Explanation of the Eight Precepts

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 18:14

Some people have been asking us to speak a bit or clarify the idea of the eight precepts and what they are. I know we just mentioned it briefly in the opening of the retreat, and some of you have been sitting and practicing with eight precepts, and we really had meant to speak about it more formally. Time just slipped by, so I'm glad a few people asked. I want to describe what the other three precepts are, share a little bit about some ways it might be helpful if you're interested, and then formally offer eight precepts if there's anyone who wants to take them.

The five lay precepts that we took at the beginning of this retreat come from the five precepts that are classically taught by the Buddha and practiced in Asian Buddhist countries, with one exception. If you're a lay person just living your life and you come to a monastery, you take the five precepts. The fifth precept is actually not brahmacharya—it's not celibacy in one's daily life. The fifth precept is really refraining from sexual misconduct. So if you hear references to the five precepts, know that the third precept addresses sexual misconduct, not brahmacharya.

When we talk about eight precepts, in Asia people will often come to the monasteries or nunneries once a week on the moon days—the quarter moon days, the full moon and new moon days—sort of like in this country one might go to synagogue or church. Often on those days, they take the eight precepts for the day. When you take eight precepts, the third precept becomes brahmacharya, celibacy. We borrow that even when we do five precepts for a retreat because it's so essential to stay with ourselves.

The other three precepts are often something that people in Asia will come and take for the day, so just know it's not a lifetime commitment you're making if you're a lay person. But you also need to make some commitment rather than going back and forth every day—should I, shouldn't I—especially with the big one, which of course is not eating after noon.

Let me go through what they are. The sixth precept is to refrain from eating at the wrong times. Classically, that means after the noon meal we don't eat solid food. The purpose of all of these is to cultivate sense restraint, to cultivate simplicity. It's not about suffering. It's about actually opening up a space of simplicity, of more time and energy for practice, of less complication. It's really worth exploring if you're interested, to see for yourself. It's not that eating is bad somehow, obviously. But two meals a day for most people with normal health is plenty. In fact, often ordained sangha live on one meal a day. I lived like that for quite a while when I was a nun, and it's fine. Especially if you're in intensive practice, we really don't need as much food.

I often find on eight precepts there's a lightness in the evening. I get tired in the evening—I don't have

good night energy—but not eating in the evening actually helps me stay more awake. You have to explore for yourself. Also, there's so much more time. All that energy going into the dining room, even if you're just going to have tea, can be a distraction. So you can just stay out of there and practice. It's so much more simple, so much more pleasant.

What is allowed in the evenings is interesting. There's a range in Buddhist countries and in the Theravada ordained sanghas of what is actually permitted. In Burma, which seems to be the most strict, what's allowed is clear juice without pulp, fruit juice, clear broth or herbal tea—not caffeinated drinks or soda—sugar, honey, molasses, and oil. So you could have herbal tea with honey, or sometimes the kitchen would serve a clear fruit juice. Sometimes in Burma they'll serve little pieces of palm sugar or date sugar. Personally, if I eat that at five in the evening, I'm done for the day, but some people find it helpful. Little hard candies are also permitted. Some places in Thailand—the monks in the Amaravati tradition, up until recently, could eat cheese and chocolate, the cheese allowance due to some translation of a particular word in Pali. But we're not going to offer that here.

Some places in Thailand where I've practiced, soy milk or regular milk was allowed. Other places, absolutely not. In Burma, that would definitely not be acceptable. So just to give you a sense, there's a range of interpretation. Here, it may be that once in a while soy milk is served—I'm not sure what the kitchen will do. And you can really choose your own interpretation. Don't beat yourself up about it, but choose your own and realize that with all of these precepts and guidelines, the guidelines are pointers back to our own intention, our own sincerity of practice, and really looking at what comes up. They're not meant as punishments, or another way to feel bad about yourself. Renunciation is not meant to be a suffering experience. It actually opens up a place of freedom in our energy, in our heart.

The seventh precept is one that, for the most part, you're already observing, which is refraining from entertainment—dancing, singing, card playing, going to shows. Hopefully that part isn't too hard. You never really know what's going on out there, but we hear stories. Not yet about this retreat, but it gets back to us sooner or later.

The other part, though, can be interesting, which is refraining from beautification, adornment, perfumes and such. It's about not wearing jewelry, not wearing things that smell good, which already we're not doing here, hopefully. It doesn't mean you don't keep yourself clean or take care of your body, of course. So mostly that's not a hard one, but sometimes on retreat it can bring up interesting things that we notice about ourselves.

Without judgment, but just to see the suffering in this—just wanting to look a little better. Seeing that you spend a little extra time fixing your hair. Or your beard, if you're a guy—trimming your beard very neatly. That's just the same thing. Or wearing earrings or little jewelry. Or you get dressed in the morning and your sweatshirt doesn't quite match your sweatpants, so you change it. This is stuff no one else is going to notice, but you notice. And just notice the energy that's going into that. It's suffering.

So with taking the seventh precept, we just let go of that needing to look good, trying to adorn our bodies, and notice what comes from that.

The eighth precept is to refrain from lying on high or luxurious beds. That's basically taken care of here, though compared to a few years ago, the beds here are high and luxurious. If you used to come and sleep on those dreadful twenty-five-year-old foam pads that used to be here, that was something else.

But this precept could also include not luxuriating in bed. The bell rings, or it doesn't ring, and you wake up wide awake, and there's that thought: "But the bell didn't ring yet, there's twenty-five more minutes." And you lie there, really wide awake, and you're just kind of... ahh. Notice what that's feeding in the mind stream. It's feeding desire, wanting to luxuriate more. It feeds a kind of dullness. I'm speaking from experience. When you finally get up, it's like, ugh.

When you wake up and get up right away, it's just a moment. You get up and you're much more present, more there. That's feeding virya, feeding the energy that Rebecca spoke about last night.

So really, wise attention is seeing what we're feeding with our attention in the moment. What are we starving? When we luxuriate in bed, what are we starving? Virya. We're feeding luxuriation. When we get up the moment we wake up, we're feeding virya. We're starving laziness and torpor.

Exploring that is really what these precepts are meant to do—bring us back to look at what's helpful for waking up in our experience.

As I mentioned, in Asia often people will come, take the precepts for one day, maybe just that day—not even that night—then go home. When you're done with it, you return to the five precepts.

No blame, no shame, no problem. So here, if you have been practicing the eight precepts and you feel it's enough, you can simply take the five precepts the next morning—no problem at all. Or if you want to experiment with the eight precepts, it doesn't mean you have to commit to them for the entire retreat.

But I would suggest that if you want to experiment, do pick a defined period—perhaps a week—so that you're not in that place I started to describe earlier, where every evening at five o'clock you're caught in "Should I? Shouldn't I? Should I? Shouldn't I?" That is really dukkha, and quite unnecessary. You're just feeding doubt and wanting and judgment. Simply say, "I'm going to do it for a week and see what happens." That's the only way we really discover, really explore.

If it doesn't feel appropriate for you, it can become—in working with balanced effort—a kind of pushing that isn't helpful. Or if your intention in taking the eight precepts is because you feel you're so bad and rotten that you need to punish yourself... no. That's not a good reason. That's not a helpful motivation. So explore your intentions, and then just see how it goes.

Most retreats in Asia are conducted under the eight precepts. If you go to sit with one of the Sayadaws or visit any wat in Thailand, it's assumed that you are practicing under eight precepts. So it's quite a common

thing.

There are people for whom, medically, not eating in the evening simply doesn't work. If you have hypoglycemia or something similar, you just need a little something. If that's the case, you can still take the other two precepts, and for medical reasons it's accepted that you can eat a little something in the evening.

So have a good day.

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