The Five Moral Precepts Summary Sheet

(Pages 70-71 in the Buddhism textbook)

This summary sheet is to help you learn about the Five Precepts of Buddha. According to the AQA specification you need to know the following things:

‘• The five moral precepts:

1 do not take life  
2 do not take what is not given  
3 do not misuse the senses  
4 do not speak falsehoods  
5 do not take intoxicants that cloud the mind.’

The Five Precepts can be translated different ways into English so the wording may be different from what you are used to in places.

Terminology

**abstain** - to avoid doing something;/to do without something

**compassion** - feeling concerned for the suffering of other people

**contemporary** - today

**Dhamma**  - the teaching of the Buddha

**ethics** - the study of right & wrong behaviour/good & bad behaviour

**ethical** - to do with right & wrong behaviour

**the Five Moral Precepts** - five principles that Buddhists follow to live ethically

**kamma (karma)** - 1. a person’s actions; 2. the idea that skilful actions result in happiness and unskilful actions result in suffering.

**karuna** - compassion

**metta**  - loving-kindness; showing a kind, friendly attitude toward others

**scripture** - holy books

**sentient being** - something/someone capable of thinking or feeling; animals, humans and supernatural beings like gods or spirits

**skilful** - good, ethical actions or behaviour

**unskilful** - bad, unethical actions or behaviour

What are the Five Precepts?

**Buddha** taught the Five Precepts as **guidelines** for living. This means that they are **part of the** **Buddhist scriptures** and **the Dhamma**. All Buddhists try to follow them. They are:

1. to abstain from **taking life** (= not **harming a sentient being**);
2. to abstain from taking what is **not freely given**;
3. to abstain from **misuse of the senses** or sexual misconduct;
4. to abstain from **wrong speech**;
5. to abstain from **intoxicants** that cloud the mind.

In more detail, 1. means not **harming or killing people and animals**. For this reason all Buddhists are **vegetarian** and some are vegan. They will also not work in a job that harms animals e.g. working with leather. However, most Buddhists are happy to use animal products that cause no harm such as wool or milk.

2. means **not stealing** or pressuring people into giving more than they want.

3. means not **overindulging physical pleasures** such as overeating. ‘**Sexual misconduct**’ is not clearly defined by clearly things like rape and adultery would be this. There is a debate over whether it would mean homosexuality or two unmarried people. Buddhists would see this in terms of kamma; whether such actions are likely to produce good effects or bad effects on those involved and on others.

4. is talking about not just **lying** but also speaking **truthful but cruel words** or unkind gossip.

5. refers to **drugs and alcohol**. They should have a clear mind and be self-controlled. This does not necessarily mean a Buddhist cannot drink *any* alcohol.

**All** of them are **related** to the **first one**; not to harm. The other four are just expressions of this main idea. It might be seen as more ethical to lie that to tell the truth harmfully.

There is **no punishment** for breaking the precepts but unskilful actions lead to suffering so Buddhists choose to follow them because breaking them brings its own unhappiness. **They are guidelines not strict rules.** The belief in kamma means that **intentions** are the most important thing. They should act out of compassion and kindness as their motives.

Possible Exam Questions

Explain two ways in which following the Five Moral Precepts would be difficult to follow in contemporary British society. (4 marks)

‘The Five Moral Precepts should be treated as strict rules that Buddhists must obey.’ (12 marks)

‘The Five Moral Precepts are too negative and have nothing positive to say.’ (12 marks)

‘Consequences of actions are more important than the intentions of those who do them.’ (12 marks)