

# 2005-10-03 Five Precepts

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## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So what I have in mind to do today, starting today and for the next five weeks after today is to give a series of talks on what's known as English is the five precepts. And today, I thought I'd do kind of an introductory talk, and then take each of the five for the those five, next five weeks. And the five precepts are very important in our tradition and very central to our practice. And so I'd like to, it's important to talk about them. Also, in a few weeks, I'm going to do a refuge ceremony for some people taking refuge class, and the refuge there and mirror part of the rest of ceremonies is kind of a commitment to the precepts and part of his taking the precepts. And so it seems like it's an opportune time to talk about precepts in in the teachings of the Buddha in the training that the Buddha laid out to trading, spiritual training, it's sometimes divided into three different trainings. And the first training is a training in virtue, the word is sila. The second training is a training in Samadhi and Samadhi. Here, this context can just means inter cultivation or development. And, and then the last training is a training in wisdom or insight. And these are the three trainings that lead to awakening lead to liberation lead to freedom there and all the Buddhist teachings and all the Buddhist practices can be subsumed under these three trainings. The first training then has to do with sila and it's a very interesting word. I think probably one of the best English words to translate it is the word virtue. The word ethics is a little bit confusing er has a lot of associations in English, that some of which are good and some of them which are confusing for people or sometimes are off putting for people. But virtue the word see line, its original meaning means character, or nature, or like a habit, something that we I know one monk who likes to try and translate that does what's normal, normal, or malossi normal normality. So seal has to do with character. More ethics. Sometimes we think of ethics has to do with rules and But seal has to do with character. And so when we talk about a training, one of the three trainings, it's a training and character training and some inner qualities that can be developed. And here the idea is that integrity or ethical sensitivity, or virtue is not something that's a matter of rules, or understanding of what's what, but has a lot to do with how we develop ourselves kind of heart we create the kind of character we make for ourselves, our dispositions that we create the habits we make, the kind of the kind of foundation out of how we want to live our life, how we normally want to respond in normal

circumstances to life as it is. And so it's a training. So it does involve changing ourselves. And one of the things that Buddhist tradition will say over and over again, in some form or other is that the human being is malleable and if you're if you don't take responsibility for the, for shaping your heart, your mind who you are, there are a lot of forces in society that will do it for you. And, and so you could just kind of pass the go along and be shaped by the forces around you. Or you can, you can take some responsibility for it, at least to kind of be mindful that the forces of society don't influence you too much. And some of the popular forces that exist in our culture are not very savory. And in fact, the way that watching children growing up and another have children, watching the way some children in our culture are impacted by violence and sexuality that appear on television, and in music, it just, it's just phenomenal. You know, I probably never existed in human culture, society before except during wartime that children were exposed to the kind of influences they are now. And sometimes, just not very pleasant to see the results that happen. So at least to somehow take some responsibility for how we're being shaped, and there's our parts of our personality who we are, which maybe is genetic, who knows how it's got there, but seems like it's not going to change at all. And there are other parts of something deep aspects of who we are, that can be changed that can be cultivated or developed, awakened to change direction in radical ways. And so illustration wants to emphasize over and over again, the radical possibility of change that can happen. One of the radical stories that I read about once was there was a young boy I think he was a teenager who killed another teenager. Another boy and killing I think currently the only the only child of this mother. And the killer was raised in very difficult circumstances, kind of without parents almost, and grew up in the violent streets. Maybe he was a member of a gang and, and had nothing to really live for no one who really cared for him or took care of him except for maybe the gang and so he was sentenced to jail. And At his trial after he was sentenced, the mother was asked it was offered a chance to say something and she spoke up and said, I'm gonna kill you. Something like that to the to the killer. So then she waited a few years apparently. And then as you start to visit the killer is jail cell knows jail visits, and started doing regular visits, and would bring him something in which they could bring him to jail. So I started developing a relationship or friendship with the person who killed her child and eventually became kind of his friend and kind of maternal figure. And he had no one else was visiting him, no one else cared about him enough to visit him in prison. And so he gets look forward to these visits from this woman, the mother of the person killed and, and they've developed a very close relationship. After the August visit she made and eventually he was released from jail. And he came to live with her. And she kind of helped him get started his new life and not into what exactly she did for him, but kind of started his new life in Jakarta. He kind of lived like lived with her like a son. And some point when his life was well established. She said to him, remember that trial I promised I'd kill you. I did. And so a radical change of character, you know, it could happen. There's a famous story that's told maybe too many times. I think it's maybe Richard heckler. He was an Aikido. Maybe not but anyway a keto student who was in Japan, studying Aikido and Aikido is supposed to be the way of love. That's we live with Hi, Nikita means love. Key I guess it's the means like energy and dough. So the way the way of love because you're supposed to love your opponent to defeat he's supposed to not actually defeat your opponent but somehow change the circumstances. This guy was studying a keto. And he was late one night he was taking the train home. And there was a drunk, who was being quite obnoxious and angry and fair.

I think to be violent, I guess, on the train. And this American Akito students that oh, you know, I'm not supposed to use my Kido except maybe in self defense, but this guy is really look like it's gonna be dangerous because, you know, for other people for people on the train, and finally is this will be easy, you know, this guy's drunk, I can finally you know, use my be justified to use my Aikido training and so he was just about to stand up and defend the train this drunk guy and just before that as I remember the story, this old guy who's sitting in the train somehow reached over to the drunk and said, Oh, you come sit down right next to me here and tell me you know what's going on with you. And the guy started telling him a story and after a while the drunk start crying and he's having a hard life and hard time and the old guy just sat there and listened and listened to him and eventually the guy quieted down with I don't know. Certainly the danger was over. So here again, a change of character, someone who was angry, belligerent and perhaps threatening to be violent. was, was changed by someone who met him. And saw saw him and received him with compassion and kindness. And rather than meeting him with, with, with hostility with violence, meaning violence with violence, he was met with kindness, and it dissolved the whole thing. Maybe you'll forgive me just give you one more story that I've heard of have some like, again, as a keto story of some guy going into keto teacher going into someplace inner city where there's some violent youth and offering to teach some kids there, how to be better fighters, better killers even or something. And it's kind of strange thing to do offer to do, but he talked to my Kido and after a few Yours are some time we've been trained in Akito. They didn't want to fight anymore. And the idea being that if you get trained and some interdiscipline like this, it changes your character in such way that, that you're not liable to act from the place inside of us that acts from anger, or violence, hostility, greed kind of being callous to people that we encounter. So Buddhism puts a great emphasis on how we can change that we can change, we can change our character dispositions, if we'd like to. Some of us are quite happy with who we are, don't feel the need to change. But some of us could see some room for improvement. And the idea in Buddhism is not to judge ourselves as being good or bad, based on how we are, but rather the idea is to see what's become familiar with ourselves to know ourselves well enough, and to see how can What can I do about who I am that allows me to live wiser and allows me live in such a way that I can move towards greater freedom, freedom in my own heart, freedom in my mind, and also freedom in my in my actions and how I act, so that when we act in the world or activities can be a gift to the world rather than a harm to the world. One of the ideas of the precepts, the five precepts, ethical precepts, is that they are understood to be gifts, people who live by them are giving a gift to the people around them, people encounter them. So, the word sila means character or nature or habit that we have. So, as a training in developing that part of ourselves. There are lists of different kinds of character that a person can developed. The one of the very common lists is the 10, sealants or 10 qualities of character and these 10 are not Not taking what's not given, not engaging in improper sexuality, not engaging in lying, not lying, not slandering, not engaging in harsh speech, and engaging in frivolous speech, not being covetous, not being, not having ill will, acting from ill will, and not having wrong views, harmful views. So there are 10 qualities of character can be developed so you can develop these qualities. And often in Buddhism, when we talk about things that are negative, the implication is you're developing positive qualities as well. The corollary is that opposites so when we're developing the quality of not killing, it's actually developing ourselves. Passion. We're developing the quality of not taking what's not given. It's

developing generosity, or contentment, Friday things. not engaging sexual misconduct. It's developing good contentment or respect. not lying is developing truth, truthfulness, and so forth, then we go. So it's a training. The most famous list of the five list of sealers that comes down to us in modern world is what's called the five sealers, punches sila. And there are four of them are the first four that I just gave you. And this is what the topic is for the next six weeks. So the first is not killing. The second is not taking what is not given. The third is no sexual misconduct. The fourth is not lying. And then the fifth is not intoxicating. The mind with drugs and alcohol, so those are the five. Now these are called sealers, they call it qualities of character. So it's very interesting to be called that, as opposed to commandments or rules. So there's a few things to be said about these. One of the thing one of the idea in the Buddhist tradition is that these five Celia's five qualities, characterizes someone who is spiritually mature, that someone who's spiritually mature who's awake, will naturally act that way, will naturally act in such a way that not going to kill intentionally. They're not going to intentionally steal, they're not going to intentionally engage in sexual misconduct, they're not going to intentionally lie, and they're not going to intentionally toxic themselves. And so, rather than something that they do, like a restraint, like that they do, they hold themselves really tight, they lock themselves in the room, and so they're not going to do any of those. things at all. Because they're, you know, it's actually expresses kind of freedom of the heart, where the heart is simply not going to act that way. Those that motivations are not going to rise in that person. And so they can go in situations that might, in other other people be very tempting. They're not going to be tempted because that inclination is not there. And I find that very inspiring. That that's what though tradition holds up. Because it means that an ethical sensitivity, ethical behavior becomes a natural part of who we are, as opposed to something that we have to consider or restrain ourselves or diminish ourselves by living, according to some people in the here but ethical rules. They feel like they're diminished by it. Oh, no, you know, the median Buddhism is actually your enhanced, your life is enhanced. When you when you develop these characters quality, replaced by these five things, these five causes As a character so virtue is probably a good translation for the English, that Polly, sila. There's no there's punch Seola. There's also something called punch De Sica. The five trainings. The five trainings are training guidelines, training rules, if you'd like, that people take on voluntarily, in order to train themselves in mindfulness, train themselves in virtue and character, trained themselves in compassion in order to train themselves in order to create the foundations for further spiritual growth. So their voluntary trainings. Now these five voluntary trainings are the same. These five punches, seeker five seekers, five trainings are the same as Five c less than the five virtues. So the same list, but the understanding of how they are how they're held is differently. One is just expressing a character that we have or can have. As we mature, the other is actually a rule rules we're going to live by. and genuinely in Theravada Buddhism, lay people will do this voluntarily taking the five precepts, and they'll often do it temporarily. It's very common. For example, in our tradition here, if you go on a meditation retreat, that your acetate live by the five precepts during the retreat, and lifted by them fairly strictly. And it's great to go and retreats, like at spirit rock, because it's really a safe place to be, because everyone there is dedicated to living by the precepts. You could drop your wallet, in the middle of their path there and not notice For a few days, and if it's not there in a few days, it's probably in the manager's office waiting for you because no one's going to take it people live there with a with our doors with not without any locks

on their doors at spirit rock. Have you? You know have you ever been slept at night without your doors locked? How many have you ever done that? Some of you have a password you have stuck without locking your doors by mistake. Sorry, you leave your open. So hot. So there are people that do it, but some people would never do that. And anyway, a spirit rock unis retreats is a place where people feel safe. And I remember there was a woman who came to spear rock many years ago. And she wrote a letter afterwards and she spear rock and said, You know, I know where she came from. But you said being a spirit rock was First time in my life, where I felt safe enough to sleep with the door's unlocked, and to be able to walk around at night by myself pretty phenomenal. Some people don't have that degree of safety in their lives. And you come to a retreat in your together with 80 strangers, and it's pretty safe. Don't find you know your heart hard to find a safe environment to be in. So, it's spirit rock is one of the places where we live by these five precepts. So in retreats, and people take a piece of the beginning of the retreat, and they're expected for the duration of the retreat, retreat to live by those presets, and it gets quite nice. You see, we get all these notes in the wintertime when it's raining a spirit rock. There's all these snail these slugs that kind of start walking across the pathways, and there's a lot of them. And so people, you know, if you're not really mindful, it's really easy to step on them. And even though it's a mindfulness retreat there people are not mindful enough and And they usually are few slugs that get squashed. And then we get these teachers get these notes, please make announcements. They'll tell people to be more careful when they walk so they don't step on this on this slugs and I love it that people are so concerned about the slugs or you know, or some insect comes into meditation help people very carefully Shepherd it outside as opposed to and I find it actually quite jarring when people do that to mosquitoes. I find it quite and so that's one of the places we live by the precepts is at spirit rock, in in. In more traditional setting terabyte and setting in Thailand and Burma. People sometimes live by the people commit themselves with precepts One day, like offering the full moon day or the new moon day, it's kind of like the Sunday of Buddhists. And they'll go spend a day at the monastery we'll just take for that day, they'll commit themselves to the precepts. Or some people will commit themselves to one or two or three or four of the precepts rather than all five. So there's some idea these are training precepts. And so we're gonna try our best to live by these and train ourselves by using this. And it's a very strong way of training, depending on how subtle you get to understanding the precepts. So one of the ways to see the value of such a training is to begin appreciating that these training rules are meant to be to stop us from doing the opposite, right or stop us from doing these things. To stop us from killing, stop us from stealing. stop us from sexual misconduct to stop us from lying and stop us from intoxication. And then we can ask, what is the motivation? What is it? What are the conditions inside ourselves? That brings us to want to kill steel sexually misconduct lie and toxic in ourselves, What is it? What are some of the forces inside of us? And so in as a training, training precepts, we're trying to look and trying to understand ourselves by having a fence around us but having this this this commitment, and we start what's going on in me what's happening here. So, what's happening when we're trying to kill? My guess is most of you haven't killed. Maybe I met some people that killed before and I didn't know quite what to say to them. It was they were Did soldiers and but you know things like insects, many people in our kind of community here will ask me, what about those snails? What about the answer the termites? What about that? And I love it that people ask that people stop long enough to ask the question. You know,



is this appropriate? Should I do this? Should I just, you know, squash the snails or should I spray my house? Is there some, you know, questioning going on? And is there some value in the life that we may be thinking about killing? And maybe there's other ways maybe there's some way of respecting that life? What is it that motivates that act of killing? Even something like an ant or snails? What motivates that? Is it because we're lazy? There is another way but it takes much more work. And there's a way of saving those lives but to still present protecting the garden or the house was a lot of work. Is it because of greed. Is it because of fear? Or is it because of many things, the main thing that come into place? What's going on there? What's going on when, when we were motivated to be violent, violent takes many different forms. It takes, you know, physical forms, verbal forms. And what motivates us when we want to be violent, what are the causes and conditions inside ourselves. So we take these as training precepts. We're asked to turn around, have them as a mirror, to understand yourself, understand yourself deeply. And when we try to understand ourselves, we use the precepts to understand understand ourselves, then they're not used is kind of blind, at a blind or blind rules or kind of commandments, that thou shalt live this way or else, using it as a mirror to try to understand what's really going on here and deep way so that we can begin taking some responsibility for our character for our training what's going on inside of us. Sorry, trying trying this and then when people work with these training presets, then there are subtleties that are very convenient or so called subtleties. They become more and more interesting. My my guess is most of you don't go make a habit of stealing. And the Emperor I'd be very surprised if many of you made a habit of stealing. But it wouldn't surprise me. If some of you steel in small ways, very small. Maybe you don't even think of us I mean, the classic idea of taking pencils from work, right? Oh, you know, that's fine, take pencils from work. It's fine to, you know, cheat a little bit of my taxes, it's fine to, you know, to do this and that, you know, no one's gonna notice if I do this or, you know, the person at the store gives me a little more change back there was do me. That's okay, because they probably overcharged me anyway for what I'm buying. And so it's only fair. And so it's a little but you know, is that really the right to do that? And what is it that motivates us look in the mirror goes back, what's happening for us Really? What's happening here? And what's happening out there? What's happening with us? And also, what does it say about how we understand others? And the relationship we have with others? So this is Reflections going on? Who am I? Who is the other? What's my relationship to both of them and to question that and to ponder that and not take what's given or the inherited view of self and other and the relationship between questioning and becoming more sensitive to relationship. The wording is very interesting. It isn't, doesn't say don't steal, it says don't take what is not given. It's kind of a higher order than not stealing. So for monastics, for example, they take this very strictly. And when they when a Buddhist monk or nun goes into someone's home, there, they are not allowed to pick up anything in someone's home until they're given permission. Like if there's a, you know, a book on the coffee table, you know, it's there for you to show your guests you know, you have your beautiful book. And they actually can't pick up that book unless they actually said please, you know, if you will look at that book, please do. Because now I suppose in any kind of way, approach taking was not given even if you just to borrow it for a moment like that. So I don't know, lay people need to live to that extreme. But monastics, live that way. And partly that's to help them preserve their integrity, but also it's a way it's a training for them. be very mindful of their impulses. So they don't act out of kind of Mindless Behavior,

or just you know, without thinking what they're doing, don't pick us up, you know, but everything they're asked to do, that has to do with mindfully with very consciously. So the high high value that Buddhism puts on being mindful and conscientious. So there's virtue, there's training rules, and then there is principles and the principles behind sila. In Buddhism between behind this virtue or character development is twofold. One is, the principle is that of compassion and liberation. To these two twins that are so important for our tradition, so is training and compassion, what is the compassionate thing to do in our circumstances, and the precepts have to do with our relationship to other people. We don't usually kill unless there's somebody to kill something to kill some animal, some being. We don't usually steal unless someone was stealing from. We don't usually lie unless we're lying to someone. We don't usually engage in sexual misconduct, unless there's somebody who were engaged in. And I've never seen any problem with masturbation in Buddhism. So it's usually sexuality has to do with something that's in Buddhism, you could do with other people, this precept. So there's this precept, maybe you do alone, get intoxicated. But the first four has to do with our relationship to other people. So there's a principle here of compassion. Principle is not to cause harm, maybe to try to cost benefit. So when it What is training and learning to do that? And then the other principle is that of liberation. So what is it that helps me become the greatest? Because what you probably find is those times when you're most likely to break the precepts go against his training rules. When you're not acting from those virtues plays a virtue, you probably find that you're probably attached or clinging to something, you probably find that is some place where the heart is constrained or constricted, or afraid. Or, kind of, you've lost control of yourself, there's kind of reacting compulsively in some way. And so there's no freedom in that behavior. And so if you're really free, would you do these things, if you really acting from freedom, so it's so the precepts helped us to see where the places where I'm not free. And that goes a little bit against some people's kind of an American ideal of I just want to be free to do whatever I want in Buddhism, The idea of freedom is not freedom to do whatever you want. Free, it's a different kind of freedom. We're talking about Buddhism, talks about freedom, from compulsion, freedom from our own impulses. So rather than acting kind of freely from our impulses, shop until you drop, that's the American freedom to shop. That'd be great when it first comes down to use the freedom to vote. And now it's this freedom. But the Buddhist idea is unnecessarily create a shop, but rather free from the impulses to shop free from the if you still shop if it's wise, but free from the compulsion to do it to free from that which forces us to act against our better judgment. So the five precepts then, represent principles of non harming, compassion and liberation. They represent trainings and character they represents. They represent how we live our life. When we become spiritually mature, and they represent a training that Buddhists will take on, so they can learn about themselves so they can train themselves. So that sila and precepts are multifunctional multi a lot of different aspects to them. And different people relate to the different aspects and different meanings for different people. So, we'll go through these five precepts over the next five weeks and they have to do with some of the most interesting aspects of human life. And I haven't seen a lot of soap operas but you know, a lot of soap opera, something Have to do something to do with some some relationship to the ethics and virtue, precepts. people invest in movies, you know, if people were living virtuous in these movies, when we got the movies very much these precepts speak to some of the most interesting, you know, fascinating parts of human life, some of the most important ones, and some of the most significant in terms of

creating harm or lack of it. And also, these precepts, speak to areas in life, which are not necessarily so obvious. Some people will think, well, I have nothing, you know, I'm basically a virtuous person and I don't need to hear about ethics or virtue. I don't want to hear about it. But there are issues in our society and how we live in our society, which are not obvious so unnecessarily flow even from even from someone maybe Who's enlightened doesn't necessarily flow automatically from their open, free heart. But they have to deal with social issues and contextual issues of what's going on. So, I mean, just one small example is when I was going to college many years ago, there was a book called The tragedy of the commons. And an idea of, you know, was fine, it was Commons meant the common the commons was in the in the villages and towns of New England, they had Common Ground Park square in the middle of this village that everyone owned everyone had in common. And people I mean, people could do whatever they wanted to do there. So we have this land space and then here which are having common to everybody like the air and the oceans and some of the wildernesses and stuff. And, you know, when there was only one automobile, the first automobile It was not an ethical issue, particularly about driving it. You know, there was no they didn't have any mufflers either. So, you know, no catalytic converters. And so they you spewed out all this smoke, but it wasn't really an ethical issue. But at some point, when we get to billion cars on the planet, does, at some point become an ethical issue. That's, you know, the kind of car we drive whether we drive at all, or we don't want it to be an ethical issue, because we know we don't want anybody to tell us what we should do with driving our cars that's like an American religion or cars. And so, you know, but does it become an ethical issue? When does it become an ethical issue? But the second car that was made the third the hundreds, the thousands was, we've got a million we got to a billion, when does it become an issue? When is the tipping point? And so there's no obvious answer to that. And I don't think it open, liberated heart will say, Well, this is the right time, unless some investigation so there's a lot of issues in our society, that we have to negotiate That the precepts relate to how do we live without killing? How do we live without taking what's not given? What does it relate to? Does it say about the things we buy things we do? So there are bigger issues. And one of the places where we see this in America is right here on our street corner. I don't know how many of you been here Thursday or Friday morning. But Thursday or Friday morning is very interesting to drive by our street corner here. Because across the street is Planned Parenthood, where apparently do they do abortions. And on all the street corners, except for parents street corner, there's anti abortion protests, and they're quite graphic. And the big posters, they have aborted babies. So one of the ethical fault lines of our culture happens right here on our front steps and so what What is Buddhist meant to say about that? Does Buddhism have any guidelines or help in helping to understand the issues around things like abortion? The first precept is not to kill, how does that relate to the question of abortion? So there are these bigger issues that the questions of virtue and precepts and training rules can relate to in our society. So perhaps in the course of these five weeks, we can look at the personal, the interpersonal, and also these larger social questions of ethics and hope in a way that's hopefully helpful for us. in cultivating our compassion, and our liberation. said, Okay, so, I see we have a couple of minutes before nine, is there maybe one question someone like to ask or any of this concern? Comment? Yes, please. Yes, in yoga they have yamas. And the armors are also the I know the five yamas Yoga, and they're almost the same, right? For for the same ones they don't intoxicate instead of in no intoxication. I think the fifth one is the fourth one, but then



when is the substitute for it is no covetousness. Right. Covering. The Five Precepts are, you know, in some form or other. I think most world religions have something like the five precepts or the five training precepts. And there's little variations, but kind of basically the same. And the 10 precepts of 10 see lists that I listed earlier. One of them is no covetousness. So it's there also. And I like that that seems to be common to many religions, and it points to It's not something we, we have to worry about, you know, imposing from the outside from the outside. Rather, it's something that can be born spring from the inside. As we become more free, more sensitive, more open or mindful, it's kind of a quality of the awakened heart rather than some kind of rule. Whenever if you read some of the many books on Buddhism in English, where they talk about the precepts one of the most common statements that Western teachers will say, very quickly, not necessarily second line, but very quickly start talking about high priests if they say, these are not commandments. They say over and over in the not commandments. They don't come from the outside, in a sense, they're gonna come from the inside. Thank you very much