

ABOUT UPĀSAKAS AND UPĀSIKĀS

Upāsaka (masculine) and **Upāsikā** (feminine) were the titles given to followers of the Buddha who undertook certain vows, but were not monks, nuns, or novice monastics. These titles are from the Pāli words meaning “to sit close” (*upāsati*) and “to attend to” (*upāsana*), and are sometimes translated as “one who serves.” Over time, the terms have come to mean “dedicated lay practitioner,” and to connote a lay person who has made a total commitment to the study and practice of the Buddhadhamma.

In traditional Buddhist communities, newborn children of Buddhist parents are initiated into Buddhism by being brought to a temple on a full-moon or festival day where the Three Refuges ceremony is performed. To be a Buddhist, a person must take the Three Refuges and sincerely practice the Five Lifetime Precepts. This, of course, is the bare minimum.

There have always been people who wanted more, who wished to make a greater commitment, yet were either unwilling or unable to become monastics. This wish is satisfied by formally committing to live by several additional precepts. A non-Buddhist becomes a Buddhist by repeating the ancient formulas for the Three Refuges and Five Precepts in a formal ceremony administered by a monk. This ceremony is performed according to specific procedures, and is a type of lay ordination. A lay Buddhist takes the additional precepts of an Upāsaka or Upāsikā in a similar ceremony, and is thereby ordained into the sangha of Dedicated Lay Practitioners.

In the early days of Buddhism, the Upasaka precepts usually consisted of three of the five additional precepts normally taken by novice monks and nuns, so dedicated lay people were known as Eight-Precepters. But over time, and in different places, the additional precepts have evolved to become more meaningful and useful to the dedicated lay practitioners who adopt them. Although the first five precepts are always the same, there is considerable variation between traditions in the additional precepts, including how many of them there are.

The Ten Lifetime Precepts of Upāsikās and Upāsakas

1. *Panatipata – Veramani Sikkhapadam Samadiyami.*

(I undertake the precept to refrain from harming or destroying living beings.)

2. *Adinnadana – Veramani Sikkhapadam Samadiyami.*

(I undertake the precept to refrain from taking that which is not given.)

3. *Kamesu Micchacara – Veramani Sikkhapadam Samadiyami.*

(I undertake the precept to refrain sexual misconduct.)

4. *Musavada – Veramani Sikkhapadam Samadiyami.*

(I undertake the precept to refrain from wrong speech.)

5. *Sura-Meraya-Majja-Pamadatthana – Veramani Sikkhapadam Samadiyami.*

(I undertake the precept to refrain from activities and behaviors that cause dullness of mind.)

6. *I Undertake the Precept to Refrain From Sources of Livelihood That Bring Harm to Other Beings.*

7. *I Undertake the Precept to Refrain from Acting Out of Ill-will or Taking Satisfaction in the Misfortune of Others.*

8. *I Undertake the Precept to Be Open-hearted and Generous in All My Relationships With Others.*

9. *I Undertake the Precept to Act With Loving-kindness and Compassion in All My Relationships With Others.*

10. *I Undertake the Precept to Live With Mindfulness and Follow the Eightfold Path Through Daily Study, Meditation, and Reflection.*

The first five precepts are usually recited in Pali, continuing a tradition that goes back unchanged for 2500 years to the time of the Buddha. The second set of special precepts for Upāsikās and Upāsakas is recited in the native tongue of the local Sangha.

The Ceremony

As with the special precepts themselves, the ordination procedures also differ from one culture and tradition to another. For example, the procedure for receiving precepts in the Chinese tradition is laid out in the 14th chapter of the Sutra on Upasaka Precepts (<http://www.sutrasmantras.info/sutra33c.html>). But the ceremonies of all traditions share some basic features.

The purpose of taking formal ordination as an Upasika or Upasaka is to strengthen one's commitment and to declare that commitment openly to the community. It should never be taken lightly. A person's reasons for requesting this ordination need to be considered carefully. Traditionally, you had to have permission from your parents and spouse before taking the Ten Lifetime Precepts, although this is no longer widely observed. The candidate for ordination and the preceptor (the person who will administer the precepts) first engage in a dialogue to help gain clarity around the candidate's motivations and expectations. In some cases, the preceptor will ask the candidate to try living according to the precepts for six months before the ceremony takes place. This is the informal part of the process. Formally asking for precepts is part of the actual ceremony.

In addition to the candidate, the preceptor, and the Sangha (community), the ceremony may also include a sponsor and a Dharma teacher (*dhammacariya*). However, the sponsor, teacher and

preceptor can all be the same person. A special bond is formed between the candidate, the preceptor and the teacher. The candidate's commitment to keep the precepts is reciprocated by the preceptor's commitment to support them in doing so. The candidate's commitment to study and practice is likewise reciprocated by the teacher's commitment to provide guidance.

During the ceremony, the candidate for ordination (or candidates, if it is a group ordination) will dress in white, and bring with them a meditation robe similar to the outer robe worn by a monk or nun. They will sit in the front row of the ceremonial hall facing the Preceptor, and when formally invited to do so, will chant the request for ordination and ask for the precepts and robe.

The preceptor will respond by giving the candidate instructions for when the robe is to be worn. At one time in India, Upāsakās regularly wore white robes to represent a level of renunciation between that of ordinary lay people and monastics. This practice can still be found in contemporary Theravadin temples, especially when observing an *uposatha* day. Upāsakās and Upāsikās are now permitted to wear the outer robe received at ordination when attending Buddhist ceremonies, teaching events, and retreats, as well as for home practice. But unlike monastics, they are not permitted to regularly wear robes in public. Once the candidate has agreed to the conditions for wearing the robe, the preceptor accepts the request for ordination and administers the Three Refuges and the Ten Lifetime Precepts. Finally, the Upāsikā or Upāsakā is given a new name and welcomed into the Sangha.

What it Means to be an Upāsakā or Upāsikā

To practice the Buddhadhamma effectively, one must know and understand it, and the Buddha expected his lay disciples to be well-versed in the Dhamma. He said: "I shall not pass into final Nirvāṇa until the laymen and laywomen are accomplished and well-trained, learned and erudite, knowers of the Dhamma, living by Dhamma and walking the path of Dhamma, not until they pass on to others what they have received from their Teacher and teach it, proclaim it, establish it, explain it, promote it and clarify it, not until they are able to use it to refute false teachings and impart this wondrous Dhamma." (DN 16). Elsewhere he says: "The highest honor and veneration any monk or nun, layman or laywoman can show me is to live according to the Dhamma and perfectly fulfill it." (DN 16).

A dedicated lay practitioner makes full Awakening, the ultimate goal of the Buddhadhamma, his or her number one priority in life. Every other kind of worldly goal is either transmuted to become a means to that end, or is set aside. Work, family life, and personal relationships all become a part of an Upāsakā or Upāsikā's daily practice. Decisions regarding choice of career and jobs, and the acceptance of additional job responsibilities or promotions, are made based on their impact on Dhamma practice. Friendships and other communal involvements either continue because they are conducive to Dhamma practice, or fall away naturally, simply because they are in conflict with it. New friendships and other community activities take their place, ones that support the practice. Commitments and responsibilities to family are not only upheld, but transformed into powerful opportunities to practice and understand the Dhamma more deeply.

When the Buddha was asked how a lay follower practices the Dhamma, he replied “both for his own benefit and the benefit of others.” One is impeccable oneself and encourages others to be impeccable in faith; virtue; generosity; and, studying, analyzing, understanding and practicing the Dhamma. The importance of a mutually supportive spiritual community cannot be overstated:

Thus I have heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling among the Sakyans where there was a town of the Sakyans named Nagaraka. Then the Venerable Ananda approached the Blessed One, paid homage to him, sat down to one side, and said:

“Venerable sir, this is half of the spiritual life, that is, good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship.”

“Not so, Ananda! Not so, Ananda! This is the entire spiritual life, Ananda, that is, good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship. When a monk has a good friend, a good companion, a good comrade, it is to be expected that he will develop and cultivate the Noble Eightfold Path.

“And how, Ananda, does a monk with a good friend, a good companion, a good comrade, develop and cultivate the Noble Eightfold Path? Here, Ananda, a monk develops right view, which is based upon seclusion, dispassion, and cessation, maturing in release. He develops right intention ... right speech ... right action ... right livelihood ... right effort ... right mindfulness ... right concentration, which is based upon seclusion, dispassion, and cessation, maturing in release. It is in this way, Ananda, that a monk with a good friend, a good companion, a good comrade, develops and cultivates the Noble Eightfold Path.

“By the following method too, Ananda, it may be understood how the entire spiritual life is good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship: by relying on me as a good friend, Ananda, beings subject to birth are freed from birth; beings subject to aging are freed from aging; beings subject to death are freed from death; beings subject to sorrow, lamentation, pain, dejection, and despair are freed from sorrow, lamentation, pain, dejection, and despair. By this method, Ananda, it may be understood how the entire spiritual life is good friendship, good comradeship, good companionship.”
(SN 45.2: Upaddha Sutta: Half [of the Holy Life], Bhikku Bodhi, Transl.)

Some of the other things the Buddha expected of his sincere lay disciples include doing good works, having integrity in their business dealings, being a true friend to others, visiting and comforting the sick, and going on meditation retreats. In short, he expected his lay disciples to practice the Noble Eightfold Path in all its depth and breadth. More advice to lay practitioners from the Buddha can be found in the [Sigalovada Sutta](#) (DN 31), which has been referred to as “the Discipline of the Householder.” This sutta includes the Five Precepts, an analysis of good-hearted (Pali: *su-hada*) friends, and a description of respectful actions for one's parents, teachers, spouse, friends, workers and spiritual teachers.

The Buddha intended the **Dhamma** for all. It can be realized by all and, therefore, it should be practiced by all. Dedicated Lay Practitioners are the future of Buddhism. Alan Wallace, who was once a monk himself, has written:

“For all the diversity of Buddhist practices in the West, general trends in the recent transformations of Buddhist practice... can be identified. These include an erosion of the distinction between professional and lay Buddhists; a decentralization of doctrinal authority; a diminished role for Buddhist monastics; an increasing spirit of egalitarianism; greater leadership roles for women; greater social activism; and, in many cases, an increasing emphasis on the psychological, as opposed to the purely religious, nature of practice.” Wallace, Alan (2002). “The Spectrum of Buddhist Practice in the West” in Charles Prebish & Martin Baumann (eds.), *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia*. Berkeley:University of California Press.

While the ordained Sangha of monks and nuns will always be at the heart of Buddhism, we can confidently assume that the future of Buddhism in the West will emphasize the role of lay people. The achievement of Awakening by lay people will be a goal for this very life, not some future life. Our hope for the future of the world depends upon large numbers of lay people adopting the moral, ethical, and spiritual values of Buddhism. It depends even more upon the Awakening of large numbers of lay people. As we have seen, there is no shortage of clear instructions from the Buddha himself on the Path to Awakening for lay people.

Although some traditions teach that complete spiritual emancipation is possible only if one renounces worldly life and joins a monastic order, this is neither true nor consistent with the Buddha’s teaching. Many celebrated masters have been married householders. ***There can be no question that full Awakening is possible for Buddhist laypersons.*** The Suttas tell us that the path to Awakening is open to all – men or women, old or young, lay or monastic. The Buddha once named 21 eminent lay disciples who had achieved complete Awakening (AN 6.119 & 120). We don’t know at what point in his 45 year teaching career this Sutta was spoken, and so it is quite possible, even likely, that by the end of the Buddha’s life this number was much larger. On another occasion, the Buddha listed 81 disciples as notable for being foremost among all of his disciples for one thing or another (AN 1.14). Twenty-one of these foremost disciples were lay men and women, and they are not all the same ones described above as fully Awakened, either. Among those mentioned on both lists is the householder Citta, who was one of three disciples notable as being foremost at expounding the Dhamma.

The Vajrayana tradition has also produced many prominent householders, from Marpa to Padmasambhava to mention a few. A Vajrayana lay practitioner utilizes the whole of the phenomenal world as the Path. Marrying, raising children, working jobs, leisure, art, play etc. are all means to realize the enlightened state.