìngjiè* 性戒, “natural precepts”)—generates

NOTES TO PAGES 28–30 | 195

negative karmic energy for everyone, regardless of whether or not they have taken the precepts or have even heard of the precepts. To take the precepts is good karma, but to take them and then violate them generates additional negative karma, to which Sheng Yen refers here. See Sheng Yen 1999c, chapter 3, sec. 1, subsec. 2. *Trans.*

NOTES TO PAGES 64–72 | 205

9 Faith in Buddhism implies assent to certain beliefs and, perhaps more importantly, a sense of confidence in following the teachings and the motivation to do so. For comments on faith in Buddhism, see Gethin 1998, 166–69. *Trans.*

10 Readers interested in more information might like to read the author's article "Zěyàng xiūchí jiětuō dào 怎樣修持解脫道" (How to practice the path of liberation), contained in Sheng Yen 1999a. *Author.*