



Monastic morality

From *Discovering Buddhism* by Dominique Side

In traditional Buddhist societies, Buddhists have the option to become a monk or a nun, and if they decide to take this step they follow a strict lifestyle. The guidelines for monastic life are found in the Vinaya scriptures, which are based on the advice that the Buddha gave to his own monks and nuns. Traditionally, the Vinaya texts are only read and studied by monastics, not by laypeople, so we only present some of the main points here.

Like laypeople, monastics take the Three Refuges and all Five Precepts. As soon as they ordain as a novice they take an additional five precepts:

- To abstain from food after midday
- To abstain from a luxurious bed (i.e., high off the floor – a sign of wealth)
- To abstain from entertainment (e.g., music, dancing, shows, TV)
- To abstain from personal adornments (e.g., jewellery, perfume)
- To abstain from handling gold or silver (i.e., money).

This means that, if they follow the Vinaya faithfully, Buddhist monastics do not eat after midday, but they are allowed to drink. One reason given for this rule is that if one over-eats, or eats before going to sleep, this makes the mind sleepy and is not conducive to meditation. Monastics take no alcohol at all. They avoid places of entertainment, partly because they waste precious time and partly because they can lead to sexual temptation. The sexual misconduct precept is interpreted as celibacy, so they take a vow to refrain from any type of sexual activity.

As we can see from the list above, some of the monastic rules are culture-bound, in other words they relate to the social conditions of ancient India and may be difficult to follow today. For example, in the Buddha's day money was not common and communities mostly traded by barter; and in village communities it was the custom to sleep at floor level and not in a bed on legs. As a result, a few monastic rules have been adapted so they apply to modern conditions.

A fully ordained monk in the Theravada tradition takes 227 vows altogether. They are found in the Vinaya. Some of these relate to the practicalities of everyday life in a community: taking care of sick monks, wearing soft shoes, not preaching to a woman alone. Others relate to genuinely moral actions. The rules are recited once a fortnight by the whole community at a ceremony called the *Upasatha*, and if any monk has infringed a rule he is expected to make a confession publicly to the community. Senior monks will give punishments according to rules that are laid down, and only in very serious cases can a monk be expelled from the monastery and asked to disrobe and become a layperson again. There are four actions that lead to



expulsion: sexual intercourse, serious theft, murder (or encouraging someone to commit suicide) and making false claims about having supernatural powers. Another group of less serious actions leads to temporary expulsion, while for lesser offences monks forfeit certain rights.

In Buddhism there is no equivalent to the ex-communication possible in Christianity, where certain actions lead to the culprit's being forced out of the religion altogether. A Buddhist monk can only be expelled from the monastic order, not from being a Buddhist practitioner, and he could continue following his religion as a householder or layman.

Women had inferior social and religious status in the Buddha's day, and the Buddha was in fact very radical in accepting women as monastics at all. As a result, however, nuns have more rules than monks and some of the additional rules reflect the fact that all monks, however young and new, had higher status than a nun. The nuns' rules may have been the only acceptable way of dealing with the social beliefs of the time, but they remain the same today. Nevertheless, many monastic communities have significantly improved conditions for nuns over recent years.

In general, Buddhist monastics do their best to follow all their vows and rules strictly, not only for their own spiritual training but also because they have a duty to provide an example to the wider community. If their discipline becomes lax then laypeople will no longer respect them and may withhold their material support, so the system has built-in safeguards against moral laziness and corruption.

