

Lay Householder Precepts and Monastic Precepts in Buddhism

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In *The Seven Stages of Purification and The Insight Knowledges* Venerable Mahathera Matara Sri Nanarama explains on page 5

“Male and female lay-devotees have five precepts as a permanent standard of virtue in their everyday life. If they are more enthusiastic, they can undertake and keep the ‘eight precepts with livelihood as the eighth’ or the ten lay precepts, or the eight precepts recommended as the special observance for Uposatha days.”

Dasa Sila (The Ten Precepts)

Dasa Sila (The Ten Precepts) are taken by novice *bhikkhus* [monks] and by lay nuns and lay people. Novice monks take the Ten Precepts as a group.

Giving The Ten Precepts

The Ten Precepts are only given by *bhikkhus*. In Sri Lanka lay nuns who have taken the Ten Precepts never give the Ten Precepts. In *Women under the Bo tree: Buddhist Nuns in Sri Lanka* Tessa Bartholomeusz explains on page 159 “Though lay nuns can give the five and eight precepts to their own pupils and patrons...they never give the ten. All the lay nuns I interviewed agreed on this point.”, and on page 162 “Though the lay nuns give the five precepts to each other and to their *dayakas*, they never give the ten.”

Taking Precepts as a Group or Individually

The Illustrator of the Ultimate Meaning (Paramatthajotikam) Part I: Commentary on *the Minor Readings* by Bhadantacariya Buddhagosa, explains in Chapter II The Ten Training Precepts (*Dasasikkhapadam*) on pages 23-24

“18 ‘By undertaking’ these training precepts...are undertaken by a novice only when undertaken in the presence of a *bhikkhu*. But they are undertaken by a lay follower either when he undertakes them by himself or when he does so in another’s presence; and they are undertaken by him when undertaken together or undertaken separately. Now when someone undertakes them together, his abstinence is single and his choice is single, though they are described individually according to their [several] functions. But when someone undertakes them singly, the abstinence is fivefold and so is the choice, it is understood. That is how the explanation should be known by undertaking.”

19. ‘By breach’: in the case of novices, when one is broken all are broken...In the case of householders, when one is broken then only that one is broken, and consequently the fivefold-ness of their virtue becomes effective again as soon as that one alone is reundertaken. Some others, however, have said that ‘When they have been undertaken separately, then, on one being broken, only that one is broken. However, when they have been undertaken thus ‘I undertake the virtue possessed of the five factors’, then when one is broken the rest are all broken too – Why? Because

of the unity of the undertaking-; but the responsibility for action resides only in the one actually transgressed'. That is how the explanation should be known by breach."

In *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values and Issues* Professor Peter Harvey explains on page 82

"In Southern Buddhism, the commentator Buddhagosa held that a lay person can take a set of precepts either as group or individually. If they are taken individually, a breach of one does not breach the set, and the whole set becomes effective again as soon as the broken one is retaken. If a set of precepts is taken by a group as a lay person, Buddhagosa holds that the same situation pertains, though he cites some as holding that the breach of one precept breaks the undertaking to hold to the set (*Khp.A.* 28). Barend Terweil reports that in central Thailand, lay people usually ask for the five precepts using a Pali formula that says that they will be observed 'one by one, separately' (*visum visum*), so that if one is broken, the rest are not. Only on particularly solemn occasions do they ask for the five precepts in a way which means a breach of one breaches the entire set.... In Sri Lanka...very pious lay people sometimes take the five as a group, by saying the Pali for 'I undertake' at the end of the group, by saying the Pali for 'I undertake' at the end of the group, rather than at the end of each precept..."

In *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values and Issues* Professor Peter Harvey explains on page 88

"An extension beyond the eight precepts is found in the ten precepts. These are the same as the eighth except that the seventh is split into its two parts, and there is the addition of an undertaking to 'abstain from accepting gold and silver'. While the difference seems a small one, in practice it is large, for the ten precepts are not taken temporarily, but only on a long-term basis....The extra precept precludes the actual handling of money as in the case of monks. The ten precepts are those observed by novice monks. A few elderly Theravada men permanently follow the ten precepts and wear white, but a greater number of women [lay nuns] do so....In Sri Lanka, the ten precepts of the householder are seen as easier to maintain than those of the novices as the lay person takes them individually, so that all are not broken if one is, whereas novices take them as a group..."

In *Women under the Bo tree: Buddhist Nuns in Sri Lanka* Tessa Bartholomeusz explains on page 9

"The precepts of the householder are a variant of the ten precepts of the *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhuni*... Occasionally, very devout laymen and laywomen abide by the ten precepts for extended periods of time, though the way that the laity 'takes' the ten precepts differs from the way monks recite them....The majority of contemporary lay nuns, unlike most laity, abide by the ten precepts for life.

In *Women under the Bo tree: Buddhist Nuns in Sri Lanka* Tessa Bartholomeusz on pages 73-74

"Although the ten precepts of the laity and the clergy [*bhikkhu* and *bhikkhuni*] each share the same number and order, the content is different, as the placement of the verb distinguishes the precepts of the clergy [*bhikkhu* and *bhikkhuni*] from those of the laity. ...According to late nineteenth-century newspapers...a Buddhist defined the differences between the two categories of precepts: 'There are two types of *sil* [precepts]. *Sil* observed by laymen is called *gihi sil* [householder precepts], while the

other *sil* the *bhikkhus* observe is *pavidi sil* ['going forth'] precepts.... In contemporary Sri Lanka, all members of the monastic order who undergo final initiation recite the ten precepts of the world-renouncer: the *pavidi dasa sila*. In this process, the novice monk recites each precept, but rather than repeating the verb after each of the ten, he chants '*samadiyami*', or 'I undertake to keep' *after* he has recited them *all*. Thus, though each of the ten precepts is chanted separately, they are regarded as one entity. Therefore, if one is 'broken', *all* are so considered. On the other hand, with the inclusion of '*samadayami*' after each precept of the householder, each of the ten remains a *separate* entity... Therefore, it is considered 'easier' to maintain the 'householder' as opposed to the 'going forth,' precepts. ...it is not unknown for the very pious householder to chant them in the style of the 'going forth' precepts, albeit if only five are repeated. However, as it is the layperson who recites the five in this manner, they are not referred to as 'going forth' precepts, but rather as 'householder' precepts. The newspaper article explains further: In the day to day life of the layman, it is natural to break the five precepts. But he can always renew them by observing them again. If he has observed *sil* by saying the five precepts as one – *panca sila sikkhapadan samadiyami* – and breaks one precept, the other four also break. In the same way, if he has observed the five precepts separately and breaks one of them, he could renew his *sil* by observing that one only. [Note 28 "Sil," *Dinamina*, 22 February 1900.]

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PTS Pali Text Society

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