

Beginning of Precepts

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Good morning! Welcome to International Buddha Dharma Society to listen to today's Dharma talk. Today, we start a new subject, precept, '戒'. In Chinese, we often say 'precept' together with 'rule' as one word, '戒律'. Precept, in Sanskrit, is sila. Precept prevents people from doing evil things. Rule, in Sanskrit, is Vinaya. It means disciplines in a religion.

When Buddha Sakyamuni lived, to discipline the disciples and the mass, the Buddha made various precepts and rules which were normally set up after something happened. The buddha left Tripitaka and the twelve categories of teachings. Tripitaka includes Sutranta-Pitaka, Vinaya-Pitaka, Abhidharma-Pitaka. After the Buddha entered Nirvana, Upali recited the *Eighty Recitation of Vinaya* during a series of assemblies of collecting the Buddha's teachings for the first time. The *Eighty Recitation of Vinaya* is the basic of Vinaya-Pitaka. Later, due to different understanding, Vinaya-Pitaka was not exactly the same for different sects, which was also the reason for the original split of Buddhism.

We often say 'Precepts, Samadhi, Wisdom' in which precepts are the foundation and the supreme wisdom is the ultimate goal. In fact, all we need to cultivate is only the precepts. If we can hold the precepts well, samadhi will deepen naturally and wisdom will reveal itself. In the Volume VI of the Shurangama Sutra, it says, "Protecting the heart is the precept; holding the precepts grows samadhi; deep samadhi power sprouts wisdom; and these are called the three kinds of non-leaking cultivation."

Precepts are the roots of all good dharmas. In *the Sutra on the Buddha's Bequeathed Teachings*, the Buddha says, "All of you Bhikkhus! After my Nirvana, you should revere and honor the Pratimoksha. It is like finding a light in darkness, or like a poor person

obtaining a treasure. You should know that it is your great teacher, and is not different from my actual presence in the world. Those of you who uphold the pure precepts should not buy and then sell or trade. You should not covet fields or buildings, or keep servants or raise animals. You should stay far away from all kinds of agriculture and wealth as you would avoid a pit of fire.

You should not cut down grass or trees, plow fields or dig the earth. Nor may you compound medicines, prophesize good and evil, observe the constellations, cast horoscopes by the waxing and waning of the moon, or compute astrological fortunes. All of these activities are improper. Regulate yourselves by eating at the appropriate time and by living in purity.

You should not participate in worldly affairs or act as an envoy. Nor should you become involved with magical spells and elixirs of immortality, or with making connections with high ranking people, being affectionate towards them and condescending towards the lowly. With an upright mind and proper mindfulness, you should seek to cross over.

Do not conceal your faults or put on a special appearance to delude the multitudes. Know your limits and be content with the four kinds of offerings. When you receive offerings, do not store them up. This is a general explanation of the characteristics of upholding the precepts. The precepts are the root of proper freedom; therefore, they are called the Pratimoksha (lit. the root of freedom).

By relying on these precepts, you will give rise to all dhyana concentrations, and reach the wisdom of the cessation of suffering. For this reason, Bhikkhus, you should uphold the pure precepts and not allow them to be broken. If a person is able to uphold the pure precepts, he will, as a result, be able to have good dharmas. If one lacks the pure precepts, no good merit and virtue can arise.

Therefore, you should know that the precepts are the dwelling place for the foremost and secure merit and virtue.”

The School of Vinaya, one of Chinese Buddhist sects, is named for its emphasis on studying, propagating and holding precepts. Its founder was Dao Xuan in Tang Dynasty. And because Dao Xuan lived in Zhongnan Mountain, it's also called Zhongnan School of Vinaya, or Zhongnan Sect.

The main scriptures for the School of Vinaya are the four Vinaya scriptures and the five Abhidharma scriptures. After the Buddha entered Nirvana about one hundred years, there were five Buddhists who took different parts of the original Vinaya-Pitaka and generated their own Vinaya scriptures separately and formed five Vinaya scriptures. Four of the five were brought into China and they were Dharmagupta-vinaya, Mahisasaka-vinaya, Sarvastivada-vinaya and Mahasangha-vinaya. The four vinayas were translated in different time and each one had their own prevailing period.

According to Dharmagupta-vinaya, Shariputra once asked the Buddha, “What kind of Buddhas cultivate pure practices so that the Dharma can exist long in the world? What kind of Buddhas cultivate pure practices and the Dharma won't exist long in the world? Please expound to me Buddha.”

The Buddha told Shariputra, “Vipassi Buddha, Sikhi Buddha, Kakusandha Buddha, Kassapa Buddha cultivated pure practices and the Buddha Dharma existed long in the world. Vessabhu Buddha and Konagamana Buddha cultivated pure practices and the Buddha Dharma did not exist long. The reason was that Vessabhu Buddha and Konagamana Buddha did not widely expound Buddhist dharma, such as prose, verse, predictions, interjections, dharma spoken without request, causes and conditions, analogies, former events, stories of present lives, universalities, previously non-existent teachings, commentarial literature. Neither did they widely propagate the above twelve

categories, nor did they make precepts, nor did they explain precepts. So, the disciples became weary and the Dharma could not exist long in the world. While Vipassi Buddha, Sikhi Buddha, Kakusandha Buddha and Kassapa Buddha widely expounded dharmas, from prose to commentarial literature, and they also made precepts and explained precepts. When the disciples became weary, the Buddhas were aware and told them to remember this and not to remember that; to think about this and to leave alone that; to cut off this and to keep doing that. So Shariputra, when the Buddhas and the disciples lived, the Dharma was able to be spread; and after the Buddhas and the disciples passed away, the later Bhiksus would allow the Dharma to extinguish. Why? Because the Sutras and the Dharmas were still governing and instructing the disciples. It's like all kinds of flowers on the table Which are easy to be blown away by the wind because there is no string to thread them together.

At this time, Shariputra stood up, with his right shoulder uncovered, knelt upon his right knee, respectfully joined the palms of his hands and said to the Buddha, "Buddha, it's just the right time. Please make precepts and explain them for all the disciples so that they can diligently cultivate pure practices and the Dharma can long live in the world.

The Buddha told Shariputra, "Not now Shariputra. Buddha knows when is the right time. Shariputra, the Buddha did not set up rules for the disciples yet, why? It's because there has not anyone who has made mistakes due to worldly annoyances. Only when this happens, will I make precepts to cut off their worldly annoyances. Shariputra, Bhiksus do not have hindrance of annoyance yet because they are not famous yet and not known by many people and they have not heard too many dharmas and are not wealthy. If one day, the Bhiksus are famous far and wide and they have a great deal of property, they will have world annoyances and then it will be time to make precepts. Shariputra, wait and see. I know the right time."

So, in the first twelve years or so, the Buddha did not make precepts. It's also because the early disciples had deep and good root. After they heard the Buddha's teachings, they obtained the fruits right away. So, at the beginning, no precepts were needed to restrain the disciples because they were clean and pure. Later on, there was one disciple, 须提那, who left home to follow the Buddha after he heard the Buddha's teachings. One time, during a great famine, 须提那 went back to his home to get food for the Sangha. His parents and his wife seized the time and persuaded him to sleep with his wife again. After knowing what happened, the Buddha denounced him in public. And from then on, the Buddha started to expound precepts and gradually more and more precepts and rules were set up. This was to maintain the Sangha clean and solemn, to protect the disciples from contaminating their heart, which was beneficial for them to become enlightened.

After the Buddha rebuked 须提那, the Buddha gathered all the disciples, established precepts, declared ten benefits from holding precepts and said, "No killing, no stealing, no mis-conduct, no false speech, no wine-drinking, these are the basic great precepts. If somebody goes against these, he must drop out from the Sangha. If he cannot keep these precepts, he may resume secular life." The Buddha declared establishment of precepts, which was the beginning of precepts in the Proper Dharma.

After the Buddha made the precepts, there were still some disciples who acted against the Buddha's teachings. During a long period of time, the Buddha laid down Parajita (four grave offenses), Saṅghādisesā, Aniyatā, Nissaggiyapācittiya, Suddhapācittiya, Pāṭidesanīya, sekhiya, etc. There were about 350 precepts for Bhiksuni, four heavy and forty-eight light precepts for Bodhisattvas. For those lay Buddhists, they could either take the five precepts or the six heavy and twenty-eight light precepts to be Upasaka or Upasika.

Normally, the establishment of a precept had a certain background. There were many stories written in Parajita. Precepts maintained the cleanliness of the Sangha. Everybody lived according to the precepts, a life under rules. A Sangha symbolized democratic self-government. The Buddha then made the rule that every half month all the disciples would recite the precepts together and self-check their own behaviors to see if anything they had done was against the precepts. If there was, then they would repent accordingly.

Dharma appears according to conditions, so does precepts. There are 84000 dharmas and there are 84000 precepts too. There are precepts in sutra and dharma and precepts are ONE. The above mentioned various precepts, written in words, practiced by the body, could be named precepts of form. Sometimes, people might have the feeling that precepts are rigid and dogmatic, while the highest realm of precepts are formless, and are ONE with CHAN and TAO. The formless precepts act on the mind ground.

In the *Maha Ratna Kuta Sutra, Puming Bodhisattva Assembly*, when the Buddha was discussing 'what is holding precepts well' with Mahakasyapa, the Buddha said, "Kasyapa, for those who hold precepts well, there is no 'I' and 'what I'; there is no 'do' or 'don't do'; there is no 'what's done' or 'who did it'; there is no 'practice' or 'not practice'; there is no 'color' or 'name'; there is no 'form' or 'non-form'; there is no 'extinguishment' or 'non-extinguishment'; there is no 'take' or 'give'; there is no 'takable' or 'givable'; there is no 'living beings' or 'the names of living beings'; there is no 'mind' or 'name of the mind'; there is no 'in the world' or 'not in the world'; there is no 'dependence' or 'non-dependence'. For those who hold precepts well, they don't look high of themselves because of holding precepts; they don't look down other precepts; they don't think about or discriminate precepts; and this is the precept of what all saints hold. No leaking or binding, not attached to the three realms, they are free from all dependable dharmas." What the Buddha said here is just the supreme realm of Mahayana precepts, and also the supreme dharma door of the 'formless precepts' of CHAN sect.

Of course, 'formless precept' is just like the CHAN Dharma, may not be understandable by normal living being.

Because I am leaving to India to pay homage to the Buddha, there will not be Dharma talks for the next two weeks. Dharma talk will resume on Apr. 21st. On that week, we will talk about the Five Precepts and the Ten Goodness.

Thank you! Wish all of you free from all suffering and become a Buddha soon! See you next week!