

A Comparative study of *Sīla* (The Five Precepts) in Theravāda Buddhism and Jainism

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Introduction

Generally speaking, the world today is plagued by various kinds of conflicts: ethnic, racial, religious and ideological. Terrorism appears to reign supreme in many countries. War is not just a threat; it is a continuing actuality all over the globe. The use of nuclear power in war is a worldwide anxiety. Lawlessness and misappropriation of various kinds are prevalent today to an unprecedented degree. The mass media are replete with distressing news about pickpocketing, bribery, smuggling, organized robbery, blackmailing, hijacking, etc. Incest and rape, too, raise their ugly heads with unprecedented frequency. Sexual abuse of children within the family circle is so common. False speech, alcoholism and drug abuse are burning social problems of modern society. In this ugly scenario Buddhist practice of *Sīla* can be a helpful instrument to reduce these vices.

Word of *Sīla*:

Sīla or morality is the cornerstone upon which the entire Noble Eightfold Path is built. The practice of *Sīla* is defined by the middle three factors of the Eightfold Path: *Right Speech*, *Right Action* and *Right Livelihood*. It is the first step of Threefold Training which is the foundation of the holy life and the path the Buddha teaches to develop the body behavior with precepts (*Sīla*).

In order to understand the term '*Sīla*' and its significance we can see the details as follows.

Sīla is common to both the Sanskrit and Pali languages, and for the Sanskrit Author Anthony Macdonell gives: "Sīla, n. habit, customs, disposition, character, behaviour, good

conduct or habits, noble character, uprightness, morality...”¹ Regarding the Pāli term ‘Sīla’ may be rendered as practice of Moral Virtues.²

The word *Sīla* in moral discipline, has three levels of meaning: (1) inner virtue, i.e., endowment with such qualities as kindness, contentment, simplicity, truthfulness, patience, etc.; (2) virtuous actions of body and speech which express those inner virtues outwardly; and (3) rules of conduct governing actions of body and speech designed to bring them into accord with the ethical ideals.³

In general sense, it is rendered as nature, character, habit, custom, practice, conduct, etc. In popular sense, it is expressed as morality, virtue, moral deeds, and moral principles and so on. The traditional sense further goes to describe it as basic foundation of moral life or the pivotal point of the holy life. In highly technical sense, it is the moral volition (*kusala-cetana*)⁴.

Literally, the word *Sīla* is interpreted in three ways, namely; as a foundation-stone (*Sīlana-attena*), calming down (*Sītala-attena*) and acting as fore-runner (*Sira-attena*).⁵

From the above statement, thus *Sīla* means - right volition (*Cetanā*), the associated mental states (*Cetasika*), mental control (*Samvara*) and the actual non-transgression in body and speech the course of conduct already in the mind by the preceding three *Sīla* called *Avītikkaṃma*.⁶

Theravāda Buddhism preserves the Buddha’s teachings and conducts religious ceremonies mainly in the original Pāli language. The five precepts are also recited in Pāli, and

¹ SOBTI, HARCHARAN SINGH, *NIBBANA IN EARLY BUDDHISM*, (Delhi: Eastern Book Linkers, 1985), pp. 41-42.

² Murti, T.R.V. *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism: a Study of the Madhyamika System*. (George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1960), p 349.

³ Contents <http://www.accesstoinight.org>. (Last visited on September 22, 2016)

⁴ Harcharan Singh, Sobti, *Mirror of Buddhis.*, (Delhi: Eastern Book Linkers, 1997), p. 293.

⁵ Ibid, p. 294.

⁶ Dasgupta, Surendranath, *History of Indian Philosophy*. (Vol. I). (Cambridge University Press, 1975), p.101.

their meanings are generally known to most Buddhists. The following the original Pāli text is given in italics and the corresponding English translation is given side by side:

- i. *Pāṇātipātā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi:*
To abstain from killing any living being.
- ii. *Adinnādānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyami:*
To abstain from stealing what is not given.
- iii. *Kāmesu micchācārā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyami:*
To abstain from sexual misconduct.
- iv. *Musāvādā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyami:*
To abstain from false speech.
- v. *Surāmerayamajjapamādatthānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyami:*
To abstain from intoxicants causing heedlessness.

The refrain “I observe the precept of abstaining from ...” which begins every precept clearly shows that these are not commandments. They are, indeed, moral codes of conduct that lay Buddhists willingly undertake out of clear understanding and conviction that they are good for both themselves and for society.

However, it does not mean that there are no five precepts in Jainism. Morality in Jainism also has the five precepts, which appear in ethic of Jain tradition are called the five great vows. These five precepts are as follows:

1. *The Sthool Prānātipātvirmani Vrat* (Ahimsā): The ordinary vow for the renunciation of violence. The vow not to cause violence and pain to any creature unknowingly or unnecessarily.

2. *The Sthool Mrishāvādviramani Vrat* (Satya): (The vow of truthfulness) the vow not to utter a lie in any situation or event unnecessarily and unknowingly.

3. *The Sthool Adattādānaviramani Vrat* (Asteya): (The vow of non-stealing) the vow not to steal anyone’s belongings without cause or unknowingly.

4. *The Sthool Maithunviramani Vrat* (Brahmacharya): (The vow relating to the renunciation of sexual pleasures). The vow not to have sexual contacts, with a man other than

one's husband or with a woman other than one's wife; and not to engage oneself in talk or gossip that provokes sexual desires.

5. *The Sthool Parigraharparimani Vrat* (Aparigriha): (The vow relating to non-attachment). The vow to determine the limit to the acquisition of belongings and to their use. The taking of a vow to delimit and determine their number or quantity.⁷

The five vows of the clergy are called 'Great Vows' or '*mahā-vratas*'⁸ when they are practiced rigidly. In case of ordinary people who may not be able to practice them strictly, they are called 'Small Vows' or '*anu-vratās*' (Ibid.) or minor vows.

Comparison

We can be said that the principles or practices in the both religions are different. That is, the practice to the ultimate goal of Buddhism is based on the precepts (*Sīla*), concentration (*Samādhi*) and wisdom (*Paññā*) while Jainism is based on right faith (*samyak darshana*), right knowledge (*samyak jñāna*) and right conduct (*samyak chāritra*).

Now we come to know about the similarities and differences of five precepts. According to the precepts (*Sīla*) of Buddhism, householders and ascetics have to observe perfectly in accordance with the basis of five precepts (*Pañca-sīla*) namely; *Pāṇātipātā veramaṇī* (non-killing), *Adinnādānā veramaṇī* (non-stealing), *Kāmesu micchācārā veramaṇī* (non-sexual misconduct, for monk is called *Abrāhmacariyā veramaṇī*; non-sexual intercourse), *Musāvādā veramaṇī* (non-false speech) and *Surāmeraya- majjapamādatthānā veramaṇī* (non-intoxicants).

While the five precepts or five vows of Jainism consists; *Ahiṃsā* (non-violence), *Satya* (truthfulness), *Asteya* (non-stealing), *Brahmacharya* (celibacy) and *Aparigriha* (non-attachment). Those who have taken to asceticism are expected to observe them all the time mentally, verbally and physically. In the case of the monks, these are to be followed very rigorously. But in the case of the laymen, they are modified and diluted. For example, the vow

⁷ Ramappa, Shri K, *Guidelines of Jainism*, (Bombay: Harsha Printerry, 1986), pp.23-25.

⁸ Sharma, Chandradhar, *A Critical Survey of India Philosophy*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 2009), p.66.

of *ahimsā* should be practiced by not injuring others mentally, verbally and physically. The laymen are also advised to refrain from associating themselves with people who are not sincere on the path and who violate the vows habitually. *Brahmacharya* is restricted to chastity and *Aparigraha* to contentment.

In Buddhism there are two classes of Precepts (*Sīla*) i.e. the precepts of householders, they have two groups are: (1) the Five Precepts (*Pañca-sīla*) and (2) the Eight Precepts (*Attha Sīla*). And the Precepts of ascetics, they have three groups, namely, (1) the rules for novices called “*Dasa-sīla*”, consist of ten rules, (2) the rules for monks called “*Bhikkhu-sīla*”, consist of two hundred and twenty-seven rules, (3) the rules for nuns called “*Bhikkhuni-sīla*”, consist of three hundred and eleven rules. So the five precepts are the first principle of *sīla*. And it is the first step of *Trisikkhā* or Threefold Training namely; precept (*Sīla*), concentration (*Samādhi*) and wisdom (*Paññā*).

While in Jainism it is the important principle of ethic tradition. And it is the principle of practice for householders and ascetics in accordance with right conduct (*samyak chāritra*) in *Triratna*.

From the above comparative of these we can conclude as it corresponds to the similarity and difference of five precepts in Buddhism and Jainism as shown in the table below:

The five precepts of Buddhism	The five precepts of Jainism
1. <i>Pāṇātipātā veramaṇī</i> (non-killing)	1. <i>Ahimsā</i> (non-violence),
2. <i>Adinnādānā veramaṇī</i> (non-stealing)	2. <i>Satya</i> (truthfulness),
3. <i>Kāmesu micchācārā veramaṇī</i> (non- sexual misconduct)	3. <i>Asteya</i> (non-stealing),
4. <i>Musāvādā veramaṇī</i> (non-false speech)	4. <i>Brahmacharya</i> (celibacy)

5. <i>Surāmerayamajjapamādatthānā</i> (non-intoxicants)	<i>veramaṇī</i>	5. <i>Aparigriha</i> (non-attachment)
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Critical Evaluation

Observance of the five precepts constitutes the minimum moral obligation of a practicing lay Buddhist. These five precepts enjoin against killing living beings, taking what is not given (or stealing), sexual misconduct, false speech, and use of intoxicating drink or drugs.

The practice of Buddhist moral precepts deeply affects one's personal and social life. On the personal level, the precepts help one to lead a moral life and to advance further on the spiritual path. Moreover, popular Buddhism believes that the practice of morality contributes to the accumulation of merits that both support one in the present life and ensure happiness and prosperity in the next. On the social level, observing the five precepts helps to promote peaceful coexistence, mutual trust, a cooperative spirit, and general peace and harmony in society. It also helps to maintain an atmosphere which is conducive to social progress and development, as we can see from the practical implications of each precept.

The first precept admonishes against the destruction of life. This is based on the principle of goodwill and respect for the right to life of all living beings. By observing this precept one learns to cultivate loving kindness and compassion. One sees others' suffering as one's own and endeavors to do what one can to help alleviate their problems. Personally, one cultivates love and compassion; socially, one develops an altruistic spirit for the welfare of others.

The second precept, not to take things which are not given, signifies respect for others' rights to possess wealth and property. Observing the second precept, one refrains from earning one's livelihood through wrongful means, such as by stealing or cheating. This precept also implies the cultivation of generosity, which on a personal level helps to free one from attachment and selfishness, and on a social level contributes to friendly cooperation in the community.

The third precept, not to indulge in sexual misconduct, includes rape, adultery, sexual promiscuity and all forms of sexual aberration. This precept teaches one to respect one's own spouse as well as those of others, and encourages the practice of self-restraint, which is of utmost importance in spiritual training. It is also interpreted by some scholars to mean the abstention from misuse of senses and includes, by extension, non-transgression on things that are dear to others, or abstention from intentionally hurting other's feelings. For example, a young boy may practice this particular precept by refraining from intentionally damaging his sister's dolls. If he does, he may be said to have committed a breach of morality. This precept is intended to instill in us a degree of self-restraint and a sense of social propriety, with particular emphasis on sexuality and sexual behavior.

The fourth precept, not to tell lies or resort to falsehood, is an important factor in social life and dealings. It concerns respect for truth. A respect for truth is a strong deterrent to inclinations or temptation to commit wrongful actions, while disregard for the same will only serve to encourage evil deeds. The Buddha has said: "There are few evil deeds that a liar is incapable of committing." The practice of the fourth precept, therefore, helps to preserve one's credibility, trustworthiness, and honor.

The last of the five Buddhist moral precepts enjoins against the use of intoxicants. On the personal level, abstention from intoxicants helps to maintain sobriety and a sense of responsibility. Socially, it helps to prevent accidents, such as car accidents, that can easily take place under the influence of intoxicating drink or drugs. Many crimes in society are committed under the influence of these harmful substances. The negative effects they have on spiritual practice are too obvious to require any explanation.⁹

Conclusion:

From the above explanation, we can say when one practices *sīla*, one returns to one's own basic goodness, the original state of normalcy, unperturbed and unmodified. Killing a human being, for instance, is not basically human nature; if it were, human beings would have

⁹ Dr. Sunthorn Plamintr, *Getting to Know Buddhism*, (Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation, 1994), pp. 133-154.

ceased to exist a long time ago. A person commits an act of killing because he or she is blinded by greed, rage or hatred. Such negative qualities as anger, hatred, greed, ill-will, and jealousy are factors that alter people's nature and make them into something other than their true self. To practice *sīla* is thus to train in preserving one's true nature, not allowing it to be modified or overpowered by negative forces.

This definition points to the objective of Buddhist morality rather than to the practice itself, but it does give us an idea of the underlying philosophy behind the training, as well as how the Buddhist moral precepts should be followed. These precepts are a means to an end, they are observed for a specific objective.

On the personal level, the observance of precepts serves as the preliminary groundwork for the cultivation of higher virtues or mental development. *Sīla* is the most important step on the spiritual path. Without morality, right concentration cannot be attained, and without right concentration, wisdom cannot be fully perfected. Thus, morality not only enhances people's ethical values and fulfills their noble status as human beings, but it is crucial to their efforts toward the highest religious goal of *Nibbāna*.

On the social level, *sīla* contributes to harmonious and peaceful coexistence among community members and consequently helps to promote social growth and development. In a society where morality prevails and members are conscious of their roles, there will be general security, mutual trust, and close cooperation, these in turn leading to greater progress and prosperity. Without morality there will be corruption and disturbance, and all members of society are adversely affected. Most of the problems that society experiences today are connected, directly or indirectly, with a lack of good morality.

Buddhist moral precepts provide a wholesome foundation for personal and social growth. They are practical principles for a good life and the cultivation of virtues. If we understand the objectives of *sīla* and realize its benefits, we will see moral precepts as an integral part of life rather than as a burden that we are compelled to shoulder. Buddhist moral precepts are not commandments imposed by force; they are a course of training willingly undertaken in order to achieve a desired objective. We do not practice to please a supreme being, but for our own good and the good of our society. As individuals, we need to train in morality to lead a good and noble life. On the social level, we need to help maintain peace and

harmony in society and facilitate the progress of the common good. The practice of moral precepts is essential in this regard.

Now we come across to the benefit of five precepts. We may summarize the five precepts in relation to the spiritual qualities that they are likely to produce and promote as follows. The first precept helps to promote goodwill, compassion, and kindness. The second can be instrumental in developing generosity, service, altruism, non-attachment, contentment, honesty, and right livelihood. The third precept helps to cultivate self-restraint, mastery over the emotions and senses, renunciation, and control of sensual desire. The fourth precept leads to the development of honesty, reliability, and moral integrity. The fifth precept helps to promote mindfulness, clarity of mind, and wisdom.

According to this way of life, anyone who wishes to practice *Dhamma* must begin by practicing *Sīla*. This is the first step without which one cannot advance. We must abstain all action, all words and deeds, that harm other people. This is easily understood; society requires such behaviour in order to avoid disruption. But in fact we abstain from such actions not only because they harm others but also because they harm ourselves.

According to Buddhist view, *Sīla* is necessary not only for the good of society but for the good of each of its members, and not only for the worldly good of a person but also for his progress on the path of *Dhamma*. The Buddha has said concerning to the benefits of *Sīla*:

“Householder, there are these five benefits for the virtuous in the perfecting of virtue. What five? Here, householder, one who is virtuous, possessed of virtue, comes into a large fortune as a consequence of diligence; this is the first benefit for the virtuous in the perfecting of virtue. Again, of one who is virtuous, possessed of virtue, a fair name is spread abroad; this is the second benefit for the virtuous in the perfecting of virtue. Again, whenever one who is virtuous, possessed of virtue, enters an assembly, whether of *Khattiyas* (warrior nobles) or Brahmins or householders or ascetics, he does so without fear or hesitation; this is the third benefit for the virtuous in the perfecting of virtue. Again one who is virtuous, possessed of virtue, dies unconfused; this is the fourth benefit for the virtuous in the perfecting of virtue. Again, one who is virtuous, possessed of virtue, on the break up of the body, after death, reappears

in a happy destiny, in the heavenly world; this is the fifth benefit for the virtuous in the perfecting of virtue.”¹⁰

In *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, the Buddha says that every person who always observes the Five Precepts strictly will get five good results in this life and next life:

1. Great wealth,
2. Good reputation,
3. Self-confidence,
4. Untroubled death, and
5. A happy state after death.¹¹

To end this point, it is no doubt that the Five Precepts bring good results to both individuals and society. They can help people to create a civilized world where they can live together in peace, harmony and economic prosperity.

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¹⁰Digha Nikaya, Vol. 2. Ed., by T.W. Rhys Davids and J.E. Carpenter, (London: Pali Text Society, 1890-1911), p. 86

¹¹Ibid, p. 84.

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