

The Five Precepts: Moral guide to training

Thus, I have heard...

The Precepts are a list of rules to live by. In the Theravada tradition, there are five for the lay person there are 8 in Mahayana and 14 in Vajrayana. For most ministers there are ten or so. I will list them, but we will focus on the main 5. There are over 200 for monks and even more for nuns! Practicing them Improves the chances of developing merit and good karma in this life.

They were developed for the sangha to live together harmoniously and be able to practice without affecting others or oneself in an unskillful way.

The main and basic lay precepts are: (positive aspects in parentheses)

1. Refrain from taking a life... not just killing. (Act with loving kindness)
2. Refrain from taking what is not given... not just stealing (Be generous,
3. Refrain from harmful speech... not just lying (practice calm and silence)
4. Refrain from harmful sexual and emotional practice... (contentment and kindness)
5. Refrain from using intoxicants that make you heedless. (practice clear headed mindfulness)

To expand to the Mahayana, we add three more. Most though consider these more in depth and not for the general laity.

6. Not to eat at wrong times, (after mid-day) can also mean certain kinds of foods too, garlic, onion, meat, eggs.
7. Not to sit on high expensive beds, or animal skins. Basically, means to overindulge in material comforts.
8. Not to over adorn with makeup, jewelry, or perfume. Can include dancing, singing, or playing music with attachment.

For Ministers there is the addition of these two.

9. Avoiding places of ill-repute (gambling, burlesque etc)
10. Avoiding abuse or waste of the donations or money under one's charge.

Vajrayana also has a whole set, which has to do with credentials, condemnation of others, failure to practice etc... It does cover the basics above but is a fair bit more complex.

So, what do you do if you break a precept? You acknowledge it and move on trying to be mindful of that in the future and try to not do that again. This whole philosophy is a process and dynamic. We are human and we are fallible. If we learn from our mistakes, we become better. Now, some of the precepts are grounds for expulsion from a sangha. Some are just for personal practice like mentioned above, some need to be confessed to a 'Dharma friend' for guidance, some to the Maha-Sangha or elders for guidance. The five or so main ones are best for contemplation and reflection. Notice too there is no 'thou shalt' stuff going on here. It is the fore thought (pre-cept) of these as a practice in daily life. If we are practicing mindful attentiveness and skillful attention and concentration, then we can see these before we do them and be able to better our own lives and the lives of everyone around us.