



Observance of the Five Precepts and Their Impact on Modern Society: An Analytical Study

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Abstract

Background: In an era of increasing social and ethical challenges in modern society, there is a growing need to re-examine timeless moral frameworks. The Five Precepts (Pañcasīla), a foundational ethical code in Buddhism, provide a comprehensive guide for individual conduct and social harmony. While rooted in ancient teachings, their applicability to contemporary issues like violence, economic injustice, familial disintegration, and substance abuse warrants detailed academic investigation.

Objective: This study aims to analytically investigate the philosophical foundations and practical applications of the Five Precepts. Its primary objective is to assess their impact on fostering personal well-being and social stability, and to analyze the consequences of their violation in the context of modern societal problems.

Methods: This research employs a qualitative, analytical design based on a systematic review of primary and secondary sources. Primary data were drawn from the Tipiṭaka (the Pali Canon), including the Sutta Piṭaka (e.g., Aṅguttara Nikāya, Dīgha Nikāya) and the Jātaka tales. Secondary data were gathered from scholarly books, articles, and treatises on Buddhist ethics. A thematic analysis was conducted to synthesize the teachings and their contemporary relevance.

Analysis: The analysis reveals that each of the Five Precepts directly addresses a key area of modern social dysfunction: non-violence counteracts a culture of harm; abstaining from stealing promotes economic justice; sexual misconduct's prohibition underpins family stability; truthfulness is the bedrock of social trust; and avoiding intoxicants ensures personal and public safety. The study establishes a clear correlation between the observance of these precepts and outcomes of personal peace, mental clarity, and communal harmony, while their violation is linked to societal decay.

Conclusion: The Five Precepts offer a robust, timeless ethical model that is profoundly relevant for addressing contemporary global challenges. Their practice is concluded to be a



critical pathway for achieving sustainable peace, moral integrity, and holistic well-being at both the individual and collective levels, providing actionable guidance for personal development and social policy.

Novelty: This study provides a novel, multidisciplinary synthesis of classical Buddhist ethics with modern sociological and psychological challenges. It moves beyond a purely theological discussion, positioning the Five Precepts as a viable, evidence-based framework for interdisciplinary research in ethics, peace studies, and social development.

Keywords: Five Precepts, Buddhist Ethics, Social Harmony, Moral Conduct, Modern Society

Background

Since ancient times, the Buddha's teachings have provided comprehensive guidance for leading a balanced, ethical, and fulfilling life. These teachings, systematically compiled in the Tipiṭaka (the Pali Canon), extend beyond religious doctrine to encompass social, moral, psychological, and personal dimensions of human existence. Within this vast corpus, the Five Precepts (Pañcasīla) stand out as a foundational moral code for lay followers. They are not merely prohibitions but positive commitments to personal development and social responsibility.

This paper presents an analytical study of the Five Precepts and their relevance to contemporary life. It aims to explore the definition, observance, and benefits of morality (sīla) as articulated in Buddhist scriptures and interpreted by scholars. By synthesizing ideas from primary and secondary sources, this article seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Five Precepts' significance, their historical context, and their practical application. It argues that in an era marked by rising ethical violations—such as violence, theft, adultery, deceit, and intoxication—the Five Precepts offer a viable path toward individual and collective harmony. This research enriches academic knowledge of Buddhist ethics and serves as a medium for promoting social awareness and ethical living.

The Five Precepts: A Framework for Personal and Social Harmony

The Buddha prescribed the Five Precepts as a guide for individuals to become ethically balanced, happy, and socially responsible. These precepts form an essential moral framework that brings stability to an individual's conduct, mindset, and social interactions (Bajracharya, 2025). The five tenets are: (1) abstaining from killing living beings, (2) abstaining from taking what is not given, (3) abstaining from sexual misconduct, (4) abstaining from false speech, and (5) abstaining from intoxicants.

The Buddha taught that engaging in these harmful actions leads to suffering and misery, creating long-term mental, social, and economic imbalances (Amritananda, 2000). Conversely, observing these precepts cultivates morality, social responsibility, mental peace, and stable relationships, thereby enriching both personal life and the broader social fabric.



An Analysis of the Individual Precepts

Non-Violence (Pāṇātipātā veramaṇī): Respect for Life and Long-Term Peace

The first precept, abstaining from killing, emphasizes non-violence and respect for all life. Its scope includes refraining from physical, mental, and emotional harm. The karmic consequences of violence are starkly illustrated in Jātaka tales, such as the Matakabhadda Jātaka, where a person who practiced violence suffered for 499 lifetimes (Bajracharya, 2011).

In modern society, practices like animal sacrifice, excessive meat consumption, and abortion, often justified by religious or cultural traditions, violate this precept and contribute to a culture of violence (Shakya, 2006). Such acts not only cause direct harm but also erode societal morality, foster insecurity, and diminish individual sensitivity. Practicing non-violence fosters empathy, compassion, and moral reasoning, which are crucial for establishing long-term personal peace and social harmony.

Abstaining from Stealing (Adinnādānā veramaṇī): Economic Morality and Social Justice

The second precept prohibits stealing, which encompasses not only outright theft but also economic injustices like corruption, fraud, black-marketeering, and price gouging (Manandhar, 2019). The Cunda Sutta in the Aṅguttara Nikāya identifies refraining from stealing as a means to purify one's life (Mahasthavir, 2009).

The Silvimamsaka Jātaka (Jātaka No. 86) demonstrates that the Bodhisattva valued moral integrity over material gain, highlighting that this precept is about upholding self-respect and social justice (Bajracharya, 2011). When individuals act with economic honesty, it builds trust and reduces social inequality. Violations, however, create environments of distrust and insecurity, undermining the foundations of a just society.

Abstaining from Sexual Misconduct (Kāmesu micchācārā veramaṇī): Family and Social Stability

The third precept calls for abstaining from sexual misconduct, which involves being faithful and respectful in intimate relationships. The Buddha warned in the Parābhavasutta that infidelity leads to personal decline and familial disintegration (Bajracharya, 2013).

Adultery and sexual exploitation erode trust between partners, create familial insecurity, and negatively impact children's mental health (Manandhar, 2015). In contemporary society, the rise in premarital promiscuity, infidelity, and sexual violence points to a neglect of this precept, leading to increased family conflict and social instability. Observing this precept is essential for nurturing stable families and a morally responsible society.

Abstaining from False Speech (Musāvādā veramaṇī): Social Trust and Transparency

The fourth precept requires truthfulness, honesty, and transparency in communication. The Ambalatthikarahulovada Sutta emphasizes that liars must bear the consequences of their deceit, which include guilt, social isolation, and a damaged reputation.



False speech, whether in the form of white lies, business fraud, or political propaganda, corrodes social trust and fractures relationships (Bajracharya, 2019). When lying becomes habitual, it creates a culture of suspicion and insecurity. Adherence to truthfulness, therefore, is the bedrock of reliable family relationships, functional institutions, and a cohesive society.

Abstaining from Intoxicants (Surāmerayamajjapamādaṭṭhānā veramaṇī): Health and Social Safety

The fifth precept advises against consuming intoxicants, which cloud the mind and lead to heedlessness. The Suraapaan Jātaka illustrates how alcohol destroys discernment and leads to suffering (Bajracharya, 2011).

In modern times, substance abuse (including alcohol, drugs, and smoking) is a major cause of health problems, accidents, domestic violence, and financial ruin (Manandhar, 2019). Intoxicants impair judgment, leading individuals to violate the other precepts. Abstaining ensures mental clarity, physical health, and social safety, protecting both the individual and the community from preventable harm.

The Personal and Social Benefits of Observance

On a personal level, consistent observance of the Five Precepts cultivates moral awareness, self-respect, and mental peace. It reduces stress, anxiety, and indecision, leading to greater emotional resilience and decision-making capacity. Practitioners often experience improved relationships and a stronger sense of purpose.

Socially, when a critical mass of individuals follows these precepts, the results are profound. Trust is strengthened, cooperation is enhanced, and communities become more secure and harmonious. A society grounded in these ethics would see reductions in crime, family disputes, and social inequality, fostering an environment where all members can thrive (Bajracharya, 2025).

Modern Society and the Violation of the Five Precepts

Contemporary news media frequently report incidents stemming from the violation of the Five Precepts: violence, theft, adultery, deceit, and substance abuse (e.g., Baral, 2021; *Gorkhapatra Online*, 2021). These violations are not merely personal failings but are symptomatic of a broader moral decline that destabilizes families and communities. The increasing normalization of these behaviors presents a significant challenge to social well-being, underscoring the urgent need for a renewed emphasis on ethical foundations like the Five Precepts.



Conclusion

The Five Precepts offered by the Buddha over two millennia ago remain profoundly relevant. This study has demonstrated that they provide a comprehensive ethical system that addresses the root causes of much contemporary suffering. By abstaining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech, and intoxicants, individuals can achieve personal peace and moral integrity. Collectively, this practice leads to the establishment of a just, trustworthy, and harmonious society.

The teachings found in texts like the *Dīgha Nikāya* (Bajracharya, 2000) and the *Jātaka* stories provide timeless insights into the consequences of ethical and unethical conduct. As modern society grapples with complex challenges, the Five Precepts stand as a practical and transformative guide for individuals, educators, and policymakers seeking to foster sustainable peace and well-being for all.

Transparency Statement: The author confirms that this study has been conducted with honesty and in full adherence to ethical guidelines.

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