

Monks' Precepts: Lay Person's Guide

MONKS' PRECEPTS

LAY PERSON'S GUIDE

Venerable Dhammavuddho Thero
Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhassa

INTRODUCTION

It has been more than 2,500 years since the Buddha walked on this earth. We are fortunate that his teachings¹ are still available to guide us. There is only one teaching of the Buddha, and that is found in the earliest Sutta-Vinaya.² In AN 4.180³, the Buddha taught the great authorities. He advised that teachings which conform to the earliest Sutta-Vinaya can be accepted as the teachings of the Buddha; otherwise, they should be rejected. It is the duty of every good Buddhist to put these teachings into practice.

In AN 7.21, it is evident that the Buddha intended the Sangha⁴ of monks to continue the practice of the Sutta-Vinaya

¹ The Buddha's teaching is called the Dhamma-Vinaya. In AN 4.180, the Dhamma refers to the Suttas (discourses) and they are found in the early Nikayas (collections) — see footnote 2. The Vinaya refers to the monastic discipline of monks and nuns only. The importance of the Sutta-Vinaya cannot be over-emphasized and this is discussed in the book 'Liberation: Relevance of Sutta-Vinaya' by the author.

² The original Suttas of the Buddha are found in the Nikayas: Digha Nikaya (DN), Majjhima Nikaya (MN), Samyutta Nikaya (SN), Anguttara Nikaya (AN), and six books of the Khuddaka Nikaya.

³ The Sutta numbers here follow the Pali Text Society books.

⁴ In MN 142, Sangha refers to the community of monks or nuns. In the Theravada tradition, there are presently no bhikkhunis. When the bhikkhunis existed previously, they had over 300 precepts.

in its original form with as little change as possible: “So long, monks, as you shall not decree the undecreed, nor repeal the decreed, but conform to the decreed training (of morality, concentration and wisdom), so long may the monks be expected to prosper, not to decline.”

The history of Buddhist countries has shown that Buddhism declined when monks became lax, corrupt, and neglected the Sutta-Vinaya. This resulted in lay people losing respect for monks. On the other hand, when monks practised the holy life purely according to the Sutta-Vinaya, it generated much faith in the lay community and the religion flourished.

The lay community supports the monks in their holy life. Thus it is important that they understand the monks' Vinaya to a certain extent as they play an important role in helping monks to uphold their precepts.

A Theravada monk has 227 precepts in the Patimokkha while a Mahayana monk has basically the same precepts plus an additional minor section concerning deportment with respect to a stupa, making it a total of 250 precepts.⁵ A monk is also bound by the other books of the Vinaya Pitaka.

A samanera or novice monk is only bound by the ten precepts. At present, a Theravada 'nun' takes the eight precepts which does not forbid her to possess money, or in some countries the ten precepts which forbid the possession of money.

⁵ A Mahayana bhikkhuni (nun) undertakes all the 250 Mahayana bhikkhu (monk) precepts plus an additional 98 precepts.

THE EIGHT CLASSES OF PRECEPTS

The precepts of a monk are classified into eight classes: (i) Parajika, (ii) Sanghadisesa, (iii) Aniyata, (iv) Nissaggiya-pacittiya, (v) Pacittiya, (vi) Patidesaniya, (vii) Sekhiya, and (viii) Adhikarana-samatha.

All these eight classes of rules are basically the same for Theravada and Mahayana, except for Pacittiya and Sekhiya. A Theravada monk has 92 Pacittiya and 75 Sekhiya, while a Mahayana monk has 90⁶ and 100 respectively.

Parajika and Sanghadisesa, the first two, incur heavy offences while the rest incur light offences redeemable by confession to another monk. Only the more important rules concerning lay people will be mentioned below⁷.

Parajika

There are four Parajikas or rules of defeat. If a monk breaks any one of the rules he is automatically 'defeated' in the holy life and falls from monkhood immediately. He is not allowed to become a monk again in his lifetime. Intention is necessary in all these four cases to constitute an offence.

Rule 1: forbids sexual intercourse. Thus in the Buddha's religion the idea of a monk having a wife is quite alien.

Rule 2: forbids stealing any object of great value, now often interpreted as approximately more than US\$20.

Rule 3: forbids the killing of a human being.

⁶ Less rule number 23 and 82.

⁷ The precept numbers refer to the Theravada Patimokkha. The corresponding number in the Mahayana Patimokkha may be different in certain cases.

Rule 4: forbids falsely claiming that one has achieved some supernormal attainment, i.e. jhana (meditative absorption), psychic power, or one of the Ariyan stages of accomplishment.

Sanghadisesa

The thirteen Sanghadisesa here are rules entailing a formal meeting of the Sangha. If the monk breaks any rule here he has to undergo a period of probation or discipline after which, if he shows himself to be repentant, he may be reinstated by a Sangha of not less than twenty monks.

Rule 2: forbids making physical contact with a woman with lustful intention. It is because of this rule that a monk avoids making physical contact with a woman, especially when food, drinks, or anything is given directly to a monk.

Rule 3: concerns speaking lewd words to a woman, with lustful intention.

Rule 5: forbids a monk to act as a go-between to a man-woman relationship. Intimate relationships are one of the main causes that bind us to the continued cycle of existence. Thus a monk is not allowed to solemnize a marriage.

Rule 13: concerns 'corrupting families' and 'bad behaviour'. A monk 'corrupts families' if he continually over-associates with lay people and behaves like a lay person. 'Bad behaviour' is behaviour beyond the bounds of a monk's restrained conduct — playfully associating with girls, playing games, silliness, singing, dancing, etc..

Aniyata

These are two indefinite rules where a monk is accused of having committed an offence with a woman in a screened (enclosed) or private place by a lay person.

It is indefinite because the final outcome depends on whether the monk acknowledges the offence. Benefit of the doubt is given to the monk unless there is over-riding evidence.

Thus it is not proper for a monk to be alone with a woman, especially in a screened or private place.

Nissaggiya-pacittiya

These are thirty rules entailing 'confession with forfeiture.' They are mostly concerned with the possessing of items which are disallowed or obtained in disallowable ways. The monk has to forfeit the item and then confess his offence to another monk.

Rules 6, 7 and 8: 'Pavarana' or invitation. Generally, with some exceptions, a monk may not ask for something from a lay person unless it is his relation or the lay person has given his invitation.

The invitation that a lay person gives to a monk in respect of requisites may be verbal or written, limited as to specific type of items, amount, cost, or time. For instance, "Bhante, as long as you are residing here, when you are in need of any requisite, please let me know and I shall be happy to supply your needs."

Rules 12 and 13: Luxurious items. The Buddha always taught his disciples to be contented and to have few wants, stressing that items considered luxurious were forbidden to a monk.

Rule 18: Money. A monk is not allowed to accept money since he is supposed to have renounced worldly possessions. There is no offence for a monk to handle money or valuables for safekeeping if they have been lost or mislaid by lay persons in the monastery or in their own houses.

The main reason the Buddha forbade a monk to possess money is stated in SN 42.10 where the Buddha said, “ ... for whoever money is allowable, then for him the five sense pleasures are also allowable; for whoever the five sense pleasures are allowable, you can be certain he is not of the nature of a monk”

If lay people want to offer money for the upkeep of the monastery, it would be best if they put it directly into the donation box/book, or into the monastery bank account, etc..

There is an allowance in the Vinaya books, called the Mendaka allowance, for a lay supporter to offer money for the support of a monk(s). This money can be given to the lay person who looks after the funds, or put into the donation box/book, etc., and then the monk(s) should be informed about it. Since a monk is not allowed to accept money personally, any money given for the benefit of a monk is not the property of the monk and thus cannot be taken away by the monk, even if he disrobes.

A Sangha Trust or Foundation is an ideal and practical modern way of accepting and administering gifts of money and property for the benefit of the Sangha. The trustees can be monastics and lay people. However, monastery land and buildings are wholly Sangha property according to the Vinaya, and so should preferably be ‘wholly owned’⁸ and managed by the Sangha, i.e. the trustees should preferably be

⁸ Note that a monk does not own Sangha property. Sangha property means the property of the Sangha of the present and future until eternity, and the monks are only trustees for the Sangha.

monastics. Reliable lay persons are appointed to look after the bank accounts and financial matters.

Rule 19: forbids a monk from buying and selling.

Rule 20: Barter. A monk may not barter directly with lay people but it is allowed to have a lay supporter barter permissible goods for the monk.

Rule 23: If a monk is offered the five medicines or seven-day allowances, he may keep and use them for seven days.

These are ghee (clarified butter), butter⁹, oils (from animals, fish, and vegetable oils), honey, and sugar (any kind). These five medicines may be consumed by the monk at any time of the day or night.

Before the seventh dawn has passed the monk is supposed to give them up to a person not fully ordained, i.e. a lay person, samanera, or 'nun'. If the person re-offers them to the monk, he may use them again for another seven days.

The seven-day limit was specified to deter a monk from storing excessive amounts of these items.

Rule 28: Kathina. It occurs after the annual three months rains season (vassa) residence of monks and this one month period is the popular time for lay people to offer robes to monks.

⁹ The original Pali word is 'navanitam' or 'nonitam'. It is something which seems to have been made from curd and which can provide ghee. Cheese is made from curd and butter provides ghee. Hence both are usually used in Thailand.

Pacittiya

There are ninety two Pacittiyas (rules entailing confession).

Rule 5: forbids a monk to sleep in the same lodging place with a layman or samanera (novice monk) for more than three continuous nights.

Rule 6: forbids a monk to lie down in the same lodging place with a woman, even a young girl. Thus it is desirable that if a monk is invited to stay with lay people, he is given a lockable room to himself.

Rule 7: forbids a monk from speaking more than six sentences of Dhamma to a woman unless in the presence of a man or boy who understands what is being spoken.

In its essence, this rule limits a monk to speaking only the necessary minimum to a woman alone.

Rule 8: forbids a monk from talking about his supernormal attainments to one not fully ordained. Supernormal attainment means the attainment of jhana (meditative absorption), psychic power, or the state of an Ariya (noble person).

Rule 9: forbids a monk from disclosing another monk's offence/fault to one not fully ordained, except when it is authorized by the Sangha.

Rule 10: A monk should not dig the earth which has life — worms, insects, etc.. It is allowed for a monk to hint to one not fully ordained to have the earth dug, e.g. “We need a garbage pit”. It is alright for a monk to dig the ground that is almost all stones, pebbles, gravel or sand, and whatever heap of soil or clay left damp for less than four months.

Rule 11: A monk is also not allowed to damage plants, including grass, flowers, fruits, etc.. This rule was laid down in order not to offend the people who regarded plants as having life.

When a monk is offered fresh fruits, bean sprouts, tuber or any such plant parts with latent life, the lay donor should remove the seeds or symbolically 'make it allowable' by cutting with knife, damaging with fingernail or fire, unless the monk can easily remove them.

The tenth and eleventh rules prohibit a monk from engaging in agriculture, making him dependent on lay people for support. This also implies that lay people should help maintain the monastery, i.e. cut the grass or bushes, plant or remove trees where necessary, etc..

Rules 37 and 38: Eating food at the proper time. The proper time for a monk to eat is during the period after dawn¹⁰ up to the time the sun reaches the highest elevation, often called 'noon' but in Malaysia and Singapore it is actually about 1.15 p.m..

During this time a monk may receive his food which has then to be consumed within this period. He is not allowed to store the unfinished food for the next day unless during a famine. One not fully ordained may do so.

A monk is allowed to consume the following classes of medicinal food at any time:

(i) Life-time allowances: Pharmaceutical medicines, vitamin pills, medicinal fruits (e.g. nutmeg, olive), medicinal leaves (herbs), medicinal roots (e.g. ginseng, ginger), salt, vegetable

¹⁰ According to the Commentaries, this is when the eastern horizon starts to be bright.

extract (e.g. marmite), miso (soya bean paste), cocoa, coffee, tea.

There are some slight differences between different Buddhist countries as to what is allowable. A monk may keep these medicinal foods throughout his life without the necessity of it being re-offered.

(ii) The five medicines: Refer to Nissaggiya-Pacittiya, rule 23.

(iii) Strained fruit juices, including sugar cane juice. If a monk is unwell he is also allowed to drink strained rice broth, strained bean broth, and clear meat broth.

Rule 40: forbids a monk from consuming food which has not been offered. Thus it is a traditional requirement for food to be formally handed by a donor into a monk's hand or into his bowl.

Rules 44 and 45: forbid a monk to be seated alone with a woman in a screened (enclosed) or private place -- similar to the aniyata rules.

Rules 48 – 50: forbid a monk to go to see a military establishment, a battle, a battle array or regimental review, without some valid reason, e.g. when giving a Dhamma talk, visiting a sick relation, etc..

Rule 51: disallows drinking of alcohol, i.e. if the colour, smell or taste of alcohol is apparent. In line with this rule, drugs that cause heedlessness and addiction are similarly prohibited.

Rule 65: A candidate for higher ordination as a monk has to be at least twenty years old.

Nowadays there appears to be no fixed lower age limit for admission as a samanera (it is supposed to be 15 years) so long as the boy can wash, feed and take care of himself. There also appears to be no higher age limit for admission, so long as the candidate is not feeble with age and fulfills the other normal requirements.

Rule 67: forbids a monk from going on a journey (out of town) with a woman by prior arrangement, unless there are dangers.

Rules 74 and 75: forbids a monk from resorting to violence against another monk.

Rule 84: A monk is not supposed to pick up a mislaid or lost valuable even for safekeeping, unless it is within the monastery grounds or in a house where the monk is visiting.

Rule 87: forbids high and broad furniture (beds, couches, chairs, etc.) for a monk as they were then regarded as luxurious and inappropriate for a monk.

There are certain occasions when a monk may use a high and broad chair in a monastery, e.g. when speaking on Dhamma. Also a monk may sit on high and broad furniture when visiting a lay person's home.

Rule 88: forbids furniture upholstered with cotton, as they were considered too luxurious for a monk. The point of this rule is that monks should not use extravagant and ostentatious furniture, but cotton does not fit into this category nowadays.

Patidesaniya

These are four rules that entail confession.

Rule 4: If monks live in a remote forest area where there have been reports of robberies and assaults on travelers, the monks are required to inform lay people intending to visit them of the danger.

Sekhiya

There are seventy five Sekhiya or Rules of Training, which are mainly about deportment of a monk.

Rules 57 to 72: Teaching Dhamma to lay people. If a lay person is not respectful, a monk is not supposed to teach Dhamma to him/her, e.g. the lay person sits on a higher seat, lies down, or wears a hat.

Adhikarana-samatha

These are seven rules for settlement of legal processes that concern monks only.

MISCELLANEOUS

Other information useful to lay people:

Paying Respect

When one enters a monastery, it is customary to pay respect to the Buddha image first, if any, and then to the community of monks. When leaving, one pays respect to the monks, and

then to the Buddha image. When one pays respect to the monks, it is sufficient to offer that respect to the Abbot alone, as representing the community of monks.

In the monastery, paying respect normally means making the five-point prostration¹¹ three times. In open public places, it is sufficient to 'anjali,' i.e. joining the palms together in respect.

Food

The eating of meat is permitted provided the monk does not (i) see, (ii) hear, or (iii) suspect, that the animal was specifically killed for himself. The Buddha refused a request to lay down a rule that monks should be vegetarians.¹² Pacittiya rule 39 forbids a monk from asking for finer foods unless for valid health reasons, or the donor is a relation, or an invitation has been made. On the other hand, a monk is advised by the Buddha to leave a residence where the nourishment is inadequate.

Unless during a famine, a monk is not allowed to cook, although reheating is permissible. A samanera, however, is allowed to cook.

A monk is not allowed to eat together, from the same tray or bowl of food, with anyone else except monk(s) practising the same Dhamma-Vinaya.

Wrong Livelihood

A monk is not allowed to practise palmistry and fortune-telling; to predict the weather, disturbances, pestilence; to interpret signs and omens; to determine whether the site for a

¹¹ Bow onto the floor with the forehead, two palms, and two elbows touching the ground.

¹² Cullavagga, Chapter 7.

proposed building is lucky or not; to practise witch-craft; to practise as a physician, except to close associates and relations.

A more detailed list is given in a few suttas of the Digha Nikaya, e.g. Samannaphala Sutta and Ambattha Sutta.

Forms of Address

Different countries have different ways of addressing a monk, but during the Buddha's time monks were generally addressed as Bhante, meaning 'Venerable Sir', by lay people. The Buddha addressed a monk as Bhikkhu, but it is impolite for a lay person to address a monk by this word.

An eight-precept or ten-precept 'nun' can be addressed as sister¹³, and a ten-precept male novice can be addressed as samanera¹⁴ by lay people.

Dressing Etiquette

One should be dressed appropriately when entering a monastery. Dress should not be revealing or provocative.

Communion

The Buddha instructed his monk disciples not to have communion with monks who follow a different Dhamma-Vinaya. Having communion means to eat together from the same tray or bowl of food, sleep together under the same roof, recite the Patimokkha together, or do formal acts of the Sangha (sanghakamma) together.

Theravada and Mahayana monks follow different Dhamma-Vinaya since their books, especially the Dhamma

¹³ 'Maechee' in the Thai tradition.

¹⁴ 'Samanen' or 'nen' in the Thai tradition.

books (i.e. the Suttas or discourses), are different and often even contradictory. Their practice, especially of the Vinaya, is generally quite different as well.

Seniority

The seniority of a monk is counted by the number of 'vassas' (rains seasons) he has observed. The seating arrangement of monks goes according to their seniority, with the senior monks on the right side.

When a monk disrobes he loses all his 'vassas.' Whether he can re-ordain depends on whether a qualified preceptor is willing to ordain him. When a monk re-ordains in another tradition, e.g. Mahayana to Theravada, or even Theravada to Theravada, he loses all his previous 'vassas' because he has to disrobe in order to re-ordain.

Dependence

In the Mahavagga, Chapter 1, it is said that a new monk (less than five vassas) has to live on dependence (nissaya) with an experienced competent senior monk (at least ten vassas) so that he can train under this teacher. Exceptions are permitted when the new monk wishes to strive alone in the forest and is not receiving guidance; when he is ill and is not receiving guidance; when he is tending a sick monk and is not receiving guidance; when he is going along a high-road and is not receiving guidance. However, if the monk continues to be inexperienced, incompetent, he will be required to live in dependence all his life.

In the Mahavagga, Chapter 2, it is said that an inexperienced ignorant monk should not be allowed to travel to distant places without being accompanied by an experienced competent monk. It is also implied that an experienced competent monk is basically one learned in the

Dhamma-Vinaya, wise, conscientious, scrupulous, desirous of training, one to whom the tradition has been handed down.

CONCLUSION

In AN 3.129 the Buddha said: “Monks, there are these three things which shine forth for all to see, which are not hidden. What three? The disc of the moon shines for all to see; it is not hidden. The disc of the sun does likewise. The Dhamma-Vinaya of a Tathagata shines for all to see; it is not hidden.”

However in the Vinaya Pitaka (Mahavagga, Chapter 2), monks are not allowed to recite the monks' precepts (Patimokkha) before lay people. This probably shows that lay people are not encouraged to know too much of the monks' precepts since they can become over-critical of monks, and that is unwholesome kamma.

In AN 3.85, it is stated that even Ariyans can make transgressions of the minor precepts, and in DN 16 the Buddha allowed the abolishment of minor precepts although they were not properly defined.

In AN 6.54, the Buddha said that one digs a great pit for oneself when one reviles a Buddhist monk who possesses right view. That being so, lay people should be careful not to be too critical of monks when their understanding of the Dhamma-Vinaya is neither comprehensive nor profound.

In MN 142, the Buddha said that a gift to an immoral ordinary person may be expected to repay a thousandfold. A gift to a virtuous ordinary person may be expected to repay a hundred thousandfold. A gift to an external-sect ascetic who is free from lust for sensual pleasures (i.e. one who has attained jhana, a state of mental brightness) may be expected

to repay a hundred thousand times a hundred thousandfold. A gift to an Ariyan is incalculable, immeasurable.

Then the Buddha said, "In future times, Ananda, there will be members of the clan (i.e. monks) who are 'yellow-necks', immoral, of evil character. People will give gifts to those immoral persons for the sake of the Sangha. Even then, I say, an offering made to the Sangha is incalculable, immeasurable. And I say that in no way does a gift to a person individually ever have greater fruit than an offering made to the Sangha."

That being the case, lay people are encouraged to support monks or monasteries for the sake of the Sangha, rather than supporting only a few choice monks. Whenever they can, lay people should assist monks to uphold their precepts, e.g. by providing transport for the monks; helping to upkeep the monastery grounds; asking what needs to be done for the monastery; etc..

If they should see a monk not practising the Vinaya well, they can give constructive criticism to the monk, or discuss this with him, rather than bad-mouth him behind his back. It is not easy for a monk to find happiness in the robe (SN 38.16). Lay people should give not only material support to a monk but also moral support and encouragement for him to continue to practise the holy life "as pure and polished as a conch shell."



Ciram Titthatu Saddhammo