

The Eight Precepts

Beyond the five precepts Buddhism offers a higher code of moral discipline for the laity consisting of eight precepts (*atthasila*). This code of eight precepts is not entirely different in content from the fivefold code, but includes the five precepts with one significant revision. The revision comes in the third precept, where abstaining from sexual misconduct is changed to abstaining from incelibacy. The third precept of the eightfold set thus reads: *Abrahmacariya veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami*, "I undertake the training rule to abstain from incelibacy." To these basic five three further precepts are added:

(6) *Vikalabhajana veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami*, "I undertake the training rule to abstain from eating beyond the time limit," i.e., from mid-day to the following dawn.

(7) *Nacca gita vadita visukhadassana-mala gandha vilepana dharanamandana vibhusanattana veramani sikkhapadam samamadiyami*, "I undertake the training rule to abstain from dancing, singing, instrumental music, unsuitable shows, and from wearing garlands, using scents, and beautifying the body with cosmetics."

(8) *Uccasayana mahasayana veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami*, "I undertake the training rule to abstain from high and luxurious beds and seats."

There are two ways in which these precepts are observed — permanently and temporarily. Permanent observance, far the less common of the two, is undertaken generally by older people who, having completed their family duties, wish to deepen their spiritual development by devoting the later years of their life to intensified spiritual practice. Even then it is not very widespread. Temporary observance is usually undertaken by lay people either on Uposatha days or on occasions of a meditation retreat. Uposatha days are the new moon and full moon days of the lunar month, which are set aside for special religious observances, a custom absorbed into Buddhism from ancient Indian custom going back even into the pre-Buddhistic period of Indian history. On these days lay people in Buddhist countries often take the eight precepts, especially when they go to spend the Uposatha at a temple or monastery. On these occasions the undertaking of the eight precepts lasts for a day and a night. Then, secondly, on occasions of retreat lay people take the eight precepts for the duration of their retreat, which might last anywhere from several days to several months.

The formulation of two distinct ethical codes follows from the two basic purposes of the Buddhist moral discipline. One is the fundamental ethical purpose of putting a brake on immoral actions, actions which are harmful either directly or indirectly to others. This purpose falls into the province of the fivefold code of precepts, which deals with the restraint of actions that cause pain and suffering to others. In enjoining abstinence from these unwholesome actions, the five precepts also protect the individual from their undesirable repercussions on himself — some immediately visible in this present life, some coming to manifestation only in future lives when the kamma they generate bears its fruit.

The other purpose of the Buddhist training in moral discipline is not so much ethical as spiritual. It is to provide a system of self-discipline which can act as a basis for achieving higher states of realization through the practice of meditation. In serving this purpose the code functions as a kind of asceticism, a way of conduct involving self-denial and renunciation as essential to the ascent to higher levels of consciousness. This ascent, culminating in nibbana or final liberation from suffering, hinges upon the attenuation and ultimate eradication of craving, which with its multiple branches of desire is the primary force that holds us in bondage. To reduce and overcome craving it is necessary to regulate not only the deleterious types of moral transgressions but also modes of conduct which are not harmful to others but still give vent to the craving that holds us in subjection.

The Buddhist code of discipline expounded in the eight precepts represents the transition from the first level of moral discipline to the second, that is, from sila as a purely moral undertaking to sila as a way of ascetic self-training aimed at progress along the path to liberation. The five precepts also fulfill this function to some extent, but they do so only in a limited way, not as fully as the eight precepts. With the eight precepts the ethical code takes a pronounced turn towards the control of desires which are not socially harmful and immoral. This extension of the training focuses upon desires centering around the physical body and its concerns. The change of the third precept to abstinence from celibacy curbs the sexual urge, regarded in itself not as a moral evil but as a powerful expression of craving that has to be held in check to advance to the higher levels of meditation. The three new precepts regulate concern with food, entertainment, self-beautification, and physical comfort.

Their observance nurtures the growth of qualities essential to the deeper spiritual life — contentment, fewness of wishes, modesty, austerity, renunciation. As these qualities mature the defilements are weakened, aiding the effort to reach attainment in serenity and insight.

Source: Taken and adapted from "Going for Refuge & Taking the Precepts", by Bhikkhu Bodhi. *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, 1 December 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/wheel282.html> .

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