

Uposatha

The Buddha encouraged householders to dedicate certain days, known as Uposatha days, to deepening commitment to dharma practice. Uposatha days occur four times each month, roughly a week apart, in conjunction with the lunar calendar (full moon, half moon, etc.). On Uposatha days householders practice meditation, listen to the dharma and observe the eight precepts.

The eight precepts include guidelines for ethical conduct and for practicing renunciation.

The eight precepts:

- 1-To refrain from taking the life of any living creature.
- 2-To refrain from stealing.
- 3-To refrain from sexual activity.
- 4-To refrain from harmful speech.
- 5-To refrain from consuming intoxicants that cause heedlessness.
- 6-To refrain from eating outside the time (12pm).
- 7-To refrain from dancing, singing, music, going to see entertainments, wearing garlands, using perfumes, and beautifying the body with cosmetics.
- 8-To refrain from lying on a high or luxurious sleeping place.

In our dharma community many students observe the eight precepts on Uposatha days. It's a good way, students find, to cultivate renunciation.

On Uposatha days students practice renunciation together. It's one reason why it's an effective practice. Practicing renunciation is often difficult. We often experience resistance. But if we share the practice with each other, support each other, it's not quite as difficult.

The fact is, it's nearly impossible to maintain a strong dharma practice without support. It's especially difficult to practice renunciation without the support of teachers and dharma friends. Most students find that when they observe the eight precepts together, they're more able to stay with the practice. They're more able to practice skillfully, with an open heart. They find, in fact, that it's joyful when they do it with others. It's joyful to go through it together.

Whether or not you follow the eight precepts on Uposatha days, the precepts can serve as a template for practicing renunciation. In delineating the eight precepts, the Buddha specifies sense pleasures that, when we over-indulge, become problematic. The sense pleasures he includes are those you might think about subtracting, to some extent, as you cultivate renunciation.

You'll note that the precepts regarding killing, stealing and taking intoxicants are identical to their counterparts in the five precepts. These precepts relate to practicing ethical conduct.

The precept pertaining to sexual conduct, you'll note, is different. On Uposatha days, observing the eight precepts, we refrain from all sexual activity. The precept speaks to the strong effect that sex can have on our dharma practice and our lives. As dharma students we seek to establish a skillful relationship to sex. This doesn't mean we don't enjoy sex. It means that we refrain from sexual activity when it's unhealthy, unskillful, when it leads to suffering. Sex, as we all know, is an extremely powerful force. If we engage in sexual activity in an unskillful manner, the results, invariably, will be disruptive, damaging, painful. Think about people whose lives have fallen into disarray, whose careers have been destroyed, because they weren't able to

restrain their desire for this potent sense pleasure. We hear about it all the time. We've seen the President of the United States put his presidency in jeopardy because he wasn't able to subtract certain sexual activities.

If you're frequently knocked off-balance by your desire for sex, if your sexual conduct is unskillful, if it causes suffering for yourself or for others, it will be important to practice renunciation in this area.

(It's important to remember that if we're engaging in harmful, self-destructive behavior with regard to any of the sense pleasures, we may very well need to seek professional help, the support of a twelve-step program, etc. Dharma practice doesn't provide all the answers to all of our problems. More severe difficulties surrounding food, sex and sleep are often symptoms of deeper psychological issues, including unresolved trauma; in such instances it's essential to elicit the help of a skilled professional.)

The sixth, seventh and eighth precepts pertain to the practice of renunciation with regard to food, entertainment and sleep. These are sense pleasures we might want to think about subtracting, to some degree.

Food is a sense pleasure that many people partake of in an unskillful manner. Some dharma students, in considering how to practice renunciation, will want to look closely at their relationship to food.

Reflecting on how we might practice renunciation in terms of food, the key question is: How much do we need? This is the key question when it comes to many sense pleasures. How much do we need? We need to eat. We need food to sustain us, to provide the strength and energy we need to meet our daily tasks and practice the dharma. But how much do we need?

In cultivating renunciation, we ascertain what we need in order to nourish ourselves, maintain our health, and, in turn, we subtract what we don't need. Of course, we probably won't ever want to subtract everything we don't need. For most of us, there's nothing wrong with a nice piece of apple pie with a scoop of ice cream every now and then. As we practice renunciation, we don't deprive ourselves. We don't reject all sense pleasure. We don't put ourselves in a painful, resentful position. We moderate our intake.

Monks in the Theravada tradition live simply, relying on basic requisites, eating food put in their bowls by householders, never eating after twelve noon, wearing plain robes, living in modest structures. As householders navigating the modern world, we have different needs. We need suits and ties, dresses and skirts. We need cars. We need the internet. We need, probably, to go to the movies every once in awhile. We need music. We need sex, physical contact. We need to go to a baseball game every now and then. As householders, we've chosen to live a life in which we consume certain sense pleasures, in which we acquire more than the basic requisites, in which we possess a certain amount of stuff. But how much do we need? Again, that's the question.

How much stuff do we need? Do we need as much stuff as we've got? Most of us have a lot of stuff. How much of it do we need? How much clothing? Do we need so many pairs of shoes? Do we need three leather jackets?

In classes, when we discuss our habits with regard to acquiring sense pleasure, students often talk about the manner in which they shop, the tendency they have to spend a lot of time looking at stuff they might possibly buy, the tendency they have to buy lots of stuff. Nowadays the opportunities to shop have increased exponentially, thanks to the phenomenon of online

shopping. We can sit in front of a computer, touch a few keys, click a few icons, and, in moments, buy a terrific amount of stuff. But how much do we need?

With regard to sleep, the question is the same: How much do we need? In observing the eight precepts, we “refrain from lying on a high and luxurious sleeping place.” In monasteries monks, nuns and lay people sleep on the floor, perhaps in a sleeping bag or on a mat. Sleeping on the floor, we’re less likely to succumb to the sense pleasure that derives from sleep; we’re less likely to stay in bed.

How does this translate to the day-to-day experience of a householder? As somebody who tends to over-indulge in sleep, this is a subject of which I have much firsthand knowledge. Again, it’s about developing a skillful relationship to the sense pleasure. In cultivating renunciation with regard to sleep, we make sure to get enough sleep, but not too much. Sleep, for many, is a potent sense pleasure. Staying in bed buried beneath the sheets and blankets, lingering in a warm cocoon. It’s another means of getting lost in sense pleasure. It’s another means of drowning ourselves.

Over-sleeping, we squander large pieces of time, time that might be well spent, attending to meaningful areas of our lives, practicing the dharma. Too much sleep dulls the mind. It’s difficult, in fact, to practice meditation if we spend too much time under the covers, embedded in a world of slumber.

Lastly, we come to the precept regarding “entertainments.” Most of us shouldn’t have any problem identifying areas, with regard to entertainment forms, where we might benefit from reducing the amount of sense pleasure we receive.

On Uposatha days, practitioners refrain from partaking in all forms of entertainment. As the precept stipulates, they “refrain from dancing, singing, music, going to see entertainments.”

More than 2,500 years ago, long before the advent of cable TV, the Buddha realized it was important to practice renunciation of the sense pleasures we acquire through entertainment sources. We can only imagine what he'd think if he were around today. In recent years, of course, there's been an explosion of entertainment modalities. The "entertainments" provide constantly flowing, forever overflowing fountains of sense pleasure. As a culture, we indulge hungrily. We spend tremendous amounts of time feeding on the visual images, sounds, ideas, opinions, stories that these entertainment forms offer. We spend countless hours watching television, viewing sporting events, listening to music, surfing the internet, etc. We're mesmerized by the non-stop outpouring of information supplied by the internet, cable TV, the so-called 24 hour news cycle. We're fixed, as though surgically attached, to the laptop, cell phone, smart phone, portable listening device. In the last thirty years there's been a staggering expansion of vehicles that provide entertainment and information. When I graduated college in 1977, you played records on a turntable. If you wanted to see a movie, you had to go to the theater. Since then, numerous entertainment-based technologies have been introduced, the VCR, DVD, CD player, portable listening device, personal computer, laptop, tablet computer, internet, email, cell phone, smart phone (note: since I began writing this book, I've had to add items to this list).

When I was a kid living in the suburbs of New York City, there were seven TV channels. Now many households own a cable TV set up that boasts as many as 150 channels. When I was growing up, if you were watching television and wanted to change the channel, you had to get off the couch, go to the TV, switch the dial; now all you have to do is push a button on the remote control. There are more opportunities to acquire sense pleasure from entertainment sources and we're able to receive these sense pleasures much more quickly, in many cases

almost instantly. Sense experience arrives with startling velocity. High-speed internet connections allow us to absorb new images in seconds. Everything is available, in a moment, with a click.

More and faster. In our culture, these are the qualities deemed most critical.

All the moments of our lives, it seems, are clogged with experience. The sense doors are jammed, like the doors to the Lexington Avenue subway during the height of rush hour. In New York City, citizens are often seen walking along the sidewalk completely wired, talking on a cell phone, earplugs stuffed in their ears. Gone are the days of a reflective stroll along the city boulevards.

Every day the desire grows. The desire for more sense pleasure, more rapid access to sense pleasure. It just keeps growing. That's how desire operates. We want more and we want it faster.

As the Buddha put it:

Not even if it rained gold coins
would we have our fill
of sensual pleasures.

(Dhp. 186)

All things considered, it's necessary that dharma students, seeking true happiness, develop the quality of renunciation. We have to learn to skillfully subtract sense pleasure. If we consistently over-indulge in sense pleasure we're not going to be able to move ahead along the

Buddha's path. It's a challenging task, developing renunciation in today's world. But we can learn the skill.

As we travel along the path, we'll gradually reduce our intake of various sense pleasures, including food, entertainment and sleep. Gradually, we'll make added effort to practice renunciation. We'll make this effort because we've come to understand the drawbacks of sense pleasure and the benefits in practicing renunciation.

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