

## Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras – Foundation Year Part 2: Exploring Buddhist Practice – The Five Precepts

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### *Week 4: The Third Precept – from Craving to Contentment*

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*Positive form: With stillness, simplicity, and contentment, I purify my body.*

*Negative form: I undertake the training principle of refraining from sexual misconduct.*

*Pāli: Kāmesu micchācāra veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.*

### **Introduction – sex is just one craving**

This guideline is about freeing ourselves from the addictions and cravings that keep us from experiencing peace of mind – it is not about taking a puritanical view of sex. In the traditional negative form of the precept, sex is singled out as probably the most powerful human craving, and therefore potentially the greatest obstacle to contentment. But really we are being advised not to let any desire turn into the sort of neurotic craving that can keep our mind in a whirl – and sex here stands for all our desires. In the negative form of the precept, the idea of 'sexual misconduct' does not imply any moralistic attitude to particular forms of sexual activity, such as sex outside marriage, homosexuality, or masturbation. The sort of 'misconduct' the precept is advising us against is sexual behaviour that harms others, or ourselves.

### **Neurotic craving**

Practising this precept involves exercising some control over our desires and appetites, to help us experience 'stillness, simplicity and contentment.' Buddhism sees 'craving' as the enemy of contentment, but it does not see all desires as 'bad'. Many desires are healthy and necessary. When we are hungry, thirsty or cold, then our desires for food, water or warmth are all natural and positive. Our desires for friendship, community, beauty, creativity, and for a productive outlet for our energies, are also positive. Finally, we seem to have an inbuilt desire to fulfil our spiritual potential, and without this we would never grow and develop.

To do away with all desire would condemn us to a life of stagnation. So we need to distinguish between healthy desire, which is necessary for life and growth, and neurotic craving, which keeps us bound to a cycle of never-ending dissatisfaction. Neurotic craving could be defined as desire for something that cannot satisfy the need we are trying to satisfy. For example, if we overeat, we are not eating because our body needs nourishment. Perhaps we are looking for comfort in food because we lack affection or self-esteem. But food can never give us either of these – in fact, overeating will make it more difficult for us to get what we really need.

## **Becoming creative**

Unfortunately a lot of our desire is neurotic. Until we begin to manifest more of our spiritual potential we will experience a sense that something is missing in our lives. Usually we try to satisfy this sense of inner dissatisfaction by grasping at things in the outer world, like pleasures and possessions. But these can only distract us temporarily from our sense of inner need, just as comfort-eating can only distract us from our need for affection. This displaced neurotic desire is the force that drives the consumer society, and it also drives many people's lives. It puts us on an endless treadmill, chasing an imaginary carrot. But happiness does not come from catching the carrot – it can never be caught. Instead it comes from getting off the treadmill, and looking for fulfilment where it actually can be found.

For most of us this would mean a radical shift in the way we approach life, and we are not likely to make this shift all at once. But practising this precept gives us a way to start, by beginning to leave behind our more obvious patterns of addictive behaviour based on neurotic craving. This can be one of the main ways we practice becoming creative, rather than simply repeating old comfort-seeking behaviours that deepen our reactive patterns. So for example when we feel the urge to escape from our sense of dissatisfaction by taking refuge in our normal distractions – food, cigarettes, shopping, drink, drugs, sex, or whatever – instead of responding in an unconscious way we can remain conscious, exercise our freedom, and choose to do something different and creative. At first this will mean that we have to face up to some discomfort, because changing old patterns is uncomfortable. But in the longer term – and perhaps quite quickly – we are likely to experience more and more positive mental states, and a growing sense of freedom and power in our lives.

## **The dangers of distraction**

The ways we distract ourselves from our sense of inner dissatisfaction may not be 'bad' in themselves, but unless we keep them in their proper place, they can have at least three negative consequences. Firstly, if we orientate our life around them they stop us focusing our attention on what can really satisfy us, so that we waste our lives by constantly looking for fulfilment in the wrong place. Secondly these ways we distract ourselves often become addictive. The more we overeat, drink, smoke, take drugs, acquire property, shop, consume, masturbate, indulge in romantic fantasies, or whatever, the more difficult it becomes to disentangle ourselves from our habits and look for satisfaction in a different, more effective way. Thirdly, our addictive distractions often give rise to negative mental states, so that instead of helping us to be happy they actually separate us even further from the parts of ourselves that could give us real fulfilment. For example, when our desires are thwarted we may well feel anger or ill-will towards the people who stand between us and what we want. In fact our attempt to find happiness by consuming, owning or experiencing things in the outer world may cause a host of negative actions and mental states, including dishonesty, resentment, envy, and anxiety.

## **Sex**

In its traditional negative form this precept focuses particularly on sex, as the most powerful craving for many people. Buddhism does not see sex in itself as 'evil', but sex can be a powerful focus for our neurotic desire, so we need to bring our creativity and ethical sense into our sexual lives.

For the lay Buddhist the negative form of this precept was traditionally taken to mean that we should avoid adultery, rape, and abduction. This is not much help as a guideline in present-day society, so we need to go back to first principles. The principle we need to apply is obviously that we should avoid harming others or ourselves through our sexual behaviour.

### **Not harming others**

Our sexual desires are likely to harm others if we look for our own pleasure without taking other people into account. We should therefore try to see sexual partners as important in their own right, basing our relationships on mettā, and not exploiting others or treating them as sex objects. This would include not entering into unequal relationships where the partner has expectations we have no intention of fulfilling. We should also avoid causing pain to third parties for the sake of sex, for example by having sex with one member of a settled couple. In the present day, pornography too needs to be seen in the light of this precept.

### **Not harming ourselves**

Our sexual desires harm us if we allow them to turn into neurotic craving, or if they are so demanding that they stop us experiencing peace of mind. We need to manage our sex drive so that it does not dominate our experience or set our life agenda – if we let it, sex can control our whole existence. Managing our sex drive means not stoking up our sexual desires unnecessarily. This involves what is called 'guarding the gates of the senses' – controlling how we use our senses to reduce the amount of sexual stimulation we receive. We have a choice about where we put our attention, and if we constantly choose to focus on what we find sexually stimulating, then we will find peace of mind very difficult to achieve. Guarding the gates of the senses also involves watching how we use our mind, so that we don't use sexual fantasies as a way of distracting ourselves from our experience. (In Buddhism the mind is seen as the sixth sense, as it is another gateway through which stimuli can enter our awareness.)

Managing our sex drive in an ethical way involves neither glorifying sex as something sublime, nor demonising it as something evil, both of which give it a power it does not deserve. Our sex drive is part of our animal inheritance – neither spiritual nor demonic.

## **Abstinence**

Complete abstinence from sex has traditionally been seen as an important practice for monks, nuns, and other people seriously following the spiritual path. In the days before contraception this was partly for practical reasons. But celibacy is also an important practice in its own right. Freeing the mind from the constant disturbance caused by sexual desire is an enormous step towards contentment. Abstinence also makes energy available for other purposes, especially meditation. Because of this many Buddhists who are not normally celibate voluntarily refrain from sex for specific periods, perhaps for just a few weeks while on a retreat, perhaps for longer.

## **Stillness, simplicity, and contentment**

The aim of this precept is to help us to become happier. By freeing ourselves from neurotic desires and slavery to biological urges we create a space in which we can experience peace of mind and positive mental states. But in the twenty-first century world craving is not the only enemy of contentment. Our society encourages a fast, hurried pace of life, which leaves little space for more expansive mental states. Many of us work too many hours, at jobs we do mainly for the pay cheque, at a pace that depletes our energies and causes high levels of anxiety. So much of our lives can be spent either earning money or spending it that we don't have the energy to use our brief periods of rest creatively. 'Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.' And our over-active states of mind can become addictive, so that we find it difficult to switch off, and spend our precious leisure time giving ourselves even more input, doing things like watching TV or surfing the web.

## **Cultivating simplicity**

If we want peace of mind – what the precept calls stillness and contentment – then we need to see simplicity as a positive quality, and we need to cultivate it. We may need to make some decisions about our priorities, and to simplify our lives accordingly. We may need to see that having fewer things – and spending less time earning the money to buy them – can make our life richer rather than poorer. We may need to overcome the conditioning that tells us that simplicity equals poverty, and instead see it as beautiful and desirable. Simplicity in life, like simplicity in art, is an aspect of elegant good taste, because it gets rid of unnecessary clutter, and opens up a sense of space, light, and freedom.

Cultivating stillness, simplicity and contentment does not mean that we should sit around doing nothing. We have energies, and we need to use them, or they will turn against us. But in our prosperous societies many of us could live more simply than we do, and this would allow us to spend less time working for purely economic reasons. This is in fact what many practising Buddhists choose to do, reducing the time spent on economic work, in order to spend more time on spiritual practice, altruistic activity, and creative pursuits, as well as making life more relaxed and spacious. For many people this sounds like an attractive idea,

but achieving it involves disentangling ourselves from the consumer society – which may not sound so attractive, and requires some determination and strength of character, because it often runs completely counter to the values of our present society.

### **Questions for reflection and discussion**

1. Do you agree that a lot of the desires that drive human activity are ‘neurotic’? If so, think of some examples.
2. “Happiness does not so much come from getting what we want, as from having fewer wants.” Do you agree? If so, what does this say about the approach to happiness offered by the consumer society?
3. What are some of your neurotic cravings and addictions (we all have them)?
4. How often do you think about sex? To what extent do you tend to seek out sense impressions that will increase your sexual desire, or on the other hand guard the gates of the senses to limit sex desire?
5. Do you see simplicity - in the sense of keeping what we own and consume down to what is necessary for a healthy life - as a positive or negative quality? How much scope do you have for simplifying your life?
6. Is your life too busy, or is it not busy enough? Either way, what could you do about it?

### **Suggested exercises**

1. Give yourself at least an hour alone to do absolutely nothing this week – preferably longer. Notice any underlying sense of boredom, anxiety or dissatisfaction. Notice what you want to do to escape any discomfort. Instead, sit with the discomfort for a while, then do something skilful, such as meditating or exercising.
2. Consider taking a personal precept related to this ethical guideline for a week, for example:
  - To give up some minor addiction for the week
  - To avoid television for the week
  - To simplify your life in some small way, like giving away a possession
  - To practice guarding the gates of the senses this week, avoiding sexual stimuli, or avoiding sense impressions that stoke up some other craving that is more relevant to your practice – desire for food might be an example.

3. Decide to go on retreat. Consult an Order member about which retreats might be appropriate, set aside at least a week, and make a reservation.