

The Fifth Precept: Abstinence from Intoxicating Drinks and Drugs

The fifth precept reads: *Suramerayamajjapamadatthana veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami*, "I undertake the training rule to abstain from fermented and distilled intoxicants which are the basis for heedlessness." The word *meraya* means fermented liquors, *sura* liquors which have been distilled to increase their strength and flavor. The word *majja*, meaning an intoxicant, can be related to the rest of the passage either as qualified by *surameraya* or as additional to them. In the former case the whole phrase means fermented and distilled liquors which are intoxicants, in the latter it means fermented and distilled liquors and other intoxicants. If this second reading is adopted the precept would explicitly include intoxicating drugs used non-medicinally, such as the opiates, hemp, and psychedelics. But even on the first reading the precept implicitly proscribes these drugs by way of its guiding purpose, which is to prevent heedlessness caused by the taking of intoxicating substances.

The taking of intoxicants is defined as the volition leading to the bodily act of ingesting distilled or fermented intoxicants. It can be committed only by one's own person (not by command to others) and only occurs through the bodily door. For the precept to be violated four factors are required: (1) the intoxicant; (2) the intention of taking it; (3) the activity of ingesting it; and (4) the actual ingestion of the intoxicant. The motivating factor of the violation is greed coupled with delusion. No gradations of moral weight are given. In taking medicines containing alcohol or intoxicating drugs for medical reasons no breach of the precept is committed. There is also no violation in taking food containing a negligible amount of alcohol added as a flavoring.

This fifth precept differs from the preceding four in that the others directly involve a man's relation to his fellow beings while this precept ostensibly deals solely with a person's relation to himself — to his own body and mind. Thus whereas the first four precepts clearly belong to the moral sphere, a question may arise whether this precept is really ethical in character or merely hygienic. The answer is that it is ethical, for the reason that what a person does to his own body and mind can have a decisive effect on his relations to his fellow men. Taking intoxicants can influence the ways in which a man interacts with others, leading to the violation of all five precepts. Under the influence of intoxicants a man who might otherwise be restrained can lose self-control, become heedless, and engage in killing, stealing, adultery, and lying.

Abstinence from intoxicants is prescribed on the grounds that it is essential to the self-protection of the individual and for establishing the well-being of family and society. The precept thus prevents the misfortunes that result from the use of intoxicants: loss of wealth, quarrels and crimes, bodily disease, loss of reputation, shameless conduct, negligence, and madness.

The precept, it must be stressed, does not prohibit merely intoxication but the very use of intoxicating substances. Though occasional indulgences may not be immediately harmful in isolation, the seductive and addictive properties of intoxicants are well known. The strongest safeguard against the lure is to avoid them altogether.

Source: Taken and adapted from "Going for Refuge & Taking the Precepts", by Bhikkhu Bodhi. *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, 1 December 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/wheel282.html> .

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