

# The Buddhist Precepts

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Most religions have moral and ethical rules and commandments. Buddhism has Precepts, but it's important to understand that the Buddhist Precepts are not a list of rules to follow.

In some religions, moral laws are believed to have come from God, and breaking those laws is a sin or transgression against God. But Buddhism doesn't have a God, and the Precepts are not commandments. However, that doesn't exactly mean they're optional, either.

The Pali word most often translated as "morality" is *sila*, but *sila* has many connotations that go beyond the English word "morality." It can refer to inner virtue such as kindness and truthfulness as well as the activity of those virtues in the world. It can also refer to the discipline of acting in a [moral way](#). However, *sila* is best understood as a kind of harmony.

## Being in Harmony

The Theravadin teacher Bikkhu Bodhi wrote,

"The Buddhist texts explain that *sila* has the characteristic of harmonizing our actions of body and speech. *Sila* harmonizes our actions by bringing them into accord with our own true interests, with the well-being of others, and with universal laws. Actions contrary to *sila* lead to a state of self-division marked by guilt, anxiety, and remorse. But the observance of the principles of *sila* heals this division, bringing our inner faculties together into a balanced and centered state of unity." ("[Going for Refuge and Taking the Precepts](#) ")

It is said that the Precepts describe the way an enlightened being naturally lives. At the same time, the discipline of upholding the Precepts is part of the path to enlightenment. As we begin to work with the Precepts we find ourselves "breaking" or defiling them over and over. We can think of this as something like falling off a bicycle, and we can either beat ourselves up about falling—which is disharmonious—or we can get back on the bicycle and start pedaling again.

The [Zen](#) teacher Chozen Bays said, "We just keep on working, we are patient with ourselves, and on and on it goes. Little by little our life comes more into alignment with the wisdom that gives rise to the precepts. As our minds get clearer and clearer, it's not even a matter of breaking or maintaining the precepts; automatically they are maintained."

## The Five Precepts

Buddhists don't have just one set of Precepts. Depending on which list you consult, you might hear there are three, five, ten, or sixteen Precepts. Monastic orders have longer lists.

The most basic list of Precepts is called in Pali the *pañcasīla*, or "five precepts." In [Theravada](#) Buddhism, these Five Precepts are the basic precepts for lay Buddhists.

[Not killing](#)

[Not stealing](#)

[Not misusing sex](#)

[Not lying](#)

[Not abusing intoxicants](#)

A more literal translation from the Pali for each of these would be "I undertake to observe the precept to abstain from [killing, stealing, misusing sex, lying, abusing intoxicants]." It's important to understand that in maintaining

the Precepts one is training oneself to behave as a buddha would behave. It's not just a matter of following or not following rules.

## The Ten Grand Precepts

[Mahayana Buddhists](#) generally follow a list of Ten Precepts that are found in a [Mahayana Sutra](#) called the [Brahmajala](#) or [Brahma Net Sutra](#) (not to be confused with a Pali sutra of the same name):

1. Not killing
2. Not stealing
3. Not misusing sex
4. Not lying
5. Not abusing intoxicants
6. Not talking about others' errors and faults
7. Not elevating oneself and blaming others
8. Not being stingy
9. Not being angry
10. Not speaking ill of the [Three Treasures](#)

## The Three Pure Precepts

Some Mahayana Buddhists also vow to uphold the [Three Pure Precepts](#), which are associated with walking the path of a [bodhisattva](#). These are:

1. To do no evil
2. To do good
3. To save all beings

The Pali words usually translated as "good" and "evil" are *kusala* and *akusala*. These words can also be translated "skillful" and "unskillful," which takes us back to the idea of training. Very basically, "skillful" action takes oneself and others closer to enlightenment, and "unskillful" action leads away from enlightenment.

To "save all beings" is the bodhisattva's vow to bring all beings to enlightenment.

## The Sixteen Bodhisattva Precepts

You will sometimes hear of the Bodhisattva Precepts or the Sixteen Bodhisattva Vows. Most of the time, this refers to the Ten Grand Precepts and Three Pure Precepts, plus the Three Refuges:

I take refuge in the [Buddha](#).

I take refuge in the [Dharma](#).

I take refuge in the [Sangha](#).

## The Eightfold Path

To fully understand how the Precepts are part of the Buddhist path, begin with the [Four Noble Truths](#). The Fourth Truth is that liberation is possible through the [Eightfold Path](#). The Precepts are connected to the "ethical conduct" part of the Path—Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood.