

A wise man is one who observes the Precepts.

In this essay on ethical conduct a meaning of the above mentioned Dhamma proverb will be discussed. Ethical conduct (*Sila*) is one of the three divisions of the Noble Eightfold Path (*ariyo atthaṅgiko maggo*) together with Wisdom (*Panna*) and Concentration (*Samadhi*). *Sila* includes right speech (*samma vaca*), right action (*samma kammanta*) and right livelihood (*samma ajiva*). These are further expressed and simplified into the Five Precepts (*panca-sila*) which are the basic moral trainings of Buddhist teaching.

The Five Precepts ask us to abstain from harming any sentient beings, not taking what has not been freely given, to avoid wrong sexual behaviour, to refrain from lying, and to abstain from consumption of intoxicants. They are not commandments but simple recommendations as if broken, the subsequent effect on the mind is very noticeable and fuels the defilements. Developing one part of the Eightfold Path always supports a development of the other remaining parts, therefore if one practises morality, their mental development will improve and their wisdom grows also. This supports the proverb in question as well as the Buddhist proverb “Virtue will have a good effect on one to the end of old age” (*Silam yava jaru sadhu*). In result, one will become more content and happy as expressed in the Buddhist proverb “Virtue will bring happiness to one to the end of old age” (*Sukham yava jara silam*).

The precepts can be taken one by one or all of them together, however to extend one’s practice, one can also undertake the Eight Precepts (*attha-sila*) which is usually done by lay followers during lunar observance days (*Upasatha*) or on retreats. In here the third precept is extended to prohibit all sexual activity and an additional three precepts are added to refrain from eating after noon, abstain from any form of entertainment or beautification of the body, and from sleeping on luxurious/overly-comfortable beds. The three added precepts are present mainly to support one’s meditation practice. In monastic life the novice monks and nuns observe the ten precepts (*dasa sila*). They are derived from the Eight Precepts by splitting the precept concerning entertainments and sleeping on ‘high’ beds into two parts and by adding one rule prohibiting the handling of money. Fully-ordained monks (*bhikkhu*) observe the 227 monastic rules and fully ordained nuns (*bhikkhuni*) would observe the 311 monastic rules.

To summarise, the precepts in any form and ethical conduct in general are extremely important aspects of the Buddha Dhamma. Their importance is also seen throughout other teachings as they are part of many other essential teachings, such as Three Bases of Merituous Actions (*Punnakiriyavatthu*), Seven Noble Treasures (*Ariyasab*) and The Ten Perfections (*Dasa Paramita*). For lay people they’re also reflected in the Four Virtues for Future Benefits (*Samparayakattha*). This essay only briefly touched on this very important subject, however the depth, beauty and importance of one’s morality development should not be underestimated. As the Buddha rightly said:

*Silam rakkheyya medhavi*

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