



This document is an extract from the full chapter which is available for download in the table via this [link](#) and is intended for use by participants of meetings.

Commitment to harmlessness – the gifts of the five precepts

The foundational planks of our raft

Laying a groundwork of kindness

“Recovery is not just about stopping the destructive behaviour. It’s about cultivating a life worth living.” ~ Dr Gabor Maté

Setting off on the first stage of our journey from suffering to freedom, we begin by laying an essential solid foundation to our raft. Before delving deeply into the complexities of our human suffering and the specifics of our compulsions and destructive patterns of behaviour, it's incredibly helpful for us to establish a baseline *commitment to harmlessness*. This commitment, embodied in what Buddhism calls the ‘Five Precepts’, is not about imposing rigid rules, but about cultivating awareness of how our actions impact ourselves and others – consciously choosing to minimize harm. This ethical awareness forms the very foundation of our RAFT to Freedom. In many ways, these five precepts can be considered an original harm reduction programme.

Crucially, these five precepts are best understood as training guidelines or personal intentions, not as rigid commandments demanding impossible perfection. The path from suffering to freedom is one of learning and growth, and we are all imperfect human beings, therefore, we frame these precepts using conscious intention:

- ★ “I set the intention not to harm myself or others by my thoughts, by my words or by my actions.”
- ★ “I set the intention not to take anything that has not been freely given.”
- ★ “I set the intention not to harm myself or others by my sexual and sensual misconduct.”
- ★ “I set the intention not to harm myself or others by false speech, harsh speech, gossip and slander.”
- ★ “I set the intention to refrain from taking alcohol and other drugs that impair my mindfulness.”

This framing acknowledges that we are setting a caring and ethical course, we are cultivating an aspiration of harmlessness. We focus on positive intention rather than on prohibition. When we inevitably fall short (as all humans do), this framing encourages us to have self-compassion and renew our commitment, rather than experience the shame and self-condemnation that can trigger us to spiral into our old harmful patterns when rigid rules are broken – falling overboard.

Self-reflections

Take a few moments for honest self-inquiry:

- ★ [How does viewing the precepts as personal gifts, rather than imposed rules, change your relationship with them?](#)
- ★ [Which of the Five Gifts feels most challenging or relevant for you currently?](#)
- ★ [How has your relationship with substances affected your ability to uphold the other ethical commitments?](#)

- ★ [Can you identify ways adopting these intentions could support your emotional well-being and personal integrity?](#)
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Journaling prompts

Use your journal to explore these themes further:

- ★ **Reflecting on intentions:** Choose one intention that resonates strongly or poses challenges. Observe how you navigate related situations and journal about your experiences, challenges, and insights.
 - ★ **The gift of safety:** Reflect on how living with harmlessness might reduce fear, anxiety, and conflict in your life and relationships.
 - ★ **Historical harm, present intention:** Identify a past action causing harm aligned with one of the precepts. Without dwelling on guilt, reflect on how adopting the intention now might lead to different outcomes.
 - ★ **Clarity and ethics:** Explore the direct connection between clarity of mind (avoiding intoxicants) and your ability to act ethically in daily situations.
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Remember to remember

The ‘Five Precepts’, understood as personal intentions and gifts of harmlessness, form the essential ethical foundation for our RAFT to Freedom. They are the sturdy planks upon which we build our vessel. By committing to minimise harm in these five key areas, we create safety for ourselves and others, cultivate self-respect, simplify our lives, and establish the stability needed for deeper inner work. This commitment is not about achieving instant perfection, but about setting a clear, compassionate direction – a conscious choice to align our actions with our aspiration for freedom from suffering.

Many people discover that by abandoning their use of intoxicants (and other harmful addictions), the vast majority of their turmoil settles, for themselves and for those around them. There is also an immediate freedom for the individual; freedom from conflict, blame, guilt, shame, agitation, discomfort, regret, debt and freedom from hangovers! The space that this freedom creates can be filled with more helpful possibilities and with contentment.

Hold these intentions sincerely as you navigate your recovery. They are powerful allies in recognising our shared humanity and the ways we cause and experience suffering. With this commitment to harmlessness providing a stable grounding, we can now proceed to look more closely at the nature of human experience within our first stage of our journey.

“I like to think of ethics as a kindness practice. Every time I refrain from causing harm, I’m giving peace to the people around me.” ~Sylvia Boorstein’s

“We do good because it frees the heart. It opens us to a wellspring of happiness.” ~ Sharon Salzberg

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