

# Still Learning

*Bringing Buddhism to life for your school*

## Teachers' Notes

### The Five Precepts

The Buddha taught that enlightenment could be achieved through practicing the 3-fold path of ethics, meditation and wisdom. Ethics are therefore considered to be very important in Buddhism.

#### Why be ethical?

The Buddha wasn't a god, and didn't make himself out to be one. He encouraged us to never just accept any teachings, even his, but to test them out against our own experience to see if they work for us.

The teachings he gave about ethics are in the form of 'precepts', or guidelines. They are not rules as such, because we will not be punished if we break them, and because it is so hard to keep them perfectly that only an enlightened person could do it. The precepts are pointing towards the way an enlightened person would naturally act. By 'acting as if' we are enlightened and trying to follow the precepts as well as we can, our behaviour will become more like that of an enlightened person, and so we will become happier. To the extent that we act against the precepts, we will find we become more miserable.

The Buddha didn't talk about actions being right or wrong, but called them 'skilful' or 'unskilful'. This is because it is very hard to behave perfectly, but we can practise improving our behaviour so that it gets better and better, like practising a sport or a musical instrument.

There are different lists of precepts, but a common one is the list of five below.

## The negative formulations

### 1. To avoid harming others

This includes humans and animals. Following this precept affects all aspects of a Buddhist's life, including how they act towards others and themselves, how they eat (many Buddhists are vegetarian or vegan) and what they do for a living. A Buddhist practicing this precept would also try not to damage the environment more than necessary.

### 2. To avoid taking the not-freely-given

This includes stealing, but it means more than that. It means not trying to take something from somebody that they don't really want to give you. This includes bullying or manipulating people into giving you what you want, or maybe taking someone's time and energy that they don't really have to spare.

### 3. To avoid craving

This means to avoid deliberately increasing or indulging our craving for things. (The Buddha talked about sexual craving, because this is often the strongest craving for a human, but it extends to cravings for all sorts of things.) Stoking up our craving will cause us to become discontented and live a lifestyle that looks to other people and things to make us happy, and that can cause us to harm others in pursuit of what we are craving.

### 4. To avoid lying

This includes big fat lies and also little white ones. It also includes exaggerating or manipulating the truth for our own benefit, for example to avoid blame or get praise.

### 5. To avoid drink and drugs that cloud the mind

The aim of Buddhism is to become more and more aware, so the eventually we will become aware of the way things really are and become enlightened. Drink and drugs make us a lot less aware of what we are doing and of other people. There are other things we do that make us less aware and dull our minds, like watching lots of television, surfing the net, or playing loads of computer games. It's not that any of these things are bad, but we need to notice the effect they have on us, and be careful that they are not making our minds dull and making us less aware.

## The positive formulations

It isn't enough just to not be unskilful—we need to do the opposite if we are to be as skilful as we can. Buddhists will therefore try to behave in the following ways:

1. To be kind.
2. To be generous.
3. To live simply and be content.
4. To speak truthfully.
5. To be aware.

## Overview:

The grid below shows how the principles behind each of the precepts match up with the negative and positive formulations:

The Principle	The negative formulation	The positive formulation
1. Kindness	To avoid harming others	To perform acts of loving-kindness
2. Generosity	To avoid taking the not-freely-given	To be generous
3. Contentment	To avoid craving	To live simply and be content
4. Truthfulness	To avoid lying	To speak truthfully
5. Awareness	To avoid drink and drugs that cloud the mind	To be aware