

Smoking & The Fifth Precept



S. Dhammika
Essays on Buddhist Doctrines

Smoking and the Fifth Precept

The Five Precepts consist of the bare minimum of Buddhist moral behaviour. Being a sincere Buddhist involves much more than just following the precepts, but anything less than that disqualifies one from honestly calling oneself a Buddhist. If you ask someone why they should keep the precepts or what are the benefits of doing so they will usually say: “To avoid making bad kamma.” Wanting to avoid “making bad kamma”, people sometimes ask if smoking violates the precepts, in particular the fifth precept. The two are probably associated with each other because of the popular perception that those who drink also smoke. When the issue is brought up the opinions tend to be either; “Smoking does not violate the fifth precept” or “Yes, it is against the fifth precept.”

Those in this first camp will justify their stance by saying, quite correctly, that there was no tobacco in ancient India, that therefore people did not smoke and thus the fifth precept was never meant to include smoking. But this answer needs to be looked at more carefully because it is both right and wrong. It is right that tobacco did not exist in ancient India; it only became known outside North America after the 16th century. However, that does not mean that people in ancient India did not smoke. In fact, we know they did! The two ancient Indian medical texts, *Susrutasamhita* and *Carakasamhita*, both mention smoking. The first even describes how to make cigarettes and use them. Cigarettes (*dhumavatti*), smoked for enjoyment and for their supposed health benefits, were made by grinding cardamom, saffron, sandalwood and aloe wood into a fine paste and moulding it over a reed so that it was about 15 centimetres long and the thickness of a thumb. When the paste was dry, the reed was removed and the resulting hollow cigarette was smeared with clarified butter or sandalwood oil before being ignited. The *Carakasamhita* recommends sitting in an upright but comfortable posture while smoking, taking three puffs at a time and inhaling through both the mouth and nostrils but exhaling only through nostrils.

Although this type of smoking was sometimes done for pleasure it was mainly recommended for medical reasons. It was thought to be good as a purgative, as a cure for tiredness, depression, throat and nose problems and also as being beneficial for pregnant women. Such cigarettes could not have been addictive like tobacco and lacked tobacco’s toxic chemicals, nonetheless inhaling any kind of smoke is not good for the lungs. The oldest parts of the *Susrutasamhita* and the *Carakasamhita* date from several centuries after the Buddha but smoking may have been current during his time. Whatever the case, cigarettes are not mentioned in the Tipitaka, the Buddhist scriptures.

Another type of smoking is mentioned in the Tipitaka however. It seems that certain types of herbs were burned and the smoke sniffed in through a small metal tube (*dhumanetta*). This tube was curved so that one end was put in the mouth, the other end near the nostrils, and blowing into the tube forced the smoke into the nostrils from where it was inhaled. The Buddha subscribed to this kind of smoking and in the Vinaya, the rules for monastics, he allowed monks and nuns to have such smoking tubes (Vin.I,204). But it is very clear that this was only because such smoking was thought to be good for the health. In the Dasabrahmana Jataka however, using smoking tubes for whatever pleasure might have been derived from them is said to be unworthy for a genuine monk. In other words, smoking for non-therapeutic reasons was considered unacceptable.

So much for the argument that smoking does not contravene the fifth precept. What of the argument that it does? Before looking at this it is necessary to understand why abstaining from alcohol is one of the most basic Buddhist ethical principles. The central focus of much of what the Buddha said concerns the mind; its nature, its various modalities, how it can be transformed, and the results of doing so. It is no coincidence that the very first verse in the Dhammapada, the most popular of all Buddhist sacred texts, begins with the words: “*Mano pubbangama dhamma... etc.*” The way to Nirvana, the ultimate Buddhist goal, lies through transforming the mind. It is also very clear from the Tipitaka that the Buddha, like many people before and since, understood that even small amounts of alcohol has a distorting effect on the mind.

Its depressant quality lowers inhibitions, leading to making bad judgments, taking poorly considered risks, unruly speech and behaviour, etc., often with negative social consequences. Studies in the US show that 84% of all suspects arrested for serious crimes have ingested alcohol. It is likely to be the same or similar in Sri Lanka. The old Buddhist adage that breaking the fifth Precept can lead to breaking all the others is quite true. Thus the rationale behind the fifth Precept is to keep the mind lucid and clear so as to avoid problems now and attain worthwhile spiritual goals later.

So the next question is: “Does smoking have a distorting effect on the mind?” There is no evidence that it does. In fact, a cup of strong coffee has more of an effect on consciousness than a dozen cigarettes smoked one after the other. So it would seem that smoking does not violate the fifth Precept because it does not negatively impact the mind, and thus does not have an ethical component. Someone could be kind, honest, thoughtful towards others, etc., and be a regular smoker at the same time. No doubt many people are. However, as mentioned above, the five Precepts are the bare minimum of Buddhist morality. There is more to being a good Buddhist than that. Much more!

One aspect of the Precepts is avoiding the negative (*varita*) and practicing the positive (*carita*). The positive aspect of the five Precepts is; (1) not taking life but promoting life, (2) not taking what belongs to others but sharing with others what belongs to us, (3) not using others for our own pleasure but respecting their right to choose how and by whom they derive pleasure, (4) not lying but speaking truthfully to the best of our knowledge, (5) not befuddling out minds but keeping it clear, lucid and alert.

But there is another aspect to the Precepts as well that only rarely gets a mention; its self (*atta*) and others (*para*) aspect. It was mentioned at the beginning of this article that most people think that the main purpose of keeping the Precepts is to avoid bad kamma. But, as is clear from the ‘*varita*’ and ‘*carita*’ aspects of the precepts, it is, or should be, as much about benefiting others as benefiting ourselves. The Buddha called adhering to these Precepts a consideration towards others which “creates love and respect, and which is conducive to helpfulness, non-dispute, harmony and unity.” He saw following the Precepts as a gift to others which would benefit both the giver and the receiver. He said: “When a noble disciple practises the five Precepts, he gives the gift of freedom from fear, the gift of freedom from hatred and the gift of freedom from ill-will to limitless beings. And in giving these gifts, he thereby partakes in a freedom from fear, from hatred and from ill-will which is limitless” On another occasion, the Buddha called virtue “freedom-giving” and “conducive to concentration” and mentioned that one of the most important benefits of practising the Precepts is that one experiences “the happiness of being blameless”. In other words, sincere Buddhists should practise the five Precepts because they care about their own welfare and happiness, and that of others, not just because they want to avoid “making bad kamma”.

So the logical next question is: “Is smoking detrimental to ourselves and others?” The answer is of course a big yes. It has long been known that smoking directly causes numerous life-threatening diseases. It has also recently been shown that “second-hand smoke”, i.e. breathing in someone else’s smoke, is nearly as dangerous. The Buddha often said that certain behaviours should be avoided or done “for one’s own benefit, for the benefit of others, for the benefit of both.” Not smoking or giving up smoking, would certainly be behaviour that would be in harmony with this.

One last thing. Buddhist monks everywhere must not drink alcohol. But in Thailand, Burma and Cambodia they are allowed to smoke, while in Sri Lanka this is looked upon with considerable disapproval, so Sinhala monks do not, at least not in public. But in all Buddhist countries it is quite acceptable for monks to chew betel! Betel chewing has been shown to be the major cause of mouth, throat and tongue cancers in all the countries where it is done. It is as cancer causing as smoking. So if it is contrary to the whole Buddhist life to smoke why should it not also be to chew betel? Perhaps it is time there was some serious discussion on this question.