



Setting out - Before we begin

## 04 - The Five Gifts

*This document is an extract from the full chapter, which is available for download in the table via this link: <https://raft2freedom.org/raft-to-freedom-downloads/>*

*Now, there are these five gifts, five great gifts - original, long-standing, traditional, ancient, unadulterated, unadulterated from the beginning - that are not open to suspicion, will never be open to suspicion, and are unfaulted by knowledgeable contemplatives & brahmans.*

— Gotama (the Buddha), *Abhisanda Sutta* (AN 8.39)

Having gathered the first materials for our raft through generosity, we now lay down its foundational planks: a baseline commitment to harmlessness. Buddhism calls this the five precepts - not a set of rigid rules, but a way of cultivating awareness of how our actions affect ourselves and others. From this awareness, we consciously choose to minimise harm. In many ways, these Five Gifts can be considered an original harm-reduction programme. If these foundational planks are weak, our whole raft will leak, however skilfully we gather other materials like mindfulness or wisdom.

These guidelines are not exclusively Buddhist. Long before Gotama was born, early legal codes already addressed the same universal themes: violence, theft, sexual impropriety, untruthfulness, and the disruption caused by intoxication. The Ur-Nammu and Hammurabi codes are two well-known examples. Gotama, however, framed these guidelines very differently. Where laws focus on external rules and punishments, he presented them as profound, personal gifts. When we sincerely undertake them, we offer the gifts of fearlessness and harmlessness to all beings, including ourselves. In each of these five areas where harm is so often caused, we are essentially saying: you have nothing to fear from me. This commitment fosters trust, safety and connection - qualities so often damaged by our destructive compulsions and behaviours.

Understood this way, the Five Gifts are less a set of demands than an act of generosity - towards others, and towards ourselves. The self-reflections that follow invite us to consider what it might mean to offer this same fearlessness and harmlessness more fully, in our own life and relationships.

## Self-reflections

*Take a few moments for honest self-inquiry:*

- 1 How does viewing the precepts as personal gifts, rather than imposed rules, change my relationship with them? ([view card](#))
  - 2 Which of the Five Gifts feels most challenging or most relevant for me right now? ([view card](#))
  - 3 How has my relationship with substances or other distractions affected my ability to uphold the other ethical commitments? ([view card](#))
  - 4 Can I identify ways that adopting these intentions might support my emotional well-being and personal integrity? ([view card](#))
  - 5 When my intentions aren't upheld, is my instinct self-compassion and renewal, or shame and self-condemnation? What might it feel like to choose the former? ([view card](#))
  - 6 What would it mean for those closest to me to feel, in my presence, that they have nothing to fear from me? Where does this already feel true, and where is there room to grow? ([view card](#))
  - 7 Which of the five intentions, if held more closely, would most reduce my need for future repair or forgiveness in my relationships? ([view card](#))
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## Journaling prompts

- 1 **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.
- 2 **The gift of safety:** Reflect on how living with harmlessness might reduce fear, anxiety and conflict in your life and relationships.
- 3 **Historical harm, present intention:** Identify a past action causing harm aligned with one of the gifts. Without dwelling on guilt, reflect on how adopting the intention now might lead to a different outcome.
- 4 **Clarity and ethics:** Explore the direct connection between clarity of mind (avoiding intoxicants) and your ability to act ethically in daily situations.
- 5 **Gifts, not rules:** Rewrite one of the Five Gifts in your own words, as a personal intention rather than a rule. What shifts when you frame it this way?
- 6 **The watertight raft:** Which of the five planks (Five Gifts) feels least steady in your own life right now? What would strengthening it look like this week?

- 7 **Falling short, beginning again:** Write about a recent time an intention wasn't kept. Rather than dwelling on the lapse, write about what renewing the commitment might look like today.

*For a printable reminder to carry this stage's practice into daily life, see the Daily Intentions card: <https://raft2freedom.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/09/appropriate-response-daily-intentions.png>*

## 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, and establish the stability needed for the deeper work ahead.

This commitment is not about achieving instant perfection, but about setting a clear, compassionate direction. Hold these intentions sincerely, and simply begin again whenever we fall short: each renewed commitment is itself a small act of freedom - freedom from conflict, blame, guilt, shame, agitation, discomfort, regret, debt, and freedom from hangovers!

*We do good because it frees the heart. It opens us to a wellspring of happiness.*

— Sharon Salzberg, *Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness* (Shambhala, 1995)

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