

Sydney Buddhist Centre: Sangha Evening

Week 2 -The first precept – expressing interconnectedness

Positive form: "With deeds of loving kindness I purify my body."

Negative form: "I undertake the training principle of not harming living beings"

Pali "Panatipata veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami"

Introduction

In this text Sangharakshita looks at the First Precept – the ethical guideline that in a sense underlies all the others. The text we are using is condensed from a book on the ten precepts taken on by members of the Western Buddhist Order, so Sangharakshita does not pull his punches – he presents the precept as a challenging practice, which at the highest level expresses our solidarity and interconnectedness with other beings. In the process he introduces the idea of the love mode and power mode - terms which have entered the vocabulary of the FWBO – and makes some practical suggestions that may be controversial for some people.

One point that is worth noting is that here Sangharakshita talks about the precept in its negative form as not killing other beings, whereas it is perhaps more normal to talk in terms of not harming. The principle is the same – killing is the most extreme form of harming, but whenever we do either we give priority to our own egocentric desires over our solidarity with other beings.

The principle of abstaining from killing living beings; or love

*(Text condensed from *The Ten Pillars of Buddhism*, by Sangharakshita, Part 2, Chapter 1)*

The more important an ethical principle is, the more likely it is to be overlooked. Even Buddhists tend to think that they are observing the First Precept anyway, so there is no need for them to think about it. After all, there are much more interesting and important aspects of the Dharma, and simple and obvious things like the First Precept can safely be left to the dull and unintelligent while one explores the secrets of Tantra or the mysteries of Zen.

But the truth is the First Precept is not to be disposed of in this way. The principle of abstention from killing living beings, or Love, in fact runs very deep in life, both social and spiritual, and its ramifications are not only very extensive but enormously significant. It is the most direct and important manifestation of the act of Going for Refuge. Moreover it is a principle that finds expression in all the other Precepts.

Why is Killing Unskilful?

Firstly, why should killing be wrong? One explanation, of course is that as the expression of a mental state rooted in greed, hatred and delusion (or at least two of these), killing is an unskilful act in that it brings suffering to the doer and prevents him from attaining Enlightenment. But we can go deeper than that. Killing is the absolute negation of the solidarity of one living being with another. It represents the most extreme form that the negation of one ego by another, or the assertion of one ego at the expense of the other, can possibly take.

The Principle of Love

Killing is tantamount to the rejection of the most basic principle of ethics, just as the cultivation of love represents this principle in its positive form. As Shelly so finely says:

The great secret of morals is love, or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his own species must become his own.

In the *Bodhicaryavatara*, or 'Entry into the Way of Enlightenment', Shantideva gives this principle what is probably is highest expression in Buddhist literature. In his chapter on Meditation, after describing how a man stills vain imaginations and strengthens his Will to Enlightenment (bodhicitta), he proceeds:

First he will diligently foster the thought that his fellow creatures are the same as himself. "All have the same sorrows, the same joys as myself, and I must guard them like myself. The body, manifold of parts in its division of members, must be preserved as a whole; and so likewise this manifold universe has its sorrow and its joy in common...I must destroy the pain of another as though it were my own...I must show kindness to others, for they are creatures as I am myself...Then, as I would guard myself from evil repute, so I will frame a spirit of helpfulness and tenderness towards others."

...I will cease to live as self, and will take as myself my fellow creatures. We love our hands and other limbs, as members of the body; then why not love other living beings, as members of the universe?...Thus in doing service to others pride, admiration and desire for reward find no place, for thereby we satisfy the wants of our own self. Then, as thou wouldst guard thyself against suffering and sorrow, so exercise the spirit of helpfulness and tenderness towards the world.

This is what is known as the practice of equality of self and other, and the substitution of self and others. Blake gives succinct expression to the same principle when he declares 'To put another before you is the most sublime act.'

The Love which is the positive expression of the First Precept is no mere flabby sentiment, but the vigorous expression of an imaginative identification with other living beings. 'Love' is in fact far too weak a word for the positive counterpart of non-killing

or non-violence, and even *maitri*, (Pali *metta*) is not altogether satisfactory. Just as killing represents the absolute negation of another's being, 'Love' in this sense represents its absolute affirmation. As such it is not erotic love, or parental love, or even friendly love. It is a cherishing, protecting, maturing love which has the same kind of effect on the spiritual being of others as the light and heat of the sun have on their physical being.

The Love Mode and the Power Mode

To operate according to the power mode means to relate to other living beings in such a way as to negate rather than affirm their being. To operate in accordance with the love mode is the opposite of this. Observance of the First Precept means that, as a result of our imaginative identification with others, we not only abstain from actually killing living beings, but operate more and more in accordance with the love mode and less and less in accordance with the power mode. In this way there takes place within us a change so great as to amount to a change in our centre of gravity.

It will not, of course, be possible for even the most faithful observer of the First Precept to operate totally in terms of the love mode, eschewing the power mode completely. We live in a world dominated by the power mode. In this connection two principles may be laid down. (a) Whenever one has to operate in the power mode, the power mode must always be subordinated to the love mode. A simple everyday example of this is when the parent, out of love for the child, forcibly restrains him from doing something that will harm him. (b) Within the spiritual community it is impossible to act according to the power mode, for by its very nature it is based on the love mode. Should an Order member so far forget himself as to relate to another Order member in terms of force he places himself outside the Spiritual Community and ceases, in fact, to be an Order member.

Practical Implications

Buddhists should do their best to switch from the power mode to the love mode in as many different ways as possible, and to extend the principle of Love into as many different areas of life as possible. Observance of the First Precept will naturally result in one's being a vegetarian; in one's refusing to have oneself, or to assist or encourage others in having, an abortion; in one's feeling concern for the environment; and in one's being opposed to the manufacture of all armaments whatsoever - as well as many other things.

Not that the observance of the First Precept consists simply in doing or not doing a certain stated number of things of this sort. Non-violence, or Love, is a principle, and being a principle there is no limit to the number of ways in which it can be applied. No one is so skilful in his conduct that his practice of this principle could not be better. As the most direct manifestation of one's Going for Refuge, the potentialities of Non-Violence, or Love are infinite.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1 Think of some everyday examples of 'one ego asserting itself at the expense of another', or 'negating rather than affirming their being' - in other words, of people operating in the power mode.

2 Think of some examples you have observed recently of people acting from an 'imaginative identification with others' - in other words, operating in the love mode.

3 Think of some situations where it would be impossible or undesirable to act in the love mode.

4 Do you agree that following the First Precept is "the most direct and important manifestation of the act of Going for Refuge? Why, or why not?

5 How could you extend the love mode into more areas of my life? What specific changes could you make?

6 What is the connection between the first precept and insight or wisdom?