

Lay Precepts: A Brief Explanation

By Kathy Wesley; last revised 11.26.06

Here is a short explanation of the five Lay Precepts. You can read more about them in Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche's book *Dharma Paths*, beginning on Page 68.

Lay precepts are good conduct vows that are taken for life. The vows are a statement of your intention to follow pure conduct, and keeping the vows purely is the cause for vast merit (good karma) and positive rebirth in the future.

At a Lay Precepts ceremony, an individual can take any one of the Four Root Vows (not to kill, not to steal, not to lie, and not to commit sexual misconduct) or the One Branch Vow (not to take intoxicants). It is not required that a person take all five vows.

Once taken, it is expected that the precept taker will examine his or her mind-stream daily and confess any contraventions of the vows he or she has taken. Two common confession liturgies are "Lama Dorje Dzinpa" or "The Three Skanda Sutra." Those texts will be provided at the ceremony.

Keeping the vows purely is somewhat difficult.

For example, all intentional killing (even of insects) is a branch violation of the vow of not killing. However, to completely break the vow (i.e., root violation of the vow), we must kill a human being with intention.

All intentional stealing is a branch violation of the vow of not stealing. However, to completely break the vow, we must intentionally take something of great value.

All intentional lies are branch violations of the vow of not lying. However, to completely break the vow, we must intentionally claim to have spiritual achievements that we do not have.

All intentional sexual misconduct is a branch violation of the vow of not committing sexual misconduct, but to break the vow, we must intentionally enter into a sexual relationship with someone who is not our spouse or commitment partner. (Only married people or committed people can take this vow. Single

people who take it are committing to lifelong celibacy. As result, few single people take this vow.)

The Branch Precept of not taking intoxicants is considered the "fence" or protection for the other four root precepts, because guarding our conduct is easier when we do not take intoxicants. Therefore, taking even a drop of intoxicating substance with intention or attachment is the breaking of this vow.

According to Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, branch violations of the vows can be repaired through the complete practice of confession, in which we go before an image or visualization of the Buddha and confess our fault, regret it deeply, and resolve not to repeat it. Root violations of the vow should be confessed to the preceptor who gave us the vow, or, in the preceptor's absence, it can be confessed to another lama or master. The negative karmic effects of the root violation can be counteracted by the complete practice of confession as mentioned above, but according to Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, the vow at that point is considered broken and cannot be re-taken in this life.

The reason for this is that since the Lay Precepts come from the Common (Hinayana) tradition of Buddhism, the precepts are taken for this life only. Once broken, they cannot be re-taken.

Studying the precepts helps us understand karma, and increases our awareness of how karma works in our daily lives. And taking the precepts magnifies the effects – both positive and negative -- of the karma we accumulate.

According to Buddhist teachings, all actions are composed of three parts: Intention, action, and rejoicing. The karmic consequences of an action increase as we willingly participate in these three parts of an action. This is true of both positive and negative actions.

For example, if we see an insect, and think, "I dislike this insect. I think I'll kill it." This lays the foundation for the karmic consequence of thinking about killing.

Next, if we kill the insect willingly and with intention, this advances and increases the karmic consequences of our action.

Finally, if we think, “that’s good; it’s dead,” this is the rejoicing in our action. This rejoicing again advances and increases the karmic consequences for our act.

If, in addition to committing these three parts of an action, we have taken the vow not to kill, the consequences of our actions are magnified even greater still, because we are contravening our promise, made in the presence of the Buddha.

In *Dharma Paths*, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche says committing the fault of deceiving the Buddha is a very serious one, indeed, which, unless it is confessed and purified, can lead to rebirth in lower realms.

Therefore, we need to be careful when we choose to take the vows, as the karmic consequences of not keeping them are very serious. We need to exercise discernment and maturity when we decide to take the vows, since taking them magnifies the positive and negative consequences of all our actions.

However, if we are ready to take on the commitment, there is great positive impact upon our mind-streams from taking even just one of the five Lay Precepts.

Without the precepts, our attitude toward our actions might be too laid-back, or even careless: “Well, lies don’t hurt anyone, so it’s OK to lie.” And this attitude can lead us into even greater negative actions in the future.

As Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche says in *Dharma Paths*, if we only feel confident enough to take one precept, that’s fine. If we feel confident enough to take two, or three, that’s even better.

But the most important thing is to know that our minds will be benefited by observing the precepts, and keeping them as best we can. It is said that when we keep pure conduct, our prayers and aspirations are more powerful, our merit increases, and our ability to benefit beings expands. People tend to like those who keep pure conduct, because people with pure conduct are trustworthy, reliable, and stable. The minds of people who keep pure conduct tend to be more stable, as well, and their meditation bears fruit, because they are practicing mindfulness all the time in respect to their actions of body, speech, and mind.

