

Uposatha: the hardcore Buy Nothing Day

The five precepts

Buddhism is both a philosophy and a practice. Therefore, intellectual understanding of the Dharma is incomplete without experiential knowledge. The opposite is equally as true. The person possessed of bare intellectual concepts becomes like a backseat driver – ever critical of others and deluded as to her own accomplishment. Conversely, she who practices without a firm intellectual understanding of principles is like a driver who knows nothing of the rules of the road – a danger to herself and others.

The five precepts are guidelines for everyday behaviour developed by the historical Buddha through observation of what kind of restraint, in general, is conducive to liberation from suffering. As such their clout stems not from any authority, human or otherwise, but from observable principles of cause and effect in the world. They are the bread and butter of the Buddhist community and are as follows:

1. *Panatipata veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami*

I undertake the precept to refrain from destroying living creatures.

2. *Adinnadana veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami*

I undertake the precept to refrain from taking that which is not given.

3. *Kamesu micchacara veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami*

I undertake the precept to refrain from sexual misconduct.

4. *Musavada veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami*

I undertake the precept to refrain from incorrect speech.

5. *Suramerayamajja pamadatthana veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami*

I undertake the precept to refrain from intoxicating drinks and drugs which lead to carelessness.

There are many layers of meaning contained within these formulations. As one strives to be true to the precepts, the experience naturally leads to deeper intellectual insight. And, of course, this intellectual insight conduces to better practice. Thus experience and intellect complement each other like the two arms of a man pulling in a rope.

Uposatha

In addition to the five precepts lay Buddhist may elect to observe the eight precepts of the monthly Uposatha, otherwise known as the “lay fast”. These precepts are identical to the five precepts plus an additional three – excepting that the third precept becomes an undertaking to refrain from *all forms* of sexual activity. Here are the last three:

6. *Vikalabhojana veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami*

I undertake the precept to refrain from eating at the forbidden time (i.e., after noon).

7. *Nacca-gita-vadita-visukkadassana mala-gandha-vilepana-dharana-mandana-vibhusanathana veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami*

I undertake the precept to refrain from dancing, singing, music, going to see entertainments, wearing garlands, using perfumes, and beautifying the body with cosmetics.

8. *Uccasayana-mahasayana veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami*

I undertake the precept to refrain from lying on a high or luxurious sleeping place.

Of the eight, the last seems to be the least important. In fact, in *Hoofprint of the Ox*¹ Master Sheng Yen omits it altogether (and splits number seven into two to make up for the omission). For more on the eight precepts visit:

<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/ptf/atthasila.html>.

The days on which Uposatha is observed varies according to each tradition. Basically though, Uposatha observance falls on the two days of the full moon, dark moon and half moon, making for six days per lunar month. But following the movements of the moon in a society governed by a solar calendar is inconvenient. Therefore, Uposatha, for our purposes will be on the 8th, 14th, 15th, 23rd, 29th and 30th of each month, except for February when the last two dates are the 27th and 28th.

No doubt, choosing to take this up would cause serious disruptions to the lifestyle of the faster. Nonetheless, we would like to encourage all to take up the challenge. The disruptions are necessary and the very point of the exercise. But everyone has to decide for themselves to what degree they want to take up the observance. The degree can be increased over time. One might, for example, start with only two days a month and increase this by one extra day per month until the full six are a normal part of your schedule.

A final twist

Buy Nothing Day is an annual event started in the United Kingdom that asks people to literally buy nothing for a day so that they can become more conscious of how unnecessary, futile and destructive most of our consumer habits are. Uposatha can be thought of as a Buy Nothing Day for the hardcore social activist looking to be mindful of more than just consumer habits.

It has always surprised me that Buy Nothing Day does not encourage people to donate whatever money they save as a consequence of the non-activity to a charitable cause. Relating this back to Uposatha, the charitable cause is none other than DDM Sydney – a very cash poor organisation indeed.

¹ 2001, Oxford University Press, p56

This twist, however, should not turn Uposatha observance into a fundraising machine. The point, really, is to sharpen up our practice. But if a few extra shekles happen to go into the modest coffers of DDM as a side-effect, blessing can only heap upon blessing. DDM Sydney will employ any money donated as a result of Uposatha observance to the publication of Chan Buddhist commentaries by Master Sheng Yen. In this way our material generosity will be transformed into Dharma generosity, assisting those who are ready to deepen their understanding of Chan.

Donation Methods

Direct Deposit

It would be most convenient administratively if Uposatha donations are made direct to the DDM bank account. This can be done electronically (internet or phone) or in person. When making your donation, register it as “Uposatha Donation” and record the details of transaction if you want a receipt.

The DDM Sydney account details are below:

Account Name: Dharma Drum Mountain Buddhist Association

BSB: 082 024

Account Number: 024 561178191

Cheque

Alternatively, make out a cheque to “Dharma Drum Mountain Buddhist Association” and, with a note saying what the cheque is for, send it to

DDM Sydney

PO Box 5001

South Turramurra 2074

Best wishes to everyone and good luck to those who choose to take this very worthy activity up. Strive on for the benefit of all sentient beings.