

The Role of Buddhist Moral Education in Promoting Social Harmony: A Philosophical Analysis of Pañcasīla

Yen Sokne

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Philosophy, University of Delhi,
Delhi 110007, India

Abstract

This paper examines how Pañcasīla, the Five Precepts of Theravāda Buddhism, can inform moral education directed toward social harmony. It asks how commitments to refrain from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech, and intoxicants can become practices of ethical understanding rather than exercises in obedience. The study uses philosophical analysis and close readings of selected Pāli discourses, interpreted alongside scholarship on Buddhist ethics, moral education, and education for peace. Its central argument is that the educational significance of the precepts lies in connecting restraint with recognition of others' vulnerability, reflection on intentions and consequences, and accountability for harmful conduct. The explanation distinguishes between the specific prohibition of false speech, and the general Buddhist attitude against divisive discourse, and explains the compatibility of sincere criticism with peaceful interaction. It also signals the limits of transferring historically embedded learning into contemporary schools, especially as they relate to gender, authority, religious pluralism, and substance use. The paper proposes discussion of ethical dilemmas, reflection before and after action, reciprocal responsibilities between teachers and learners, and opportunities for responsible correction. These proposals describe a defensible educational approach; they do not establish measurable effects on conflict or social cohesion. The contribution is a framework for understanding social harmony as cooperation sustained by safety, honest communication, and fair treatment, while preserving the possibility of disagreement and protecting learners from coercive religious instruction.

Keywords: pañcasīla; buddhist moral education; social harmony; theravāda buddhism; ethical reflection; peace education

Introduction

Moral education concerns how people learn to recognise obligations, judge difficult situations, and take responsibility for their conduct. Its relationship to social harmony requires careful examination. A classroom may appear orderly because learners trust one another, but it may also appear orderly because learners fear punishment or cannot challenge authority. These situations have different moral significance. This paper understands social harmony as the

*Corresponding Author Email: yensokne168@gmail.com

Published: 17 October 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70558/IJMRS.2026.v2.i4.301231>

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0).

capacity to cooperate without violence, exploitation, or deception while maintaining fair opportunities to question decisions. On this account, harmony includes the conditions under which disagreement can be expressed and addressed without denying another person's dignity.

Pañcasīla offers a focused starting point for examining this relationship within Theravāda Buddhism. The Five Precepts concern abstention from taking life, taking what is not given, sexual misconduct, false speech, and intoxicants associated with heedlessness. They are commonly explained as training commitments for lay practitioners (Bodhi, 1981). Their educational interpretation nevertheless raises a question: what makes learning these commitments an exercise in moral understanding? Memorising a formula does not establish that a learner can recognise intimidation, acknowledge another person's interests, or respond honestly when the truth is inconvenient. A philosophical account must explain the movement from a stated rule to a reasoned practice.

The central research question is therefore: under what conditions can education informed by Pañcasīla contribute to a defensible understanding of social harmony? The paper argues that the precepts provide boundaries for conduct, while reflection and reciprocal responsibility supply important conditions for learning to apply those boundaries. This argument concerns what educators have reason to teach and how their practices should be evaluated. It does not claim that Buddhist affiliation, recitation of the precepts, or attendance at religious classes produces peaceful behaviour. Harvey's (2000, pp. 1–7) distinction between ethical ideals and the varied conduct of actual Buddhists makes that limitation especially important.

The inquiry has three connected objectives. It interprets the social significance of the Five Precepts through particular canonical passages, examines how moral judgment can be cultivated through reflection, and identifies conditions for applying this interpretation in religiously diverse educational settings. The focus is lay moral education rather than the full disciplinary code of Buddhist monks. Although a discourse addressed to Rāhula supplies an important example of ethical instruction, its contemporary educational use requires adaptation. Monastic status and lay classroom participation do not carry identical obligations.

The study also analyzes a possible vulnerability of appeals to religious solidarity. An institution might urge victims to remain silent so that the community appears united. Such a demand protects an appearance of agreement while leaving the underlying harm unresolved. A useful account of Buddhist moral education must explain why honest reporting and justified criticism remain compatible with its aims. The following sections review relevant scholarship, explain the interpretive method, analyse the precepts, and discuss educational applications. The conclusion identifies the argument's limitations and questions requiring empirical investigation.

Literature Review

Bodhi's (1981) account presents the precepts as elements of moral training rather than merely an inventory of prohibited acts. He connects restraint with the development of qualities such as compassion and truthfulness. His explanation draws substantially on commentarial traditions, which should be distinguished from the canonical discourses used below. The educational implication developed here is that a rule may identify a clear boundary while

leaving teachers with the further task of cultivating judgment. A learner can know that an act is prohibited without understanding the vulnerability of the person affected or the reasons for acting differently.

Harvey (2000) approaches Buddhist ethics across traditions and distinguishes scriptural ideals from lived practice. This supports an important methodological caution: a philosophical interpretation of Pañcasīla cannot establish the degree to which particular communities embody it. The present study consequently treats ethical texts as resources for justification. Claims about a school's actual climate, learners' conduct, or community relations would require evidence collected for those purposes.

Moral education scholarship helps clarify what such justification involves. Nucci (2001) distinguishes morality from other domains of social values and develops an educational approach that extends beyond inculcating rules. His work provides a useful point of comparison for asking whether learners identify a problem because someone is harmed or simply because an authority disapproves. The present paper does not equate Nucci's developmental theory with Buddhist ethics. It uses the comparison to expose a pedagogical question: can learners give reasons for restraint when external supervision is absent or when an authority encourages wrongdoing?

Contemporary Buddhist education also involves adaptation rather than a simple transfer of ancient instruction. Lau and Tse (2024) explore the progress of Buddhist education in their study in Hong Kong through the use of textbook research and interviews such as the focus on daily life, moral development and student-centred learning. Its institutional setting concerns modern Chinese Buddhism and should not be treated as evidence about Theravāda education generally. It nevertheless illustrates why educational context matters. The meaning and teaching of a tradition change when teachers address learners' immediate concerns and work within contemporary curricula.

UNESCO's (2023, paras. 6 and 8) recommendation on education for peace places critical reflection, respect for diversity, and freedom of belief within its educational framework. This supplies a contemporary normative comparison, not independent confirmation of a Buddhist programme's effectiveness. Taken together, these sources motivate the specific contribution of this paper: an account connecting the social boundaries expressed by Pañcasīla with reflective learning and institutional accountability. The contribution is a focused synthesis rather than a claim that earlier scholarship has neglected every relationship between Buddhist ethics and education.

Methodology

This is a philosophical and interpretive study based on published texts. It combines close reading, conceptual clarification, and normative argument. Its purposively selected canonical materials are AN 8.39, SN 55.7, AN 6.63, AN 10.176, MN 58, MN 61, and DN 31. AN, SN, MN, and DN refer respectively to the Aṅguttara, Saṃyutta, Majjhima, and Dīgha Nikāyas. Selection was guided by relevance to precepts, reciprocal reasoning, intention, responsible speech, reflection, and educational relationships. The study makes no claim to an exhaustive review of the Pāli canon or a systematic review of educational interventions.

The analysis proceeds by identifying a passage's immediate normative claim and then examining the reasons connecting it to an educational proposal. A distinction is maintained between what the text says and what this paper proposes. For example, an ancient instruction about intoxication can inform a discussion of responsible judgment, but it does not supply contemporary clinical evidence. Similarly, a historical account of sexual misconduct cannot simply be presented as a complete modern account of consent or equality.

The English translations credited in the references are used as the working texts. The present work employs the Pāli terminology to clarify the concerns, but it does not offer any new translation, nor does it resolve disputes by comparing manuscripts. Citations identify discourse numbers as well as the credited translators; publication years refer to the cited translations. Contemporary ethical vocabulary is introduced openly as an interpretive extension.

Arguments are assessed for consistency, attention to affected persons, and suitability for educational settings that permit disagreement. Proposed classroom situations are hypothetical illustrations, not reports of observed events. No interviews, surveys, classroom observations, or outcome measurements were conducted. Accordingly, the results below are philosophical conclusions and proposals for educational practice, rather than findings about the causal effects of Buddhist instruction.

Results of the Philosophical Analysis

Non-Harm and Recognition of Vulnerability

AN 8.39 describes observance of the precepts as giving others freedom from danger, hostility, and oppression (Thānissaro Bhikkhu, 1997b). The significant feature is its orientation toward those affected by conduct. Restraint is presented as a benefit extending beyond the practitioner. This provides a textual basis for asking learners whom their actions expose to danger and what another person has reason to expect from them. The discourse makes a normative and religious claim; it does not measure whether a community's members experience security.

SN 55.7 develops reciprocal reasoning through recognition that others, like oneself, value life and dislike being harmed (Thānissaro Bhikkhu, n.d.). Its reasoning also addresses theft, sexual misconduct, and several forms of harmful speech. The passage supports a perspective-taking approach, although it does not explicitly discuss the fifth precept. An educational extension would ask learners to examine an incident from the standpoint of someone who is frightened or excluded. Understanding one's own discomfort can begin the inquiry, but listening remains necessary because another person's situation may differ from one's own.

The first precept specifically prohibits taking life. Applying its orientation to intimidation and bullying is a broader ethical interpretation, not a claim that these acts are identical to killing. A teacher might therefore distinguish the prohibition's precise scope from its relevance to a classroom's treatment of vulnerability. A learner who avoids physical aggression but encourages others to threaten a classmate has not demonstrated the moral understanding sought by this educational approach. The relevant question is whether the learner recognises and responds responsibly to the danger created.

Taking What Is Not Given and Fair Cooperation

The second precept places a boundary around appropriation without permission. AN 10.176 describes theft in relation to things belonging to others that have not been given (Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, 1997c). The educational question developed here concerns the difference between having access to something and having permission to use it. A borrowed device, a shared fund, or another learner's work may be accessible without being available for unrestricted appropriation.

Consider a hypothetical group assignment in which one learner presents a classmate's contribution as entirely their own. This is an analogy concerning unfair appropriation, rather than a ruling that every instance of plagiarism meets the traditional conditions of theft. The scenario raises issues of authorship, permission, credit and distribution of advantages. In fair cooperation, the participants know what is to be done with their contributions and their agreements are respected.

The precept also leaves questions that cannot be answered from its wording alone. Saying you are protecting what you have does not explain if the resources were dispersed equitably at the outset. Moral education should consequently permit discussion of deprivation, unequal access and institutional obligations, as well as individual restraint. A school that condemns stealing while ignoring exclusion from essential learning resources provides an incomplete account of responsibility. This conclusion extends the analysis to contemporary institutions; it is not attributed directly to the canonical definition of theft.

Sexual Responsibility and Protection from Exploitation

The third precept concerns sexual misconduct rather than a general requirement of celibacy for lay practitioners. AN 10.176 describes prohibited relationships through historically situated categories of protection and marital attachment (Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, 1997c). These categories cannot be adopted uncritically as a complete account of contemporary sexual ethics. Their historical framing must remain visible when educators discuss present concerns.

The interpretation proposed here gives priority to freedom from coercion and exploitation, respect for personal boundaries, and responsible use of authority. These are contemporary ethical extensions informed by the precept's concern with misconduct; they are not presented as translations of every historical category. Teaching should be appropriate to learners' age and educational setting. It should make clear why apparent agreement may be compromised by threats, dependence, or a large difference in power.

This matters for social harmony because silence about exploitation can preserve an institution's reputation at the expense of affected persons. A responsible educational setting provides ways to seek help without humiliation or retaliation. It does not transfer responsibility for abusive conduct to the person subjected to it. The precept's educational relevance is therefore judged partly by how institutions treat vulnerable learners, including whether those holding authority are subject to scrutiny.

Truthfulness, Disagreement, and Responsible Speech

The fourth precept concerns false speech. AN 10.176 illustrates truthful testimony through

acknowledging what one knows or has seen, while treating divisive speech as a separate category within the ten wholesome courses of action (T̥hānissaro Bhikkhu, 1997c). Pañcasīla and the broader account of verbal conduct should therefore be distinguished. A claim can be factually accurate yet communicated with the intention of intensifying hostility. Conversely, a disagreeable statement can be necessary for addressing harm.

MN 58 evaluates speech with reference to truth, benefit, and appropriate timing; agreeable speech is not its sole standard (T̥hānissaro Bhikkhu, 1997a). This gives a textual basis for rejecting an understanding of harmony that prohibits criticism. The classroom application is that learners should assess evidence and purpose before repeating an allegation. They should also distinguish a responsible report to an appropriate person from public humiliation or the circulation of an unverified rumour.

A hypothetical learner who reports repeated harassment may disturb a class's apparent peace. The disturbance does not itself show that the report is morally wrong. The relevant issues include the report's accuracy, the risk being addressed, and the opportunity for a fair response. Appropriate timing should not become an excuse for indefinitely postponing protection. This paper consequently treats honest communication and fair inquiry as conditions of defensible cooperation, even when the inquiry exposes conflict.

Heedfulness and Responsible Judgment

The fifth precept concerns abstention from intoxicants associated with heedlessness. DN 31 identifies dangers of intoxication, including quarrelling and weakened judgment (Kelly et al., 2005, §8). These are claims within an ancient ethical discourse, not contemporary estimates of health outcomes. Their relevance here lies in the connection between a person's capacity for judgment and the responsibilities they undertake toward others.

An educational interpretation can explore how impaired attention affects consent, promises, and the ability to recognise harm. However, teaching the precept should not substitute for appropriate medical knowledge or support. Nor should educators label a person who needs assistance as morally worthless. The distinction between evaluating conduct and degrading a person is important to a learning environment in which improvement remains possible.

The traditional commitment is abstention, so it should not be silently rewritten as merely moderate consumption. In a religiously diverse classroom, educators can explain that commitment accurately while allowing learners to examine its reasons without requiring a religious vow. Discussion of digital distraction may supply a comparison concerning attention, but distraction is not thereby classified as the canonical intoxicant prohibited by the fifth precept. Keeping these distinctions prevents a contemporary application from altering the teaching it claims to interpret.

Discussion

The preceding analysis identifies educational reasons for learning the precepts without establishing an automatic progression from instruction to social harmony. A commitment can guide conduct only if learners understand situations, notice relevant interests, and have opportunities to act responsibly. Intention has an important place in this account. AN 6.63 identifies intention as kamma expressed through bodily, verbal, and mental action (T̥hānissaro

Bhikkhu, 1997d). This supports attention to motivation, but it does not justify treating a stated good intention as a complete answer to recognised harm. An educator must also ask what the learner could reasonably have understood and how they respond when their conduct's effects become clear.

MN 61 provides a more developed model of ethical instruction. Its mirror analogy introduces reflection on bodily, verbal, and mental action before, during, and after acting. For harmful bodily and verbal actions already performed, it also directs acknowledgement to a teacher or knowledgeable companion and future restraint (Tānissaro Bhikkhu, 2006). These features support an educational method in which anticipation, monitoring, and reconsideration are connected. They do not amount to a modern classroom protocol, and the discourse's monastic setting should not be overlooked.

The proposed adaptation would begin with a concrete dilemma rather than require a declaration that the learner is virtuous. Before acting, learners would identify who might be affected, what information is missing, and whether their reasons remain acceptable when viewed from another position. During an activity, they would be encouraged to notice emerging harm and change course. Afterwards, they would examine what occurred and identify a responsible response. The goal is to develop judgment through arguments and experience, not to provide moral standing for the repetition of a rule.

For instance, a hypothetical class might evaluate a communication that accuses a peer of stealing shared money. Learners might evaluate the evidence provided, the impact of public allegation and the possibilities to preserve the fund without an unfair judgment. The exercise could then change the information: perhaps a payment record was overlooked, or a witness is uncertain. This variation tests whether learners revise their conclusions responsibly. It also shows how concern for fairness can require investigation rather than immediate agreement with either an accuser or an authority.

Correction needs equal care. A learner who has propagated a false allegation may be required to withdraw the allegation, correct the error and incur commensurate sanctions. Such reactions should be able to deal with the harm without forcing a public self-degradation. It does not demand exposure of private thoughts, forced reconciliation or forgiveness from an injured individual. Teachers must distinguish support for learning from practices that expose a learner to further danger. Such safeguards are especially important when moral language is used by adults who also control evaluation and discipline.

Institutional conduct affects the credibility of this approach. DN 31 presents teaching as a reciprocal relationship: learners have responsibilities toward teachers, while teachers are expected to instruct and support their learners (Kelly et al., 2005, §29). This reciprocity supports scrutiny of educational authority, although its historical language includes forms of deference that should not simply govern contemporary classrooms. A teacher's authority must therefore be evaluated through fair treatment, consistency, and willingness to correct mistakes. Respect cannot plausibly mean that learners must accept humiliating treatment or conceal misconduct.

Religious diversity creates another condition. An institution can teach the Buddhist origin and

meaning of Pañcasīla while inviting comparison with other ethical traditions. Learners should be free to examine the reasons for non-harm and truthfulness without professing Buddhist identity. This approach is consistent with UNESCO's (2023, para. 8) emphasis on inclusion and freedom of belief. It preserves the teaching's religious context while resisting the assumption that educational participation requires conversion. Meaningful dialogue also allows learners to raise objections concerning historical gender categories, authority, and the limits of prohibitions.

The proposed framework consequently requires opportunities to practise inquiry as well as restraints on harmful action. Evaluating a programme would involve more than testing recall of the five formulations. Learners' responses to dilemmas could be examined for their use of evidence, recognition of affected persons, and willingness to revise an unsupported conclusion. Whether these capabilities improve relationships outside the classroom remains an empirical question. A future study would need to distinguish doctrinal knowledge from conduct and account for institutional climate, prior beliefs, and access to support.

Limitations

The argument is limited by its selected corpus and reliance on English translations. It does not establish that the proposed interpretation captures every Theravāda account of Pañcasīla, and it offers no comparison of textual variants. Contemporary ideas concerning consent, fair procedures, and religious freedom are introduced as interpretive commitments rather than represented as fully articulated doctrines in the ancient passages.

The educational proposals have not been tested. Religious teaching can interact with social hierarchy, economic conditions, and institutional incentives in ways a textual study cannot determine. Learners' stated agreement may also differ from their conduct. No conclusion about reductions in bullying, conflict, or prejudice follows from this paper alone. Further research should examine both possible benefits and instances in which appeals to morality silence complaints or increase exclusion. Its design should include the perspectives of learners affected by the programme, including those who do not share its religious commitments.

Conclusion

Pañcasīla can inform moral education by supplying commitments that make the effects of conduct on others a subject of sustained inquiry. Its educational significance extends beyond recitation when learners examine reasons for restraint, assess their intentions, and take responsibility for recognised harm. The selected discourses provide resources for reciprocal reasoning, reflection, and responsible speech, while also requiring care in contemporary interpretation. The paper's central conclusion is conditional: education informed by the precepts is defensible when it protects vulnerability, permits truthful criticism, and makes educational authority accountable. Social harmony understood in this way does not require uniform belief or the suppression of disagreement. It depends on conditions in which cooperation can be pursued without coercion or deception. The framework supplies criteria for designing and evaluating moral education, while leaving its actual social effects to empirical research. Further studies could examine how learners apply these reasons in difficult situations and whether institutional practices support the responsibilities that educators teach.

References

- Bodhi, B. (1981). *Going for refuge and taking the precepts* (The Wheel Publication No. 282/284). Buddhist Publication Society.
<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/wheel282.html>
- Harvey, P. (2000). *An introduction to Buddhist ethics: Foundations, values and issues*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511800801>
- Kelly, J. L., Sawyer, S., & Yareham, V. (Trans.). (2005). *Sigalovada Sutta: The Buddha's advice to Sigalaka* (DN 31). Access to Insight.
<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.31.0.ksw0.html>
- Lau, N. S., & Tse, T. K. C. (2024). Education for Buddhist Modernism: Buddhicised education and reform in Hong Kong schools. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 46(4), 471–484 <https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2024.2344176>
- Nucci, L. P. (2001). *Education in the moral domain*. Cambridge University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511605987>
- Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu (Trans.). (n.d.). *Veludvāreyya Sutta: The people of Bamboo Gate* (SN 55.7). Dhammatalks.org. https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/SN/SN55_7.html
- Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu (Trans.). (1997a). *Abhaya Sutta: To Prince Abhaya* (MN 58). Access to Insight. <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.058.than.html>
- Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu (Trans.). (1997b). *Abhisanda Sutta: Rewards* (AN 8.39). Access to Insight. <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an08/an08.039.than.html>
- Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu (Trans.). (1997c). *Cunda Kammaraputta Sutta: To Cunda the silversmith* (AN 10.176). Access to Insight.
<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an10/an10.176.than.html>
- Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu (Trans.). (1997d). *Nibbedhika Sutta: Penetrative* (AN 6.63). Access to Insight. <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an06/an06.063.than.html>
- Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu (Trans.). (2006) *Ambalatthika-rahulovada Sutta: Instructions to Rahula at Mango Stone* (MN 61). Access to Insight.
<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.061.than.html>
- UNESCO. (2023) *Recommendation on education for peace and human rights, international understanding, cooperation, fundamental freedoms, global citizenship and sustainable development*. <https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/recommendation-education-peace-and-human-rights-international-understanding-cooperation-fundamental>