

The buddhist five precepts in a nutshell philosophy essay



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Many of us “ know” that negative emotions and behaviour are unwholesome and lead to suffering, and that, in contrast, positive emotions and behaviour are wholesome and lead to happiness. Yet, even with this knowledge, few of us are dedicated practitioners, following the Buddhist Five Precepts faithfully and sincerely on a daily basis. In other words, there is a gap between “ knowledge” and “ practice”.

The purpose of Dharma education is not the accumulation of knowledge, but the use and application of knowledge to bring about change within us. The teachings of Dharma help us develop a good heart and true happiness for the benefit of ourselves as well as for others. True happiness requires training and a certain degree of inner discipline. We need to train the intellect and feelings, as well as the heart and mind. In this process we undergo a transformation of our attitudes, and our entire outlook, as well as our approach to living. Buddhism provides the framework and guidance to work towards this transformation.

However, such transformation does not come naturally. As human beings, we have many negative mental traits; we need to address and counteract each of these and there is no easy way out. We are unlike computers, where a simple push of a keyboard button can delete a negative trait from our mind. As humans, we need to apply a variety of approaches and methods, such as observing the precepts, meditation and so forth to deal with our varied and complex negative mental traits. Observing the Five Precepts is one of the very basic methods, a set of guiding principles with which to counteract our negative traits. The Five Precepts also help to guide our bodily actions, our speech and our mental attitudes. It is a systematic means

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of actualising our aim of purifying our body, speech and mind. The process of transformation requires commitment and perseverance. We need to constantly apply various techniques and take time to familiarise ourselves with the practices. Determination and inner discipline are important qualities we need to develop if we are to bring about successful transformation.

The training process encompasses faith, understanding, practice, experience and realisation. First, we need to have a certain degree of faith to enter the path. We need to have faith that the Five Precepts will lead us to happiness and that we can uphold them. Next, we need to learn the value of upholding the precepts, and how this can be accomplished by understanding their contents and principles. Learning the precepts helps us to understand the importance of becoming more ethical in our behavior and increasing our mental discipline. Subsequently, we transform this knowledge into action, that is, keeping the precepts sincerely on a daily basis. Determination and inner discipline are very important in upholding the precepts. By learning, understanding and upholding the precepts, we change our perception of the world, and most importantly of ourselves. As a result, our interactions with others and the way we conduct our daily lives will become positive, fruitful and light. Such experience and realisation will further enhance our understanding and faith in the precepts.

In the beginning, positive changes may be very minor. The negative influences that we have held for so long within our minds remain strong, leading us to continue to violate the precepts. We have to be patient with ourselves and keep working at it. Little by little, our life will come into

alignment with wisdom. With growing wisdom, we will become more mindful
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(aware) of our thoughts and actions. Negative actions that we once committed with little or no awareness are suddenly revealed to us. As a result, it becomes easier to maintain the precepts. Just like learning to ride a bicycle, we will fall often. However, with constant practice, we will get there eventually. Observing the Five Precepts is an ethical discipline which will require constant effort from ourselves, as old negative habits are replaced with new, positive ones. We need to work with ourselves and be patient. No one saves us but ourselves, and the Buddha merely guides the way!

3. 1 THE BUDDHIST FIVE PRECEPTS IN A NUTSHELL

The Five Precepts were recommended by the Buddha for anyone who wishes to lead a life of peace, while also contributing to the happiness of family and society. The Five Precepts are voluntarily observed by lay Buddhists; they are not commandments that have to be strictly abided by. They form the basis of universal morality outlined in the Noble Eightfold Path, which is very important, especially when one is beginning to follow the Buddhist way.

WHAT ARE THE FIVE PRECEPTS?

THE FIRST PRECEPT:

ABSTAIN FROM KILLING

Respect Life, Not Kill and Being Compassionate

I undertake the training rule to abstain from taking life, so that

I will practise compassion by protecting and benefiting all life.

THE SECOND PRECEPT:

ABSTAIN FROM STEALING

Respect Personal Property, Not Steal and Being Generous

I undertake the training rule to abstain from taking what is not given, so that I will practise generosity by sharing and giving away my material and spiritual wealth.

THE THIRD PRECEPT:

ABSTAIN FROM SEXUAL MISCONDUCT Respect Personal Relationships, Not Indulge the Senses and To Be Content

I undertake the training rule to abstain from misconduct regarding objects and subjects of sense pleasures, especially adultery, so that I will practice contentment and channel my energies towards spiritual development.

THE FOURTH PRECEPT:

ABSTAIN FROM UNTRUTHFUL SPEECH Respect Truth, Not Lying and Being Truthful in Speech

I undertake the training rule to abstain from false speech, and other unwholesome modes of speech, so that I will communicate positively.

THE FIFTH PRECEPT:

ABSTAIN FROM CONSUMING INTOXICATING DRINKS AND DRUGS

Respect Mental and Physical Well-being, Not Taking

Intoxicants and Being Mindful

I undertake the training rule to abstain from taking alcohol, and that which causes intoxication, so that I will be more healthy and not break the precepts through loss of mindfulness.

2. 1. 1 The First Precept: ABSTAIN FROM KILLING

I undertake the training rule to abstain from taking life

The pali word panna means “ that which breathes.” A living being is one that has breath and consciousness, including human beings, animals and insects.

Plants are excluded as they do not have consciousness. This precept prohibits the killing of living beings. In broader terms, it should also be understood to prohibit injuring, maiming, and torturing a living being.

Conditions Under Which A Violation Is Considered to Have Occurred

- Object: The fact and presence of a living being, human or animal
- Knowledge: The knowledge that the object is a living being
- Intention: The intent or resolution to kill
- The Act: The act of killing
- Consequence: A resulting death

Exceptions

- By accident – no intention

The act of killing can take place through action of the body, or speech, such as commanding someone to kill, resulting in the death of a living being. The key factor for the violation of this precept is intention. The mental factor is the propeller while the body only functions as the channel for actualising the intent to kill. A complete act of killing constituting a full violation of the precept needs to involve the five conditions stated earlier. Let us first look at the first condition: Object. There is violation only when a living being is present and one perceives it as a living being. Here is a straightforward example to illustrate this idea. In a demonstration or riot where mobs are very angry with a political leader, they might burn the photos and/ or slash the statue of the political leader. In this case, there is no killing as the rioters only perceive the photo or statue as a living being. Intending to kill one being and killing another by mistake also does not constitute a full transgression.

The second condition, Knowledge, denotes that killing occurs only when the killer is aware that the object of his action is a living being, not a photo or statue. So, if we step on an insect we do not see, the knowledge (awareness) of a living being is not there and hence full violation has not occurred.

The third condition, Intention, ensures that the taking of life is intentional. There is no violation if there is no intent to kill, for example accidentally killing a fly when we try to keep it away.

The fourth condition holds that the action must be directed towards killing and the fifth, that the being (human or animal) dies as a result of this action.

Full violation of the precept is not deemed to have happened if there is no resulting death.

Underlying Motivations for Killing

- Greed
- Hatred
- Delusion

An example of killing motivated primarily by greed is killing for material gain, such as hunting; or to gain enjoyment, such as fishing or eating seafood. Killing motivated by hatred is evident in cases of vicious murder – out of strong aversion, cruelty, or jealousy. Killing motivated by delusion can be seen in the case of animal sacrifices in certain religious practices, or in holy wars, where one kills followers of other religious beliefs, and believing that to be a sacred act.

How the Precept is Violated

- Committed by oneself
- By commanding or instructing
- Rejoicing in the act

The precept could be violated by taking a life, or by commanding someone else to do so verbally or with gestures. A common example of instructing

someone else to kill on our behalf is by ordering “ live” seafood in a restaurant.

Sometimes we may rejoice in the act of killing, for example, rejoicing in the murder of someone we do not like. When reading the news that an enemy has been killed, we must be careful not to rejoice in it.

The Intensity / Severity of Violation

- “ Spiritual Nobility” of the victim
- Size of animal
- Type of animal

There is a difference between killing a human being and an animal. Killing a human being is certainly a more serious violation than killing an animal. Within the category of humans, it is a more serious violation to kill one’s parent or benefactor, than a stranger. In the case of animals, the severity of violation is said to be proportional to the size of the animal, that is, killing a larger animal is more reprehensible than killing a small animal (such as a tiny insect). It also matters if the animals are domesticated or wild, and if they have a gentle or vicious temperament. Of all killings, the most culpable is the killing of an arahant/arahantini (a fully liberated being), and of one’s parents.

The Purpose of the this Precept

- To respect life

- To have compassion

The purpose of this precept is to respect all living beings. In doing so, we learn to be kind and compassionate to all living beings and live in harmony with them. By upholding the precept of not killing, we give all living creatures security and freedom from danger.

Quotes from Scriptures

Giving up killing, we abstain from taking the life of any living being; laying aside stick and sword, modest and merciful, he lives kind and compassionate to all living beings. (DN. 1)

There is the case where a disciple of the noble ones, abandoning the taking of life, abstains from taking life. In doing so, he gives freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings. In giving freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings, he gains a share in limitless freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, and freedom from oppression. This is the first gift, the first great gift – original, long-standing, traditional, ancient, unadulterated, unadulterated from the beginning – that is not open to suspicion, will never be open to suspicion, and is unfaulted by knowledgeable contemplatives and priests. (AN8. 39)

The First Mindfulness Training by Thich Nhat Hanh

Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I am committed to cultivating compassion and learning ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants, and minerals. I am determined not to kill, not to let others
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kill, and not to condone any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, and in my way of life.

Thich Nhat Hanh has extended the First Precept of not killing humans and animals (sentient beings) to the protection of plants and minerals, which are technically not sentient beings though they are part of nature. The essence of observing this precept is to respect life, cultivate loving kindness and to live in harmony with our ecosystem and environment. In view of the consumerist world we live in, driven often by greed, this mindfulness training can help in our reflection on how we live, and how our actions contribute to harming our environment and the planet.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS REGARDING THE FIRST PRECEPT

What is the Buddhist perspective on suicide?

Chan Master Sheng Yen: According to the Buddhist teaching of cause and effect, since one has not realised the truth of all phenomena, or is not liberated from life and death, suicide is pointless. When one's karmic retribution is not exhausted, death by suicide only leads to another cycle of rebirth. This is why Buddhists do not support suicide, and instead, encourage constructive living, using this life to diligently practise good, thus changing the present and the future for the better.

His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama: Some people commit suicide; they seem to think that there is suffering simply because there is the human life, and that by cutting off the life there will be nothing... But, according to the Buddhist viewpoint, that's not the case; your consciousness will continue. Even if you

take your own life, this life, you will have to take another body that again will be the basis of suffering. If you really want to get rid of all your suffering, all the difficulties you experience in your life, you have to get rid of the fundamental cause (greed, hatred and delusion) that gives rise to the aggregates that are the basis of all suffering. Killing yourself isn't going to solve your problem.

Ven. K. Sri Dhammananda: Taking one's own life under any circumstances is morally and spiritually wrong. Taking one's own life owing to frustration or disappointment only causes greater suffering. Suicide is a cowardly way to end one's problems of life. A person cannot commit suicide if his mind is pure and tranquil. If one leaves this world with a confused and frustrated mind, it is most unlikely that he would be born again in a better condition. Suicide is an unwholesome or unskillful act since it is encouraged by a mind filled with greed, hatred and delusion. Those who commit suicide have not learnt how to face their problems, how to face the facts of life, and how to use their mind in a proper manner. Such people have not been able to understand the nature of life and worldly conditions.

Ven. S. Dhammika, Good Question Good Answer, 2008, p26: When one person murders another they might do it out of fear, anger, fury, greed or some other negative emotions. When a person kills himself or herself they might do it for very similar reasons or because of other negative emotions like despair or frustration. So whereas murder is the result of negative emotions directed towards another, suicide is the result of negative emotions directed towards oneself, and therefore would be breaking the Precept.

However, someone who is contemplating suicide or has attempted suicide <https://assignbuster.com/the-buddhist-five-precepts-in-a-nutshell-philosophy-essay/>

does not need to be told that what they are doing is wrong. They need our support and our understanding. We have to help them understand that killing themselves is perpetuating their problem, surrendering to it, not solving it.

To keep the precept of not killing, must we be vegetarian?

There are various opinions among the different Buddhist traditions with regards to this question. The Buddha, himself, was not a vegetarian.

Traditionally, Theravadin monastics live on alms food; they receive whatever is put into their alms bowl. In other words, they have no control over their diet. However, in the Jivaka Sutta (MN 55), it is mentioned that the Buddha only allowed meat to be taken on the condition that it is pure in three aspects – that the monastic:

1. did not see the animal being killed
2. did not hear the cry of the animal being killed
3. did not suspect that the animal was killed specifically for the monk/nun

Although these conditions technically apply only to monastics, they are often used as a reasonable guide by devout lay people. The Mahayanists relate these three types of “purified meat”

to the nurturing of compassion. If we see the

suffering of the dying animal, we should be compassionate towards them and try to relieve their suffering. It is against the principle of compassion if we do not help them, and indeed, even go ahead to consume their meat.

Exceptions have also appeared in Tibetan Buddhism. In Tibet, people traditionally lived as nomads and it was, and probably still is, difficult to grow vegetables in the high altitudes, making it difficult to be vegetarian. Hence, monastics from the Theravadin and Tibetan traditions are generally not vegetarian.

When Buddhism spread to China, the idea of compassion was developed further in the Chinese Mahayanist tradition, and the Bodhisattva vow of not taking meat was strongly emphasised and made compulsory. Chinese Mahayanist monastics are therefore vegetarian, and so are many devotees who have taken the Bodhisattva precepts.

Today, more and more Theravadin monastics are encouraging vegetarianism, and His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama also encourages Tibetan monastics living outside Tibet, and who have control over their diet, to be vegetarian.

In my opinion, vegetarianism should be encouraged, but not imposed on others.

Are we not contributing to killing by eating meat? Isn't the meat in restaurants and supermarkets killed for our consumption?

Let us look at the example of poultry farming. In the old days, chickens were allowed to roam freely and grow in a natural environment. They were only <https://assignbuster.com/the-buddhist-five-precepts-in-a-nutshell-philosophy-essay/>

sent for slaughter when naturally fully grown. In other words, the production of meat was not human-controlled but based on the natural growth of the animals.

Today, driven by demand in capitalist economies, poultry is “ produced” in controlled high-tech conditions. Poultry and other animals are now raised in large-scale factory farms, deprived of natural conditions which allow them to move around and seek food freely in a natural environment. They are fed solely by humans and/or machines and kept

in cages or pens, just big enough for them to stand in, day and night. Driven by human greed, some poultry farmers, for example, speed up the growth of the chickens to generate more income, causing tremendous pain and suffering to the poultry. By creating longer days and shorter nights with the use of indoor lighting, the animals are misled into eating more often than normal. Under these factory farming conditions, these animals suffer greatly. Some reports say these animals attack each other, pecking out of frustration and wounding their mates, causing each other to bleed and suffer. To prevent them from attacking each other, farmers cut their beaks off, inflicting even more pain and suffering to the poor chickens.

During festive seasons, there is massive slaughter of animals to satisfy the sensual pleasures of humans. So, if we look deeply into the consumption of meat, we could be indirectly contributing to the act of killing, because the production of meat today is dependent on demand in the market. Therefore, if we can reduce our meat consumption, it will certainly reduce the demand for meat, and thereby minimising animal slaughter.

If we are truly concerned for the well-being of animals and not wanting to contribute to the cruelty of modern industrial farming, we will naturally develop a kind heart and compassion towards animals. The practice of the First Precept – to abstain from killing – is a celebration of life. We do not support any act of killing, and we can extend it further by teaching others not to. Being mindful of what we eat and what we buy, and making an effort in our diet are ways of preventing killing.

Many Buddhists find that as they develop in their spiritual path, they have a natural tendency to become vegetarian. By doing so, they live up to the Buddha's teaching on loving kindness. This energy of loving kindness brings feelings of safety, health and joy to them and all sentient beings.

What did the Buddha say about vegetarianism?

(Taken from Ven. Sangye Khadro's article, Mandala Magazine, June 2007)

There is a lot of debate within Buddhism about this issue. There are some Buddhists who are vegetarian (no meat or fish), and some who are vegans (no animal products at all, including dairy products and eggs). And there are some Buddhists who do eat meat.

What did the Buddha himself say about eating meat? Well, it seems that he said different things at different times. This may sound like he contradicted himself, but the Tibetans say that the Buddha was a very skilful teacher who understood the minds and needs of his listeners and would teach them

accordingly. So to some, the Buddha said it was okay to eat meat, provided <https://assignbuster.com/the-buddhist-five-precepts-in-a-nutshell-philosophy-essay/>

that they did not kill the animal themselves, or order it to be killed. But to others, the Buddha said that if you are a follower of the bodhisattva path, and truly compassionate, you should not eat meat. To these people he spoke of the harmful consequences of doing so.

In fact, there is an entire chapter in the Lankavatara Sutra (a Mahayana sutra which has been translated into English) in which the Buddha spoke very strongly against meat-eating. So as I understand it, the Buddha did not actually forbid his followers to eat meat, but left it up to each person to decide this issue for him/herself. In a way, that was compassionate of the Buddha, because some people live in places and conditions where it would be extremely difficult to abstain from meat, and if they had to be vegetarian in order to be Buddhist, they probably would not be able to do it.

Also, some people are unable to be strictly vegetarian because of their physical make-up or their health. His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama is an example of this. He tried to be vegetarian, but his health suffered and his doctors advised him to eat meat. But I am sure he eats as little as possible, because in his teachings he often encourages people (especially the Tibetans, who are quite fond of meat) to either give up or at least cut down on the consumption of meat. His advice seems to be working, because I have noticed in the last few years an increase in the number of Tibetans who have given up meat, as well as Tibetan-run organisations promoting vegetarianism. I even heard that Sera Monastery in South India is a meat-free zone!

Is abortion a form of killing? Isn't it better to end a pregnancy if the couple is not ready?

Abortion is medically defined as the expulsion of a not yet viable foetus in humans as well as animals before the end of pregnancy, during which the foetus is not capable of maintaining an independent existence.

Is abortion a form of killing? To answer this question, we need to understand when life begins. According to Buddhist teachings, the existence of a human being begins from the mind's "first arising," that is, from the first moment of the existence of consciousness in a foetus. In other words, life begins from the moment of conception, when an egg is fertilised by a sperm. Hence, abortion is indeed a form of killing.

However, according to Buddhism, abortion is allowed only in situations where it is the most humane alternative; for example, in order to save the life of the mother. But let us be honest, most abortions are performed simply because the pregnancy is inconvenient, or an embarrassment (pre-marital pregnancy or the result of adultery). These are very poor reasons for the destruction of a life.

Abortion is never a good solution to unwanted pregnancies. Prevention is better than cure. Education is the long term solution. Educating couples on sexual responsibility is a better option than destroying a life. Couples entering into sexual activity should think carefully beforehand. Are they ready to bring a new life into this world? Are they financially ready to bring up the child? Sexual activity should not be carried out without long term

commitment; that is, if pregnancy occurs, the couple must be responsible for their act of bringing a new life into the world.

What if a woman is raped?

A child conceived as a result of rape is entitled to live and be loved just as any other child. The baby (foetus) is innocent. He or she should not be killed simply because their biological father committed a crime. In dealing with unwanted pregnancy, the child could be given away or adopted by others.

How should I deal with an infestation of ants or cockroaches?

Our intention is not to kill. We try our best to bring the least harm to all living creatures. We can avoid using harmful pesticides by using organic/natural ones that do not kill the creatures. For example, fresh pandan (pandanus) leaves are good for keeping cockroaches away without killing them. We also need to be aware of actions that may invite pests into our house. Some people have the habit of leaving dishes and cutlery in the basin after meals. Some wash the dishes only when there are no more clean plates and spoons in the cupboard. This will certainly invite ants and cockroaches into their homes. When their house is infected with ants and cockroaches, they start spraying pesticides. We need to be mindful and responsible for our actions. If we make an effort to keep our environment clean and dry, and keeping food out of reach, it will certainly reduce the incidence of pests. At other times when it is unavoidable, we just need to be patient and tolerant. With mindfulness and perseverance, we can do our best to minimise harm to living creatures. Refer to Appendix 1 (p87) for tips on how to keep insects away without killing them.

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Some detractors say, “ You Buddhists are too concerned about ants and bugs.”

(Taken from Ven. S. Dhammika, Good Question Good Answer, p25)

Buddhists try to develop a compassion that is indiscriminating and all-embracing. We see the world as a unified whole where each thing and creature has its place and function. We believe that before we destroy or upset nature’s delicate balance, we should be very careful. Where emphasis has been on exploiting nature to the full, squeezing every last drop out of it without putting anything back, conquering and subduing it, nature has revolted. The air is becoming poisoned, the rivers polluted and dead, so many animals and plants are heading for extinction, the slopes of the mountains are barren and eroded. Even the climate is changing. If people were a little less anxious to crush, destroy and kill, this terrible situation might not have arisen. We should strive to develop a little more respect for all life. And this is what the First Precept is about.

What if we are practicing non-violence and someone breaks into our house and threatens us? What should we do?

It all depends on your level of cultivation. If you are an experienced practitioner who practises non-violence in your daily life, the chances are you will be more likely to react calmly and intelligently without harming anyone. The compassion one generates could influence the intruder to be less violent. But in order to be able to react in an intelligent and non-violent way, our day-to-day training is important. It may take years to develop. If you wait till a crisis happens, it will be too late. And at that crucial moment, even if <https://assignbuster.com/the-buddhist-five-precepts-in-a-nutshell-philosophy-essay/>

you know all the teachings – to embrace compassion, to be non-violent, it is only intellectual knowledge. Since it is not an intrinsic part of your being, you may not be able to act in a non-violent manner. The self-centred cherishing attitude, the fear and anger in you will likely obstruct you from acting that way. Hence, it is important to transform our knowledge into practice and to embrace loving kindness and compassion in our daily life. Here is the story of a practising Buddhist reacting in a non-violent way when confronted with a robber. Home Intrusion and the Protection by the Triple Gems (The following article is extracted from the Buddhist Society of Western Australia Newsletter, Feb/Mar issue, 2010)

On that fateful night of 19 January 2010, a masked intruder armed with a knife, garden fork and a hammer walked into my house through an unlocked door around 9 p. m. I was cooking in my kitchen and happened to turn around to be confronted by this strange looking masked man standing about 4 feet away holding up his weapons.

Extreme terror came over me. I let out two blood curdling screams in quick succession. In a split second, I went into denial as I stared into his face to see if it was my husband, Sunny dressed up like that to frighten me.

Hearing the screams, Sunny came flying into the kitchen to investigate. The intruder ordered both of us to lie down on the kitchen floor and not to look at him. He told us to just look at his feet to know where he was.

As we went down on the floor, Sunny started chanting “ om mani padme hum,” the Buddha of Compassion’s mantra, and I joined him in chanting quietly under our breaths.

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At that point I was shaking with fear. Thoughts of being robbed, bashed senseless, raped or even killed ran amok in my mind. Minutes later a calmness came over me. I even questioned myself then as to why I was feeling so calm.

The first thing I said to the intruder was “ We are peaceful people. Just tell us what you want and we will give it to you but please do not harm us.” His reply to that was, “ I am also a peaceful person. If you do as I tell you, I will not harm you.” That was cold comfort to us as he was the one holding the weapons and looked quite agitated and menacing. He added, “ I want money. My wife is pregnant and I am homeless.” To that Sunny said, “ I have \$50 in my wallet.”

When he opened the wallet, he only found a \$20 note. So then I gave him my purse which contained \$30. At that point I thought he would ask us to drive him to the nearest ATM to get more cash and then will probably finish us off, but surprisingly there were no demands from him for more cash or anything else.

He was quite happy with the \$50 cash, mobile phone and our car. He said he would return the car keys another day and leave them in our letter box. He later changed his mind, saying he would drive to Warwick Station and leave the keys under the car seat.

During our half hour ordeal, he apologised numerous times and asked for forgiveness. Twice he sounded as though he was about to cry for putting us through