

The Precept to Abstain from Killing

Translation of Venerable Yen Pei's Dharma talk 《略谈不杀生戒》, delivered in Mandarin in April 1968, at Bodhi Hermitage, Singapore

1 Introduction

Abstinance from killing is an important precept in Buddhism. A Buddhist who observes the Five Precepts¹, Eight Precepts², Ten Precepts³, Full Precepts⁴ or *Bodhisattva*⁵ Precepts⁶ must observe this precept to abstain from killing. *Mahayana* Buddhism⁷ encourages us to work for the benefit of all sentient beings, care for them, enable them to be freed from suffering as well as attain happiness, so the precept to abstain from killing is particularly important in *Mahayana* Buddhism.

Both animals and plants are living things, but animals have mental functions that are absent in plants. Buddhism does not acknowledge the presence of sentient activities in plants. According to the Buddhist teachings, it is a grievous misdeed to kill lives that have mental activities, while the wrong in harming a life with no mental activity, such as a plant, is not as severe. Therefore, the misdeed of killing is established only in the case of killing sentient lives.

2 The Misdeed of Killing

Why does killing a sentient life and depriving it of continual survival constitute a grievous misdeed? If you observe carefully, you will know that all sentient beings, without exception, treasure their lives.



Not only big animals treasure their lives, even small insects such as ants, mosquitoes and flies also treasure their lives in the same way as human beings. If you get stung by a mosquito and move your hand slightly to attempt hitting the mosquito, it will perceive this immediately and fly away to escape death. It is thus clear that all sentient beings cherish their own lives.

Whenever and wherever Buddha preached, when He spoke about sentient beings, He always advised people earnestly not to harm or take away the lives of sentient beings. If one wilfully destroys the lives of sentient beings, one will experience tremendous suffering not only in this life. There will be endless suffering in future lives! Why do we commit such deeds which are harmful to both others and ourselves? The greatly benevolent Buddha fully advocated abstinence from killing sentient beings. The abominable act of killing demonstrates disregard for the will of sentient beings to live.

Lacking this understanding, some people consider abstinence from killing as impractical, while others think that animals are born to be eaten by human beings. These are wrong ideas that demonstrate the cruelty of mankind.

According to *Numbered Discourses*, Buddha taught people to abstain from destruction of sentient lives, based on the principle of putting oneself in the place of another. We may ask ourselves this question: Since I cherish my own life, if someone harms my life with a knife, gun or any other weapon, would I be willing to get killed?

We can be sure that nobody is willing to be killed. All will defend themselves for survival. Since we hold our lives most dear, other sentient beings are the same. They also do not want to get slaughtered. If we give consideration for other sentient beings, we certainly will not destroy their lives, whether directly or indirectly. This meaning is also conveyed by the Chinese saying, “Do not do to others what you would not like others to do to you.” Like human beings, all animals fear death and do not want to suffer, so how could we sacrifice their lives to satiate our desires for food?

One who commits the unwholesome act of killing will experience suffering. Even if he gets reborn as a human being, he is likely to have a short lifespan or get plagued by illnesses. In *Great Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom*, Nagarjuna said that Buddhists should strictly observe the precept to abstain from killing. If one does not abstain from killing, all the merits that one has accrued in the human world will come to nothing. Why is this so? Based on the Law of Cause and Effect, one who has accrued a lot of merits will be reborn in a wealthy and influential household. However, he would need a long life in order to enjoy these good results. If he has a short lifespan or he is plagued by illnesses as a result of acts of killing in past lives, how could he enjoy his wealth?

Abstinence from killing is first on the list of Ten Wholesome Actions taught by Buddha. It is also the first of the Five Precepts laid down by Buddha for lay followers. It is thus clear how much importance Buddha placed on the protection of life. Of all merits, the merits of abstinence from killing are the greatest. Conversely, of all evils, the evil of killing is the most grievous. If you acknowledge yourself as a Buddhist, you should not destroy life.

3 Factors that Establish the Misdeed of Killing

According to the Buddhist discourses and commentaries, the following five factors must be present to establish the misdeed of killing:

3.1 Motive for Killing

In anything that one does, one has a motive for doing so. For instance, one learns the Buddhist teachings with a motive. Whether one liberates or destroys life, there is also a motive for doing so. In the absence of a motive for killing sentient beings, the misdeed of killing cannot be established. Motive is the main factor. One should often do self-examination to check if one harbours a motive for killing sentient beings. Why does the intention to kill sentient beings arise again and again? According to the Buddhist discourses, the misdeed of killing can be classified as high-level, middle-level or low-level, in accordance with the motive involved in the act of killing.

If one always gets angry whenever one sees somebody or some other sentient being, then makes up one's mind to kill him/it and really commits the misdeed of killing, this wrongdoing is the most serious and classified as a high-level misdeed of killing.

If one bears anger or hatred in committing the killing act, but is not clear-minded, or is drunk, or suffers from a mental illness at the time of killing, then even though the wrongdoing is not minor, it is not that severe either. This is classified as a middle-level misdeed of killing.

If one kills a sentient being with neither anger nor clarity of mind, the wrongdoing is lightest and classified as a low-level misdeed of killing.

The severity of the misdeed of killing depends on the motive. A strong motive will result in a severe misdeed of killing, while a weak motive will lighten the severity of the wrongdoing.

3.2 Target to be Killed

With the arising of a motive for killing, what follows is the act of killing in which one must see clearly the target to be killed and be sure that the target is indeed a person or other sentient being. Only then can the misdeed of killing be established. If one kills a non-sentient life such as a plant, this does not constitute a misdeed of killing.

3.3 Consideration of Target

For the misdeed of killing to be established, the target must be considered as a sentient being and moreover, as a very detestable sentient being that has to be killed.

3.4 Preparation for Killing

To kill a sentient being, one has to decide whether to use a knife, gun or other weapon to kill him/it. When all the preparation has been done, one approaches the target and drives the weapon into his/its body. If one kills a life with prior preparation, the misdeed of killing is, of course, established.

3.5 Not a case of manslaughter

This means that there is no mistake in the target that is killed. For instance, one decides to kill Zhang San and indeed kills Zhang San, not another person.

In this case, the misdeed of killing is, of course, established. If one makes up one's mind to kill Zhang San, but kills Li Si by mistake, this is a case of manslaughter, not a grievous misdeed of killing.

Jainism, which puts emphasis on consequences, regards manslaughter as a grievous misdeed of killing, just as one who inadvertently comes into contact with fire will get burnt by the fire.

Buddhism, however, places more emphasis on the motive and intention. According to Buddhism, although one who commits manslaughter has to bear responsibility for his deed, but in the absence of a motive for killing, the misdeed of killing is not fully established.

The five factors described above must be present in order for the misdeed of killing to be established. From the Buddhist perspective, the most important factor is the motive for killing. If one harbours such a motive and personally executes the deed of killing, this constitutes a grievous misdeed. Even if one gets some other person to execute the deed, one's misdeed of killing is also established. This is fully congruent with modern law.



4 Target of Killing

Killing involves the destruction of a sentient life. In Buddhism, sentient beings are classified into high forms of sentient existence and low forms of sentient existence, so the killing of sentient lives can be classified into severe misdeeds and minor misdeeds.

According to *Great Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom*, “Buddha is the most supreme of sentient beings”, so Buddha is also one type of sentient beings. The misdeed of killing or harming Buddha is certainly very severe. However, looking at the accounts in the Buddhist scriptures, it seemed that nobody was able to kill Buddha. Any attempt at taking Buddha’s life could only result in wounding Buddha’s physical body at most, but even shedding of Buddha’s blood constitutes one of the Five Heinous Misdeeds⁸. Buddha appeared in our human world out of loving-kindness and compassion. He taught human beings to overcome suffering. How could human beings, who were deeply indebted to Buddha, harm Him? The misdeed of wounding a Buddha is the most grievous of the Five Heinous Misdeeds.

Killing an *Arhat*⁹ is also one of the Five Heinous Misdeeds. *Arhats* are “fields of blessings”, in which people could cultivate merits by making offerings to them. If one does not make offerings to an *Arhat* but instead kills such a liberated being, could his misdeed be considered minor?

Our parents gave birth to us and bring us up. We are deeply indebted to them for their kindness. Yet, there are unfilial children who kill their parents, so Buddha included patricide (killing of one's father) and matricide (killing of one's mother) in the Five Heinous Misdeeds.

Anyone who commits one of the Five Heinous Misdeeds will degenerate into the *Avīci* hell of unremitting pain and suffer there upon the end of this life. Buddha is the sage among sages, so wounding a Buddha is the most grievous misdeed, followed by killing an *Arhat*, then patricide and matricide.

If the target to be killed is a human being of an equivalent status as the killer, then the misdeed of killing him is not as grievous as the four types of heinous misdeeds described above, but still more serious than killing other sentient beings. In the Five Realms of Sentient Existence¹⁰, human beings are in a special, excellent position. According to Buddhism, only human beings are able to accept the Buddhist teachings, realise Truth, as well as attain Enlightenment and freedom from bondage. Therefore, killing a human being constitutes a middle-level misdeed. If the target is an animal such as a cow, horse, cricket or ant, even though the killing act constitutes a misdeed, it is the least severe, as animals are shrouded in ignorance and unable to practise the Buddhist path.



5 Suicide

Does suicide constitute a misdeed? Some people would say that the right to live is one's own, so if one does not wish to live on and commits suicide, this would not constitute a misdeed. However, from the Buddhist perspective, suicide constitutes a misdeed too. Buddha absolutely forbade people from committing suicide. Buddha disapproved of suicide, be it due to illness, world-weariness or any other reason. In the monastic discipline, attempted suicide constitutes a grave offence which will result in expulsion from the monastic order.

Buddha often taught monks the method of contemplation on physical impurity. The monks who gained spiritual attainments through this practice considered the body as utterly impure and not worth cherishing at all. Some monks developed extreme aversion to the physical body and committed suicide, while some other monks killed one another in turn. When Buddha knew of this situation, He censured the suicidal acts of the monks as foolish deeds. It is stated in *Manual of Monastic Discipline of the Mahasanghika School*, "This accords with neither *Dharma*¹¹ nor *Vinaya*¹². It does not accord with Buddha's teachings. It does not lead to increase in goodness or virtue."

Buddha gathered the monks and advised them to treasure the precious human life. If one commits suicide foolishly, that is giving up one's life for nothing and wasting one's human life. It will be extremely difficult to gain a human rebirth again in future. Whether one gains achievements in spiritual practice or not, one should always remember that the human life is precious and hard to come by.

Therefore, whether our circumstances are good or bad, we must strive to live on. Do not proceed wrongly onto the suicidal path!

Some people who have been sick for a long time develop aversion to life. As the saying goes, “No filial son could be found by the bedside of a parent with long illness.” The children who look after sick parents may become weary. This may make the sick parents feel that life is meaningless, so they wish to die earlier through injections or medication. There were sick monks during Buddha’s time who killed themselves that way and were censured by Buddha as foolish people. Take note: killing oneself is a misdeed just like killing other sentient beings, so whatever happens, never think of committing suicide.

6 Conclusion

Killing is a misdeed as it infringes upon sentient beings' will to live. As long as one performs an act of killing intentionally, one commits a misdeed of killing. However, the severity of the misdeed varies with the type of killing involved.

According to the Buddhist teachings, it is also a misdeed to teach others how to kill, speak in praise of killing or rejoice in witnessing an act of killing.

A Buddhist should strictly observe the precept to abstain from killing. One should not kill other sentient beings. Even suicide is absolutely forbidden.

In the ceremony for taking up the Five Precepts, the preceptor would ask, "The precept to abstain from killing is a precept for lay Buddhists. Can you observe this precept throughout this lifetime and this life form?"

One should reply, "I can observe this precept." One should declare this verbally and also think in this manner: From now on, I shall not kill.

By observing the precept to abstain from killing, one guards oneself from committing any misdeed of killing and will thus gain great merits of precept-observance. By virtue of these merits, one will enjoy longevity.

My fellow Buddhist practitioners, I sincerely hope that all of you will observe this precept to abstain from killing and promote harmony in our world together.

Notes:

- 1 Five Precepts:** the minimal set of moral guidelines to be observed by lay Buddhists. These five precepts are: to abstain from killing; abstain from stealing; abstain from sexual misconduct; abstain from false speech and abstain from intoxicants.
- 2 Eight Precepts:** Lay Buddhists may observe a more stringent code of discipline consisting of eight precepts. These are modelled upon the ethical code of a novice monk or nun, but are generally observed for only a 24-hour period. These Eight Precepts are: to abstain from killing; abstain from stealing; abstain from sexual activity; abstain from false speech; abstain from intoxicants; abstain from untimely meals after noon; abstain from dancing, singing, music, entertainment programs, perfumes, cosmetics and garlands; abstain from sitting on a high chair or lying on a luxurious bed.
- 3 Ten Precepts:** the training rules observed by Buddhist novice monks and nuns. These Ten Precepts are: to abstain from killing; abstain from stealing; abstain from sexual activity; abstain from false speech; abstain from intoxicants; abstain from untimely meals after noon; abstain from dancing, singing, music and other entertainment programs; abstain from using perfumes, cosmetics and garlands; abstain from sitting on a high chair or lying on a luxurious bed; abstain from handling money.
- 4 Full Precepts:** the disciplinary rules for Buddhist monks and nuns. In *Theravada* Buddhism, there are 227 rules for monks and 311 for nuns, while in *Mahayana* Buddhism, there are 250 rules for monks and 348 rules for nuns.

- 5 **Bodhisattva:** one who has generated the aspiration to attain Enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings
- 6 **Bodhisattva Precepts:** a set of moral code used in *Mahayana* Buddhism for a practitioner to advance along the path to become a *Bodhisattva*. The *Bodhisattva* Precepts for monastics include 10 major precepts and 48 minor precepts, while the *Bodhisattva* Precepts for lay Buddhists include 6 major precepts and 28 minor precepts.
- 7 **Mahayana Buddhism (Buddhism of the Great Vehicle):** refers to Buddhist teachings and practices in which emphasis is placed on the *Bodhisattva* ideal of seeking perfect Enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings.
- 8 **Five Heinous Misdeeds:** killing one's father (patricide), killing one's mother (matricide), killing an *Arhat*, wounding a Buddha and creating dissension within the monastic community.
- 9 **Arhat:** one who has eradicated all ten fetters of self-illusion, doubt, indulgence in rites and rituals, sensual desire, ill-will, desire for existence in the Realm of Forms, desire for existence in the Formless Realm, conceit, restlessness and ignorance, thus attaining *Nirvana*.
- 10 **Five Realms of Sentient Existence:** realm of heavenly beings, realm of human beings, realm of animals, realm of hungry ghosts and realm of hell beings.
- 11 **Dharma:** the Buddhist teachings
- 12 **Vinaya:** the Buddhist monastic disciplinary rules