

Practicing the Ten Benevolences:
The Goal of Buddhist Behavior
By Grand Master Fat Wai Shakya



Dear Friends,

After his Enlightenment, Shakyamuni preached Buddhism for forty-nine years. During this time, in more than three hundred meetings of his Sangha, he expounded the Dharma. Sometimes he preached from heaven, sometimes he preached on earth, and sometimes he preached from the silence of the Bo Tree in the solitary garden.

The Buddha lived in northeast India, in an area around the Ganges River; and from there he preached the Dharma so that we human beings could attain Enlightenment; gain wisdom; purge ourselves of the poisons of greed, anger, and folly; understand the consequences of sin; distinguish the difference between good and evil; distinguish the difference between kindness and cruelty; know right from wrong, and be guided out of the tormenting darkness towards kindness and light.

The honorable Shakyamuni preached a Way of Life which he categorized into Five Principles and Practices: Training in virtuous conduct; training in concentration and meditation; training in transcendent understanding or wisdom; the attainment of emancipation; and the realized state of Buddhahood.

If any person carefully disciplines himself by following these five facets of the Way, he can turn himself into a Buddha.

But first he must become a good human being.

The person who begins to follow the Path must take care to observe the ten benevolences. Adhering to these principles, he will build himself a firm foundation and then, having achieved this, he may select any method or area of Buddhist study, whichever suits him

best. There is an old saying: "The building that stands a hundred feet high has at the ground a good and firm foundation."

By disciplining himself in the Ten Benevolences, a person can obtain kind thoughts, good conduct, and high moral behavior. The good individual will affect the society in which he lives; the good society will affect the nation; and the good nation will affect the whole world. If everyone practices the Ten Benevolences we'd have harmonious families, orderly societies, and a peaceful world. Therefore, urging people to practice the Ten Benevolent deeds is the most basic task for Buddhists. This will also help to provide safeguards for society in ways that even laws cannot provide.

We say that Shakyamuni Buddha preached the Ten Benevolent deeds to the family of the Dragon King at the Dragon Palace, and this is what he taught.

1. We must be kind to animals. We may not slaughter them.
2. We must respect other people's property. There can be no stealing.
3. We must keep our actions wholesome. There can be no lewdness.
4. We must guard our speech against lying. We must not break the promises we make, and we must be truthful and trustworthy. Also, we must guard against making vain, prideful or frivolous statements.
5. We must guard our speech against gossip and slander and causing trouble between people.
6. We must guard our speech against using harsh language and making rude or insulting statements, or uttering profanities.
7. We must guard our speech against lewd, "flower talk" expressions; and other vulgar or suggestive expressions.
8. We must be generous and guard against being greedy.
9. We must purge our hearts of hatred and anger.
10. We must not think evil of people.

The first three of these benevolent deeds are related to body; the next four are specifically related to our speech; and the last three are related to our mind.

Wherever the honorable Shakyamuni spoke, he always emphasized kindness to animals. He saw the killing of animals as being alien to the Buddhist way of life. Animals have feelings - they can feel pleasure and pain - and they have cognitive abilities, too. Human beings share with animals a fear of death and a desire to live and to reproduce their own kind. Is it not the instinct of animals to resist being harmed? Do they not strive to protect themselves when they are threatened? Do they not grieve when their mates or young ones are killed? They have spiritual selves, too, and when they are angered or saddened their spirits cry out for justice. Especially when a human being who can think and reason and foster peaceful life in all his actions chooses instead to be cruel and to slaughter helpless creatures, there is great suffering. It is as terrible to be war-like and filled with cruel contempt as it is to be the victim of such cruelty. But it is the one who sins who must face the consequences.

The sin remains in the sinner's heart and will punish him in several ways. The mild punishment is that it will cause the sinner to become physically ill. The severe punishment will continue after his earthly death. According to the Di Zhang Scripture, "If you see someone slaughtering animals, you should tell him that he will shorten his own life." Therefore, a person who wants to be a good Buddhist must not kill. And more, he must strive to set free animals that he has held for slaughter.

The Lin Yin Scripture says, "If the whole world of human beings stopped killing animals, the bitter circle of life and death will not be continued. The man who will not stop slaughtering animals will never be able to free himself from this troubled world."

From the Scriptures we learn that people who eat meat are unkind and bring unkindness upon themselves. The sins that they commit return to them, shortening their lives, troubling their minds, and making them act in angry ways that create enemies for them.

You may ask, "What are the benefits of refusing to kill animals?" And the answer is that you will have a kind look on your face. You will be thoughtful and whatever you do will be successful. Evil and bad luck

will stay far away from you. Contented, your luck will always be good." God will bless you for your kindness.

Another Scripture says that by refraining from killing animals, you will gain ten benefits:

1. You will fear nothing in your life.
2. You will always have a kind and happy feeling in your mind.
3. You will free your heart from hatred.
4. You will not get sick.
5. You will have long life.
6. You will always be protected by a heavenly god.
7. You will never have nightmares.
8. You will have no enemies, and all your problems will be easily solved by yourself.
9. No evil thing can harm you.
10. At the end of your life you will enter heaven.

The Second Benevolence is not to steal.

Whatever does not belong to you, you should not take for if you do, you are a thief. You may not take public property and treasure for your own. You may not use force to rob people or to steal from them in stealth. You may not profit from your job illegally, or cheat in management, or even plot to cheat. You may not sell drugs or smuggle illegal merchandise and cheat in paying duty or tax. All of these are illegal ways to get money. Anything that does not belong to you, you should not keep for yourself.

Consider what may happen if you steal from someone or cause him to lose his property. You may cause him great despair; and he may become ill from having lost what you have taken. Sometimes the despair will remain with him for the rest of his life. Now, the person who steals doesn't believe in the consequence of sin. He is so deep in sin that he believes that the treasure he has obtained illegally will be

with him for a long time; but it will not be. He thinks that he will enjoy his fortune for a long time, but he will cease to enjoy it in a very short time. Sooner than he thinks, in the very near future, he will get sick, perhaps by a strange kind of malady, one that even may prove incurable. He may find that the fortune he stole has been stolen by someone else, or he may find that his own son will foolishly squander his fortune. The consequences of his theft will always be there. Punishment is like a net from heaven that covers him, and he has no way to get away from what he has done.

The Di Zhang Scripture says, "If you meet a thief you should tell him that he will face poverty and suffering at the end." Sooner or later we have to pay back the debts we incur.

Buddhism teaches us that we should not steal.

The Third Benevolence is to be free of lewdness.

Buddhists are persons who belong to heaven. A man and a woman who are married and committed to each other's welfare are the ones who should produce the new generation.

Whatever happens outside of marriage is considered lewdness. Such lewdness is harmful to society because it is immoral conduct. If a husband is unfaithful to his wife or if a wife is unfaithful to her husband, there is damage to the family. This damage may cause the family to be destroyed, harming the innocent children. Man's law and God's law will punish the person who commits this sin.

Dear friends, a Buddhist should never be lewd in thought, word or deed.

The Fourth Benevolence is to refrain from lying.

Any word that comes out from your mouth is something that represents your mind and heart. Making a false statement such as reversing right and wrong, or making up a story that will scare the public, or making other irresponsible statements is sinful. You must always keep your word, too. If, for example, you come to your job, promising to perform your work in exchange for pay, and then accept pay without having actually done your job, you have broken your word. And if you then make vain statements about your lofty position, you have also violated the Fourth Benevolence.

The Fifth Benevolence is to refrain from "double talk."

"Double talk" tries to separate people by causing trouble between them. You may go to Person A and say bad things about Person B; and then go to Person B and say bad things about Person A. Both parties are damaged. You may think you have served your own interest by causing trouble between these parties, but you have not. The punishment for this sin will come back upon you. We have an old saying in China: "When the Jy bird fights with a clam, the fisherman gets the profit." Both bird and clam are caught by the fisherman.

The person who is "two-faced" or who indulges in "double-talk" has no morals. His character is poor because causing others to be angry and to fight each other is a very bad thing to do. The Di Zhang Scripture says, "If you meet a person who is making double-talk, you must stop him. Tell him that in the end he will have no one to praise him."

Dear Friends, do not stir up trouble among people. The trouble you start will only return to harm you. The Buddha teaches us to never be duplicitous.

The Sixth Benevolence is to refrain from using profanities and harsh speech.

A person who is angry and who has hatred in his heart uses profanities.

Sometimes you may find yourself disagreeing with another person. The disagreement may become an argument and in your anger you may use profanities or make insulting remarks. These words show hatred for people, and they show self-hate too.

People who insult others are never happy with anyone. People who have contempt for religion and use profanities find no comfort in religion. The Buddha teaches us to respect others and to always speak well of the Dharma. We may not utter profanities.

The Seventh Benevolence is to refrain from "flower talk."

The silk fabric that has flowers printed on it looks beautiful. People look at the fabric and fall in love with it, they are enticed by the flowers. This is just like using 'sweet talk' or 'flower talk' to entice someone into lewdness. Such talk is especially bad when it is used to

stir up the sexual feelings of youngsters. Any type of speech or literature or even poetry that is intended to stimulate sexual urges is "flower talk" and must be avoided.

The Eighth Benevolence is to refrain from being greedy.

Everyone depends on money and material things in order to live. When money is earned honestly, by your own work, you will be happy and able to enjoy it. But do not be greedy. Human beings have a tendency to want more and more, without end. Always they think, "The more, the better." This is the reason we have wars. A man wants more and so fights his neighbor. A group of people want more and so fight with another group of people. A nation wants ore and so fights with another nation. No one ever has enough.

But a Buddhist should be careful not to desire unneeded things in his life and to know when "enough is enough." As long as you have enough to survive - food, shelter, and the other basic comforts of civilization - that is enough. What is the point in having more of what you have if you do not enjoy what you already have. A person who is contented within himself will always be happy, but the greedy person, though he amasses a great fortune, will never be contented and happy. He will always want to strive for more.

The Buddha teaches us to beware of being greedy.

The Ninth Benevolence is to refrain from hatred and anger.

A person becomes discontented with life because things are not going his way. He then becomes hateful and angry.

We live in a world that is not always fair. Sometimes, although we truly deserve a promotion, it is another less-deserving worker who is promoted and we feel terrible jealousy and anger. Perhaps we work hard but through no fault of our own we may be in danger of losing our job. Our company may go out of business or move away. We are distressed and look for someone to blame for our trouble. We do not understand why things are going wrong in our life and instead of trying to find solutions to our problems, we try to find people to blame. The Hua Yen Scripture says, "Once you feel anger, the anger you have created will follow you." Hatred and anger bring all kinds of evil behavior.

A Buddhist should have patience. He should keep a peaceful mind, a loving and caring mind, a soft and kind mind towards others. The Buddha teaches us not to allow anger and hatred into our heart.

The Tenth Benevolence is to refrain from thinking evil thoughts.

People who use their intelligence to produce harmful theories and ideas are thinking evil thoughts. We often think that people who create these evil theories and ideas are ignorant and are quite stupid. But this is not always so. These people may be highly educated - it is just that they do not believe in the consequence of sin. They do not believe that kindness is the reward of kind people. They do not believe that evil is the reward of evil people. They think that after the death of a person there is no communication between the dead person and the person he has harmed. They think that the end of a person's life is like the vanishing of a lamp's light. The flesh turns to dust that the wind blows away. The bones turn to the clay of the earth. They think there is no consequence of sin; therefore they are free to oppress people. But the evil thoughts that they have created remain in their mind and haunt their spirit. They will never find rest.

A Buddhist should not scheme or devise harmful theories and ideas.

Dear Friends, if you discipline yourselves to observe these Ten Benevolences you will create a peaceful mind. You will never be angry and discontented and you will always feel blessed. You'll have good behavior and you'll get along well with all your friends.

Chanting scripture and respecting the Buddha will help you to obtain these accomplishments. You will have a nice appearance, and evil will stay away from you. Everything that you see now as ugly will become beautiful to you.

Your life will be lived in heaven.

Master Fat Wai Shakya