

The Buddha Speaks The Brahma Net Sutra, Part I

Commentary by Elder Master Hui Seng

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Sutra:

The first major precept prohibits killing. A disciple of the Buddha must not kill by himself, encourage others to kill, kill the expedient means, praise killing, or react with delight upon witnessing killing. He must not employ any method whatever, not even mantras, to kill any living being. Further, a Bodhisattva must not involve himself in the causes, conditions, methods, or karma of killing, to the extent that he cannot deliberately kill any living creature. A Bodhisattva should always give rise to the eternally abiding mind of kindness, compassion, and filial compliance. Thus, he should devise skillful means to rescue and protect all beings. Hence, if a Bodhisattva kills with indulgence or evinces delight in killing any being, he thereby commits a Bodhisattva *Pārājika* Offense.

[*Pārājika* Offense: This term, according to the *Parivāra*, derives from a verb meaning to lose or be defeated. In the *Vinaya*, the term refers to a bhikkhu who commits any of the major offenses has surrendered to his own mental defilements to such an extent that he defeats the purpose of his having become a bhikkhu in the first place. A bhikkhu who commits any of these offenses severs himself irrevocably from the life of the Sangha and is no longer considered a bhikkhu.]

Commentary:

The text reads, A disciple of the Buddha. Who is a disciple of the Buddha? He is a person who brings forth the Bodhi resolve. He's one who receives the Bodhisattva Precepts, who glorifies the Buddha's lineage, who dwells in the Buddha's comportment and Precepts who is not insane or scattered, who is not sick at heart, who is not in possession of another's body, and who's know that he himself has received the Bodhisattva Precepts. Such a one is called a Buddhist disciple.

The Sutra says that he must not kill by himself. To kill by oneself means two things: first, be using internal form, such as striking with one's hands or kicking with one's feet. The second is by using external form, which refers to knives, clubs, stones, axes, etc. Using either of these methods to deliberately deprive another person of his life is called killing by oneself.

The second aspect is that he should not encourage others to kill. Encouraging others to kill means telling them face-to-face to kill or sending a servant to kill someone—perhaps writing a letter instructing someone to kill. In those cases, one doesn't do the killing oneself but tells others to kill, but it's just as heavy an offense. One may tell them face-to-face, write, or send a messenger—all of these carry the same offense as if one had actually done the killing oneself. The third is to kill with expedient means. This refers to things one does before the actual killing—for example, one may bind or gag the victim. Or one may send them off onto a certain road and ambush them along the way, capture them, and then kill them. All of this falls under facilitating the killing.

The fifth is to praise killing. Originally the person whom the offender approaches didn't have an intent to kill. But the offender praises killing, saying, "Oh, it's really good to do this killing. You're a really great hero." This causes the other person to bring forth the intention to kill.

The sixth is to react with delight upon witnessing killing. This means that a person originally had the intent to kill and the offender goes along and encourages him. He exhorts him to actually do it and acts as an accomplice.

Seventh, he must not employ any method whatever, not even mantras, to kill any living being, up to and including using hidden weapons, such as burying arrow in the earth and thereby setting up a trap so that when someone steps on that place, the arrows are set off and the person is killed. Or setting up a fiery pit. In ancient times in India, this method was used to ambush. Even the Buddha met with this one time. People would dig a hole in the ground, put a fire in there, and the unknowing victim walking along the path would fall into the fiery pit. All of this is grouped under “Killing with mantras.”

Further, a bodhisattva must not involve himself in the causes of killing. The eighth aspect, the “causes” of killing, refers to the intent to kill. The conditions of killing means that one creates the conditions for killing or uses provisional means to bring about the act of killing.

The tenth is called the Methods of killing. That would include weapons such as daggers, swords, pits, bows, and arrows, poisons, and mantras—all of those methods of killing.

The last is called the karma of killing. The karma means to actually cut off the life-source of a person. This is accomplishing the karma of killing.

To the extent that he cannot deliberately kill any living creature. “To the extent” means even down to the tiniest of sentient creatures, such as moths, ant, insects, and all small crawling creatures.

As far as the Bhikshu Precepts are concerned, if one kills small creatures like this, it is not considered a major transgression. But in the Bodhisattva Precepts, even killing these tiny creatures is considered a major offense—a *Pārājika* Offense. This is because Bodhisattvas take compassion as their foundation. From that frame of reference, if one kills even small living creatures, it’s just harming the mind of compassion.

What’s meant by “deliberately killing?” This is different from accidentally killing without any premeditation. If one accidentally steps on a bug without deliberate intention, that’s not a transgression in this sense.

A Bodhisattva should always give rise to an internally abiding mind of kindness, compassion, and filial compliance. “Eternally abiding” means that he should always be compassionate towards all living creatures and because he knows that “the mind, the Buddha, living beings—these three—are no different,” and that their nature forever abides. It’s just temporarily that living beings appear as living beings and Buddhas as Buddhas. But ultimately, they are the same substance.

What’s meant by “kindness and compassion?” It means that you have great compassion which regards everything as sharing an identical substance as yourself. You are as careful in your regard as if you were protecting and infant. For instance, if any part of your body is damaged, you can’t say, “Well, this hand belongs to me, but if the feet are in trouble, I won’t pay any attention to them.” Everything belongs to the same body. The Bodhisattva regard all living beings as the same substance as himself. If any part of your body is afflicted with an illness, you will quickly try to cure that illness. By the same token, if any living being is suffering, the Bodhisattva would feel as if he himself were suffering. The only intent of the Bodhisattva is to pull living beings out of suffering and give them joy.

“Filial compliance” means revering the Buddha-nature of all living beings and considering them to be the same as your own parents. So, the Bodhisattva dares not look down on any single living creature—even moths or small crawling creatures.

In the *Essay on Exhortation to Bring Forth the Bodhi Resolve*, it says that the Bodhisattva “in contemplating even ants, would consider them parents of his past lives.” This kind of regard for living creatures is the same as mentioned above. If you can look at an ant and think, “This is probably my mother or father of a past life, and in the future this ant will become a Buddha”—if you respect the Dharma in this way—will you be able to kill an ant?

Thus, he should devise skillful means to rescue and protect all beings. Kindness, compassion, and filial piety are attitudes that should come naturally. Hence, if a Bodhisattva kills with indulgence or evinces delight in killing any being, he thereby commits a Bodhisattva *Pārājika* Offense. You shouldn’t kill any being with any kind of indulgence or delight. “Indulgence” means that you do things any old way

you like; say, because of greed you give rise to killing. For example, people who fish and hunt do this out of greed and desire to eat the flesh of living creatures. They don't know how to restrain themselves. Or there are those who kill in order to vent their anger.

A person who has received the Precepts is called a Bodhisattva. Here the title "Bodhisattva" means that such a person can uphold the Precepts.

"*Pārājika*" means an offense that merits casting out—being cast out of the sea of the Buddhadharma. One forever loses the wonderful cause and the wonderful result. The second meaning of *Pārājika* means "an offense that brings about a fall. That is, if one commits a *Pārājika* Offense, one falls into the three evil destinies. The third meaning is "the victory of the other party." Originally, when one took these Precepts, one wanted to break through afflictions and conquer the demonic armies. But once you break these Precepts, then afflictions are victorious over you—they beat you. The demon king says, "You can't accomplish your Way-karma now, because you're still within my grasp." That's a victory of the other party.

The fourth meaning of *Pārājika* is "dharma of utmost evil"—evil to the extreme. It is called "a dharma by which one's head is cut off." This is serious, because when one's head is cut off, it won't grow back again. It's also called "the dharma which is like cutting out the heart of a tala tree." In India there is a type of tree called the tala tree. If you cut out the heart of that tree, the rest of the tree would stop growing and all the branches would dry up. If you break a precept of this nature, it's like cutting out the heart of a tala tree—everything else will die.

There's also another meaning to the word *Pārājika*— "the end of a needle which is snapped off." If the end of a needle is snapped off, you can't use the needle anymore. Another meaning is that it's like "a big boulder which has been split into two halves." Once a rock is split into two halves, you can't glue them back together.

In the *Vinaya* it says, "When a person receives the Bhikshu Precepts, the earth spirits convey the news to the spirits of empty space, and the spirits of empty space pass the news on further, so that in a single instant, the sound of this news pervades up to the First *Dhyana*, the Great Brahma Heavens." At this point, the Demon King quakes with fright! If a person breaks the Bhikshu Precepts, the Dharma-protecting Spirits who guard him will heave a great sigh. The sound of this sigh will also pervade the First *Dhyana*, and when the demons hear this, they are delighted. They say, "You are no longer a Buddhist disciple—ha! ha!

So, in the case of someone receiving the Bhikshu Precepts, all the three realms know about it. In the case of someone receiving Bodhisattva Precepts, it's even more earth-shattering. At the moment when the *Karmadana* transmits the Precepts and one is certified as having actually received the Precepts, then the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of the ten directions will spontaneously see this person's image before them. They will say, "This person has just received the Bodhisattva Precepts. In the future he'll become a Buddha." As a result, the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are all sympathetic and mindful of this person and will protect him.

Four conditions must be met before an act is considered an offense against this first Major Precept.

- 1) The creature that is killed has to be a living being.
- 2) One must know that it is a living creature. If one didn't have this thought when the killing was done, then one condition is missing and one's act of killing is not considered a violation of this Precept.
- 3) One must have the intent to kill.
- 4) The creature's life must be terminated. Every Precept carries with it several conditions, and it's only if all those conditions are met that the act is considered an actual offense.