
The Merit of Observing Precepts

B3: Encouragement to Arouse the Mind of Renunciation

C1: The Merit of Observing Precepts

*For all kinds of grand events in samsara,
Do not have any thought of desire.
Do observe the pure precepts, the magnificent adornment in the world,
To which humans and gods make supreme offerings.*

a. A Real Renunciation Mind

In order to achieve ultimate liberation from samsara, we must not have even the slightest thought of desire towards dazzling events and wealth in this ordinary world. Instead we should conscientiously observe the pure precepts, to which humans and gods make their transcendent offerings.

For those who wish to break away from reincarnation and attain liberation, the attainments of fame, power, high social status and sensual enjoyment are totally meaningless, and do not stir up any desire within them. They view luxurious cars and mansions as if they were objects in a dream, illusions, or bubbles. They are not just paying lip service, but truly feel that the three realms are like a house on fire without any momentary bliss. They are the ones with a real renunciation mind.

However, many people, in the beginning, just like Nanda¹, have difficulties in completely abandoning yearnings and attachment towards worldly life. But if we study the Buddhist teachings in the long term, we will definitely become aware of the insecurity of samsara and further arouse renunciation in ourselves.

So how to arouse a real mind of renunciation? There is no better approach than contemplating the four thoughts that turn the mind from samsara: 1) the preciousness of being born a human being; 2) the impermanence of life; 3) the defects of samsara; and 4) the law of cause and effect is infallible. After we have completed these four common preliminary practices, true renunciation will arise absolutely, in the continuum of our minds. At that time, we will sincerely long for liberation from samsara day and night, just like a prisoner desperately wanting to be freed from his prison.

Lama Tsongkhapa says in his *Three Principal Aspects of the Path*,

*Freedom and endowments are difficult to find
And life has no time to spare.
By gaining familiarity with this,
Attraction to the appearances of this life is reversed.*

By thinking over and over again

¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nanda_\(Buddhist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nanda_(Buddhist))

*That actions and their effects are unbetraying,
And repeatedly contemplating the miseries of cyclic existence,
Attraction to the appearances of future lives is reversed.*

*When, by having trained in that way,
There is no arising, even for a second,
Of attraction to the perfections of cyclic existence,
And all day and night the intention seeking liberation arises –
Then the thought of renunciation has been generated.*

b. The Magnificent Adornment in the World

Having aroused renunciation, we must receive and uphold the pure precepts, which are the most magnificent adornment in the world and to which humans and gods make offerings. The precepts are the foundation of all virtuous qualities. It is declared in the *Sutra of Individual Liberation* that, “It is a bridge for going to good destinies.” It is not very appropriate for monastic Buddhists to adorn themselves with jewelry such as earrings and bracelets. But a practitioner endowed with untainted precepts, which is the most dignified adornment, is worthy of prostration, worship and offerings from humans and gods.

Every sentient being has a different capacity and can receive different levels of precepts according to their own ability. If one has a stronger renunciation mind, then one can receive ordination and observe the sramanera² or sramanerika precepts, and bhikkhu³ or bhikkhuni precepts. But if circumstances do not allow one to leave home and join a monastic community, at least one should observe one of the five precepts for lay practitioners, or take the refuge vows guided by a renunciation mind. It is almost impossible for a practitioner to accumulate any merit if none of these precepts are carefully observed. In Nagarjuna’s *Letter to a Friend*, it is stated,

*Keep your vows unbroken, undegraded,
Uncorrupted, and quite free of stain.
Just as the earth’s the base for all that’s still or moves,
On discipline, it’s said, is founded all that’s good.*

The earth is the basis of everything on this planet. Similarly, all merits are born on the basis of precepts. If we do not receive and uphold one single precept, it will be even difficult for us to attain rebirth as a human or a celestial being, not to mention to attain liberation. That is why in the *Thirty-Seven Practices of a Bodhisattva*, Thogme Zangpo says,

*If, lacking discipline, one cannot accomplish one’s own good,
It is laughable to think of accomplishing the good of others.
Therefore, to observe discipline
Without samsaric motives is the practice of a bodhisattva.*

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samanera>

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhikkhu>

The Fault of Breaking Precepts

C2: The Fault of Breaking Precepts

*Since all the temporary and ultimate happiness
result from observing the pure precepts,
And breaking precepts leads one to take rebirth in lower realms,
You must make the right choices and not fall into confusion.*

The temporary benefits of taking rebirth in the realms of humans and gods, and the ultimate happiness of enlightenment and liberation all result from observing the pure precepts. If one breaks the vows and does not repent completely, one will definitely fall into one of the three lower realms. Therefore, it is imperative that a practitioner make the right choices in his or her own conduct and does not fall into confusion.

It is stated in the *Sutra of Individual Liberation* that the only destination for those who break precepts is the three lower realms of the hell beings, hungry ghosts, and animals.. Accordingly, in the *Condensed Prajnaparamita Sutra*, it is also said, “Those who break their precepts cannot even help themselves, let alone benefit others.”

Observing the pure precepts has become more and more difficult in this degenerate age. In particular, it is becoming more difficult for monastic people to observe uncontaminated precepts in this highly commercialized information age. Televisions, laptops and cell phones provide constant sensory stimulation and continually tempt people. As a result, many people do not have true renunciation in their minds, and very few people can stay in remote and solitary places and practice the Dharma one-pointedly, as practitioners in ancient times did.

However, as long as we have a certain level of renunciation, and a sincere desire to achieve enlightenment, it is quite necessary to take the three refuge vows and observe the five precepts. In case one breaks any of these vows, one should receive them again in front of a qualified teacher.

The reason for this is that, in the same way that flowers, grass, and trees can only grow on the earth, all merit grows and prospers on the basis of precepts. In one of his texts, *The Main Path to Enlightenment*, Lama Tsongkhapa specifically refers to a teaching in the sutra, which says that in the degenerate age the merit of holding even one day’s precepts would outdistance the merit of making offerings to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in thousands of millions of eons. Therefore, we must not be confused and miss our direction in this degenerate age. We shall be extremely careful in making choices as regards accepting the causes and conditions that will protect our precepts and in discarding the unfavorable conditions that will lead us to break our vows. This is the goal we are striving towards!