

THE FIVE PRECEPTS AND RITUAL IN RURAL THAILAND*

by

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The first mention of the five precepts (Pāli: *pañca sikkhāpadāni* or *pañca sīlāni*) is found in the canonical texts of the early Buddhist tradition¹. Originally these precepts seem to have been "a sort of preliminary condition to any higher development after conforming to the teaching of the Buddha (*saraṇaṃ gamana*) and as such often mentioned when a new follower is 'officially' installed..."² When Buddhism spread over various nations, the use of the *pañca sīlāni* must have gradually diversified. In areas where Buddhism co-existed and competed with other religious disciplines, the link between the five precepts and official installation could well have remained or have become even more pronounced. In China, for example, up to the present time, the five precepts have been taken as a solemn lay ordination³. In regions where Buddhism has been the State religion for many centuries, such as Thailand, asking for the five precepts may no longer be linked with an installation into the Buddhist faith.

In rural Thailand, the ritual of asking to receive the five precepts (ขอศีล ๕) is a common event. Any person who takes part in the usual communal religious services, which are held in private houses as well as in the monasteries, will have the opportunity to receive the five precepts many times a year. During special days, when a major religious festival is celebrated, the precepts can be given as often as several times a day, each time at the beginning of a new ceremony. Whenever a chapter of monks and a group of laymen assemble for a religious service, the five precepts can be given, and the order of events at the commencement of the service seldom varies.

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1) E.g.: *Majjhima-nikāya*, I, 345; I, 521; *Saṃyutta-nikāya*, II, 68; II, 167; *Anguttara-nikāya*, IV, 10, 97.

2) Pali-English Dictionary, Pali Text Society, London, 1966, p. 712b.

3) Holmes Welch, *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism 1900-1950*, Cambridge Mass., 1967, p. 361-365.

At the outset, before the monks arrive, laymen prepare the dais on which the members of the *sangha* will sit, by placing an image of the Buddha at one end of the room, and arranging mats and cushions in a single file on the left hand of the image. When the monks enter, senior monks will sit nearest to the statue of the Buddha, junior monks furthest away. Where possible⁴ they will be seated in single file, facing the laymen. As soon as the elders among the laymen feel that the ceremony should start, a spokesman will call everyone to attention by asking three times in Pāli in a clear voice :

*Mayaṃ bhante viṣuṃ viṣuṃ rakkhanaṭṭhāya tisaraṇena saha pañca sīlāni yācāma.*⁵ Bareau, writing about Cambodian religious practices translates⁶ this formula as : "O vénérables, nous demandons chacun pour soi les cinq préceptes avec le triple refuge dans un but de protection". The three words *viṣuṃ viṣuṃ rakkhanaṭṭhāya* are therefore translated as : "Each person for himself, in order to obtain protection." Presently, after considering some Thai data, we will suggest an alternative translation of these words.

In Central Thailand the five precepts can also be asked for using the formula :

*Mayaṃ bhante tisaraṇena saha pañca sīlāni yācāma*⁷

This second formula differs from the first one mentioned only in that it omits the words *viṣuṃ viṣuṃ rakkhanaṭṭhāya*. At first sight we would expect that this more compact formula is used in preference to the first formula, it being easier to memorize. However, it appears that the second formula is used only seldom in rural Thailand. On one occasion⁸, when

4) If there is not enough space for all monks to sit in single file, they will have to sit two or more layers deep. In these circumstances the seniority rule is maintained only for the first row, and those behind will sit wherever there is space.

5) If only one person asks for the precepts, *mayam* is changed into *aham*, and *yācāma* into *yācāmi*.

6) André Bareau, "Idées sous-jacentes aux pratiques culturelles bouddhiques," in *Beiträge zur Geistesgeschichte Indiens*, ed. by G. Oberhammer, Wien, 1968, p. 29.

7) Similarly, if only one person asks for the precepts, some words are changed (cf footnote 5). This formula seems to be the one often used in municipal centres, as witnessed by นายไพฑูริย์ กับทีมทอง in : หนังสือสวนมณฑล, p. 88.

8) July 7, 1968. วัดจุฬาราม

a lay spokesman accidentally proceeded to ask for the precepts with the second formula, a senior monk interrupted him and made him recite the first formula. According to this monk, the difference between the two formulae is substantial. After receiving the precepts by way of the formula with *visum visum rakkhanaṭṭhāya* there will come a moment when the layman who received them breaks a precept. If that happens, he still retains four of the five precepts; if he breaks another precept, three remain, etc. If a person takes the precepts without the words *visum visum rakkhanaṭṭhāya* he is in a position where, if he breaks a precept, all five are broken. The reason why the second formula should be avoided in most circumstances is therefore because it is believed that the promise resulting from the second formula is much more difficult to uphold than the promise resulting from the first formula. It is only in exceptional cases, when all laymen agree that a solemn promise is warranted, like on the day that *Kathina* robes are offered, that the second formula should be used.⁹

Being aware of this Thai interpretation of the difference between the two methods of asking for the five precepts, a re-examination of the words *visum visum rakkhanaṭṭhāya* is warranted. The words *visum visum* mean: "each on his own", but can also be translated as: "one by one, separately"¹⁰; and *rakkhana* has, apart from the meaning "keeping, protection, guarding", also a second meaning: "observance (especially with relation to the *sila*)"¹¹. Instead of translating: "each person on his own for the sake of protection," the alternative can be: "for the sake of observing them, one by one, separately." This alternative translation corresponds closely with the beliefs of the Thai. It would be interesting to know whether this alternative translation would also be the most proper one in other regions where they use the formula with *visum visum rakkhanaṭṭhāya*—in Cambodia, for example.

In answer to either formula, one of the senior monks will recite in a clear voice the sentence: *namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa*, three times. This sentence is followed by the Three Refuges; after each sentence the monk halts in order to give the lay community occasion to repeat after him. When the three refuges have been said three times, the five precepts are prompted and repeated:

9) Personal communication with the Venerable *Phliig* วัดศาลาลอย

10) *Pali-English Dictionary*, Pali Text Society, London, 1966, p. 640b.

11) *ibid.*, p. 560b.

Pāṇātipātā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
Adinnādānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
Kāmesu micchācārā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
Musāvādā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
Surāmeraya majjapamādatthānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi

They can be translated¹² as :

I undertake (to observe) the rule of abstinence from taking life
 I undertake (to observe) the rule of abstinence from taking what is
 not given
 I undertake (to observe) the rule of abstinence from wrong sensuous
 pleasure
 I undertake (to observe) the rule of abstinence from false speech
 I undertake (to observe) the rule of abstinence from intoxicants
 which cause a careless frame of mind.

The laymen sit in polite fashion, with the hands joined in front of the chest, the feet folded behind. During this interplay between the one senior monk and all laymen, the other monks are not involved. They can smoke or softly talk to one another in obvious display that this is a matter which does not regard monks, who, after all, are committed to so many more precepts than the five being given. When the fifth precept has been prompted and repeated, the monk who presides over this part of the ceremony solemnly recites the following Pāli words, while all laymen show great attention :

*imāni pañca sikkhāpadāni sīlena sugatīm yanti sīlena bhogasampadā
 sīlena nibbutīm yanti tasmā sīlaṃ visodhaye*¹³

While these words are proclaimed, some laymen will softly murmur some Pāli formulae which are known to be auspicious, others remain quiet. At the last syllable, which is usually drawn out, all laymen bow their heads and raise their joined hands to the forehead.

12) While a careless translation as "I refrain from killing, stealing, wrong sexual conduct, lying and alcohol" may sound less cumbersome than the translation given here, we will see in the course of this paper that the subtlety of each rule is of importance for the Thai. In fact, "abstaining from taking life" is not the same as "not killing"; similarly for the remaining four precepts.

13) Although many Thai do not understand the exact meaning of these words, it is interesting to record the translation: "These five precepts lead, with good behaviour to bliss, with good behaviour to wealth and success, they lead with good behaviour to happiness, therefore (will) purify my behaviour."

From the discussion of the occasions when and the manner in which the *pañcasīlāni* are given by the monks and received by laymen, it appears that a function of the ritual of promising to adhere to these precepts is that of the preparation of the laymen for the ceremony which follows immediately. Receiving the *pañcasīlāni* can be seen as a ritual cleansing, a purification which enables the laymen to receive the benefits of the ceremony in a proper manner.

While the ritual of promising to adhere to the *pañcasīlāni* appears to function in a manner intended to bring the laymen temporarily out of the secular world, it seems warranted to ask whether the Thai farmers know the import of their promise to adhere to these rules. In theory, the people could utter Pāli sentences without realizing that they are committing themselves to precepts, or without being aware of what the precepts entail. It will become clear that this is not the case.

Children, although they have learned in elementary school the meaning of each precept, are not expected to understand the implications of taking the five precepts. Adult laymen, especially the men who have spent at least one rainy season in the *saṃgha*, can usually give a coherent picture of the precepts. Among the old people, those who consider themselves to be devout, men as well as women, can give elaborate exegetical details. The views of some of the older people on the subject of the five precepts can be summarized as follows:

The first precept is broken when life is taken; human life as well as animal life. Slapping a mosquito, or killing a germ in an egg by boiling it are certain breaches of this first rule. Torture, or lesser forms of inflicting pain are considered to fall under this rule by those who are most knowledgeable about ritual affairs.

Any form of stealing, whether it be taking of material goods against the rightful owner's wish, or borrowing without taking the trouble to ask the owner's consent consists of a breach of the second precept. It is generally conceived that gambling falls under this rule.

The third precept does not only forbid the obvious breaches of proper conduct like adultery, incest and rape, but also forbids acts showing intention to behave in a licentious manner, such as flirting with a woman who is already married to another person.

The fourth precept is very easily broken. Abstinence from false speech is seen to cover a wide range of untruths, like exaggeration, insinuation, abuse, gossip, unrestrained laughter, deceitful speech, joking and banter. This precept can often be broken together with another precept; a breach of promise involves the second precept and the fourth, flirting with a married woman involves the third and fourth.

The last of the *pañcasīlāni* forbids the use of alcoholic beverages, and all other stupefying substances like opium and drugs, unless taken for medicinal purposes.

A well-known story illustrates the evils of the fifth precept, and at the same time throws light upon the attitudes towards the *pañcasīlāni* as a whole :

Once upon a time there was a man who was thoroughly good; he lived an exemplary life. One day he was challenged to break just one precept for once. The good man thought: "The first precept I cannot break, having great compassion for all beings. With regard to stealing, no, I cannot take what is not mine, that would hurt the owner's feelings. The third precept is out of the question, as it would upset my wife whom I dearly love. As to false speech, I abhor it. However, the fifth precept does not harm anybody but my own brain, so if I have to break a precept, I had better take some alcoholic beverage."

The man took a bottle, and pouring himself a drink he felt rather curious as to the taste of this forbidden liquor. When he drank the first glassful he considered it rather innocent and tasted a bit more When the bottle was empty he noticed his neighbour's wife looking amazed at his behaviour. He staggered towards her and tried to rape her. When her husband came to help, a fight resulted in which a man was killed. In order to escape revenge, our 'good' man had to flee and became a robber. Thus breaking the fifth precept had awful results¹⁴.

While it seems plausible to draw the conclusion that the people in rural Thailand are usually well aware of the import of the promise to adhere to the five precepts, the question immediately arising is whether the Thai do try to behave according to these rules, that is, whether the *pañcasīlāni* exercise a marked influence on Thai behaviour.

14) *Somkhuan*, January 1968.

A crime like murder, armed robbery or rape certainly involves breaking a precept. If it were possible to prove that crimes involving breaking one or more of the precepts occur less among Buddhists than among non-Buddhists, then this could be an indication towards supposing that observance of the five precepts markedly influences behaviour. Lack of reliable statistical data regarding crime in rural areas precludes such a line of investigation. Moreover, even if such data were available, it would be very difficult to assess to what extent people refrain from committing a crime through fear of sanctions, like the enforcement of the law, and to what extent abstaining from crime is caused by the fear of breaking a precept. It is necessary therefore, to investigate other aspects of the situation.

In order to observe whether people in rural Thailand try to adhere to the five precepts, behaviour which unquestionably implies breaking a precept, but which does not automatically carry punishment by law can be investigated. Such behaviour for example is: gossip, mild deceit, drinking alcoholic beverages and killing animals.

A community of people without gossip is almost beyond imagination. Talking about other people, especially about aspects which these others would like to be not generally known is a habit in which many people frequently indulge. On no occasion was it noticed that a layman refrained from talking about other laymen¹⁵ because he was afraid to break a precept. Although the conduct of monks can be the subject of conversation, people generally refrain from discussing the evil deeds of a monk. This, however, seems to be part of the polite behaviour of ritually inferior towards ritually superior.

Mild forms of deceit are also part of daily life, a joke played upon an unsuspecting victim being appreciated by all (except perhaps by the victim); and whenever goods are sold or traded for other goods, some kind of deceit is almost unavoidable in order to make a profit. These mild forms of deceit are readily engaged in, while it is admitted that they contravene a precept.

15) It would have been unfortunate for the researcher if gossip had not been available to provide him with illuminating case histories of misconduct.

Alcoholic beverages are sold openly, and can be consumed in all cafés and restaurants. Drunken people are no rare sight. Unless a guest has medical grounds upon which to appeal, it would be insulting to the host if he declined to share in a proffered drink. To make the appeal that one tries to observe the precepts would be bad taste indeed. During some of the big community ceremonies, liquor is drunk by a great many people within the precincts of a monastery, and many a procession would not be so gay and spontaneous without the stimulant of intoxicating beverages.

Behaviour towards mosquitoes is merciless, and the farmer who can afford to purchase insecticide will not hesitate to spray a crop, thus killing thousands of small living creatures. Behaviour with regard to the killing of animals bigger than insects is accompanied by marked embarrassment, however. A squirrel will be trapped and killed, because it devours the best fruit, a poisonous snake will be beaten to death, rats are killed mercilessly, but the careful observer notices that there is uneasiness about these acts of violence. Sometimes, a farmer will evade the act of chopping a fish to death by letting it die out of the water, or by ordering a servant to do so. When fish or a chicken has to be killed for domestic consumption, it will be done out of sight, outside the house so that even the spirits of the ancestors cannot see this act.

On one occasion¹⁶ when an old man struck up a conversation with a monk, an embarrassing but interesting situation developed. Upon being asked how he made a living, the old man replied: "I work on the water". The monk thought that the man meant that he was a sailor, and asked whether he belonged in the navy or worked on a merchant vessel. The old man became very embarrassed and explained that he was a fisherman, and had evaded saying so because it was "not nice to tell a monk that you live off killing fish"¹⁷.

Animals bigger than chickens, like pigs and buffaloes, are usually not slaughtered by farmers. Sometimes, when buffaloes are too old to work they are permitted to remain on the farm until they die a natural

16) วัดสาลง, September 1968.

17) The evasion may not have been used with other monks; it is probably related to the fact that the monk in question was a Westerner. However special the circumstances, the fact remains that the man wanted to be extra polite and that he used a euphemism to describe the profession of fisherman.

death, but often big animals are sold to professional butchers. Most farmers shudder to think about the store of bad *karma* a butcher accumulates during his lifetime.

With regard to the question whether Thai people seem intent upon trying to evade breaking a precept, it must therefore be concluded that this *appears to be the case* only with regard to the first precept. Other acts, against which there is no legal sanction and which obviously imply breaking a precept, are freely engaged upon. The attitude seems to be that these matters are incompatible with normal daily life and that people should not be sanctimonious.

The Five Precepts, while providing a code of behaviour, can be acted upon or ignored as is expedient. There are people in Thailand who do commit themselves fully to the *pañcasīlāni*. There are people, for example, who take a solemn oath (บวช) to observe the five precepts. Such people are assured of an exceptionally good rebirth and all devout farmers would gladly follow their example if they were able to. However, farmers cannot try to imitate such people, because, in order to follow the precepts, a person should be so wealthy that he can shelter himself from society, so that no impure action or thought will reach him. Realistically the farmer knows that within a few hours after receiving the five precepts, some of them will be broken. This realization may well be a reason for the preference in rural areas to receive them with *visuṃ: visuṃ rakkhāṇa-tthāya* in the formula when asking.

The marked exception to this is the attitude towards killing animals bigger than insects. In light of the argument above, it can be hypothesized that it is not for fear of breaking a precept that people refrain from killing animals. After all, there is no apparent reluctance to break other precepts. The main reason why the killing of animals is surrounded with manifestations of guilt feelings seems to be the belief in the *karmic* repercussions of the act of killing. The sanctions are clearly outlined in Buddhist lore, and they cannot be ignored. The popular Jātaka stories abound with examples of extreme suffering which is ascribed to the fact that the person who is afflicted had in a former life killed an animal. The axioms regarding rebirth, which do not exclude the possibility that a human can be reborn in the form of a chicken, a dog etc., certainly add to

the uneasiness with regard to the act of killing animals of that size. Moreover, all Thai of adult status will be aware of the story of *Phra Maalaj*, the famous monk who, on the way to visit Indra, pays a visit to inspect the different kinds of hell¹⁸. This tale is sometimes recited as part of the death ceremonies of important people. Most Thai will be knowledgeable about *Phra Maalaj* through observing pictures in monasteries, because the details of the horrors seen by *Phra Maalaj* in the seven different hells are a recurrent theme. One of the seven hells is reserved solely for people who had killed animals, and the picture shows people suffering in this hell, carrying heads that resemble that of buffaloes, cats, dogs, chickens and ducks.

Therefore it is plausible that fear of *karmic* ill-effects, rather than fear of breaking a precept, is responsible for the attitudes towards the first precept. The fact that farmers are obliged to kill animals as part of the circumstances in rural areas can be seen as a source of guilt feelings. There are farmers who feel that they will not be able to escape their poor lot, and will probably not be reborn in better circumstances because the farmer's way of life includes killing animals.

While the five precepts were originally probably intended to be given to a layman in order to initiate him into the Buddhist faith, the initiation aspect was bound to become less important¹⁹ in a country like Thailand, where since time immemorial most inhabitants have been born Buddhists. It has been observed that the ritual of asking for the five precepts occurs usually at the commencement of a ceremony when a group of monks and a group of laymen assemble. This ritual seems to contain many signs which point to the idea that it can be interpreted as a rite of purification, performed to prepare the laymen for the ceremony at hand.

18) The theme of the visit of a mortal being to the heaven of Indra is quite common in Buddhist literature. (cf: *Malalasekera*, 1960, *Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names*, Vol II, p. 963). We could not trace a monk with the name *Mālāya* in Buddhist literature. In the Thai tradition, this monk travels to Indra under his own power, not driven in a chariot like the other people invited to visit heaven.

19) We can mention one instance where the initiation aspect of the ritual of asking for the five precepts seems to be recognizable. This is immediately after a man has left the order of the monks.

Exegetical details show clearly that each precept is interpreted as widely as possible. The emphasis on the idea that the five precepts are very difficult and hard to follow corresponds to a stress on the sacredness of the moment of taking the promise to adhere to the precepts; its function can be seen to be to accentuate the cleansing qualities of the ritual.

While the scope and meaning of the *pañcasīlāni* are aggrandized for ritual purposes, the precepts cannot retain much practical meaning for daily non-ceremonial life. Therefore, statements that the five precepts are "the minimum duties of a householder"²⁰, or "the moral code of Buddhism"²¹, while in an ideal sense they are true, are not applicable for rural Thailand without major qualification.

20) Edward Conze, *Buddhism, Its Essence and Development*, 1951, p. 86.

21) Christmas Humphries, *Buddhism* (3rd ed. 1962) p. 73.

