

Question 32:

I am dealing with a conflict regarding the fifth precept. I have no problem with the others. Since my awakening I have lost all desire to drink. I used to have 4 or 5 beers a day. However, I sometimes smoke pot especially prior to meditating, and as such I can not take a vow promising not to do this until I know I can fulfill that promise to my self and keep it. I realize that this is an intoxicant, but in its defence, it is a very peaceful intoxicant with no ill health effects. No one has ever gotten high on pot alone and gone home and beaten their wife or kids. It allows my mind to settle in to a state of no thought quite easily and has led to some valid profound insights and realizations that have actually deepened my practice. I can readily anticipate your response to this, but because it seems to have deepened my practice it becomes another conflict. I realize that this is only a promise to myself, so I wonder if a promise with this exclusion, at least for a while, is still valid. *From Mike*

Answer:

The Precepts are not absolute vows or rules. If they were, people might give up their practice entirely for having violated one of them. Instead, they are affirmations of our intention to refrain from those 5 unwholesome activities. We repeat them often so that we continue to make efforts to refrain from them, and over time, to refrain from even very minor infractions of them, such as killing an insect, taking something rather insignificant without ensuring that it was intended to be given, or telling “white lies.” So the short answer to your question is that you can still take the 5 Precepts. To practice the 5th Precept, you can be very mindful and analytical of your use and experience of marijuana in preparation for deciding whether to reduce or eliminate its use.

Marijuana’s effects may bring the mind to a state of relative calmness without effort. This calmness, perhaps along with marijuana’s other effects on the brain, may open the mind to ideas, awareness or understanding that did not occur with the mind in its usual busy state. However, deeper levels of awareness and insight can be gained by calming the mind through techniques of meditation alone. By learning to calm the mind without artificial enhancements, we strengthen or “exercise” our mind to enable it to become calm in diverse situations and environments. Smoking pot may give the experience of, and confidence in, your mind becoming tranquil and therefore more aware, but relying on it ultimately hinders or delays the “work” or training required to control the mind.

In addition, marijuana is known to have some delusional properties. These add to one’s existing delusions. In general, whether under the influence of an intoxicant or not, people sometimes perceive that their mind is not having any thoughts, but their mind is not as fully aware and concentrated as it is in meditation. If marijuana use deepened the practice of meditation or led to true stillness of the mind, then it would soon be extremely popular among meditation practitioners! However, numerous dedicated meditation practitioners have used marijuana in the past, but we have never heard of anyone who continues using it after really learning to meditate.

One of the reasons for this is that with meditation practice, the nervous system becomes very finely tuned, aware and sensitive to any negativity, dulling of the mind, or delusive influences. To protect this well-tuned system that enables him to meditate, the practitioner carefully avoids such influences.