

# Observing the Uposatha



by  
Bhikkhu Pesala



# Observing the Uposatha

by  
Bhikkhu Pesala



© Latest Edition September 2021

Bhikkhu Pesala

Association for Insight Meditation

You may print copies of this book for your own use. However, all rights are reserved. You may not use this PDF file on your own web site, nor for commercial distribution. If you post an extract on a forum, post a link to the appropriate page. Please do not link directly to the PDF file.

# Contents

Observing the Uposatha.....	1
The Customary Observance.....	1
Three Kinds of Observance.....	1
The Cowherd's Uposatha.....	1
The Naked Ascetics' Uposatha.....	2
The Noble One's Uposatha.....	2
The Recollection of the Buddha.....	2
The Recollection of the Dhamma.....	3
The Recollection of the Saṅgha.....	3
The Recollection of One's Own Morality.....	4
The Recollection of Deities.....	5
The Morality of the Arahants.....	6
How Great is the Benefit?.....	8
The Traditional Observance.....	10
The Lay Disciple Mahākāla.....	12
The Soldier and the Beautiful Wife.....	12
Practising for the Entire Day and Night.....	12
Maintaining Noble Silence.....	13
The Eight Precepts.....	13
Recommended Sitting Postures.....	14
Walking Meditation.....	14
Eating and Drinking.....	15
Reverting to Five Precepts.....	15
When to Observe the Uposatha.....	16

# Observing the Uposatha

## The Customary Observance

The way that the Uposatha is observed varies a great deal depending on the country, the local customs, and the monk who is in charge of the local monastery. From what I have seen in the UK, lay people come to offer alms to the monks on Uposatha days, much as they do every day, but they usually prepare almsfood for all lay people who are observing the eight precepts, and serve them after serving the monks. The lay people who are not observing the eight precepts share their food after serving the monks and those observing the eight precepts.

Those lay people who are observing the eight precepts may arrive about 8:00 am to take the precepts and listen to some meditation instruction from the monks. They usually wear white clothes, and do not wear jewellery or cosmetics. They spend the day meditating, listening to talks, or reading Dhamma books. Many abstain from talking while other lay people engage in conversation over the meal. At the end of the day, in the early evening, they undertake the five precepts and return home. Those not observing the eight precepts wash the dishes after the meal, and clean up before leaving.

## Three Kinds of Observance

In the Uposatha Sutta of the Gradual Sayings, Book of Threes, the Buddha teaches his leading female lay disciple, Visākhā, about the three kinds of Uposatha Observance, while dwelling at the monastery donated by her.

“There are these three kinds of Uposatha, Visākhā. What three? The Cowherd’s Uposatha, the Naked Ascetics’ Uposatha, and the Noble One’s Uposatha.

### The Cowherd’s Uposatha

What, Visākhā, is the cowherd’s Uposatha? It is as if, Visākhā, when returning the cows to their owners in the evening, the cowherd thinks: ‘Today the cows grazed and drank at one place, tomorrow they will graze and drink at another place.’ Similarly, someone observes the Uposatha thinking, ‘Today I ate this kind of food, tomorrow I will eat that kind of food.’ Thus he spends the day with thoughts of covetousness. Thus, Visākhā, is the cowherd’s Uposatha. Observed in this way, Visākhā, the cowherd’s Uposatha is not of great fruit, nor of great benefit, is not of great splendour, nor very pervasive.

## The Naked Ascetics' Uposatha

“What, Visākhā, is the Naked Ascetics' Uposatha? There is, Visākhā, a class of ascetics called Nigaṇṭhā (Naked Ascetics).<sup>1</sup> They urge their followers thus: ‘Lay aside weapons towards living beings beyond a hundred leagues to the east, west, north, and south. Thus they have sympathy and compassion for some living beings, but not for others. On the Uposatha they urge their disciples to lay aside all clothing and to declare ‘I belong to no one and possess nothing.’ Yet his parents know him as their son, and he knows them as his parents. His wife and children know him as their provider, and he knows them as his wife and children. His slaves and workers know him as their employer, and he knows them as his slaves and workers. Thus on an occasion when they should be urging them to be honest, they urge them to tell untruths. When the night has passed he makes use of goods that have not been given. This, I declare, is taking what is not given. Observed in this way, Visākhā, the Naked Ascetics' Uposatha is not of great fruit, nor of great benefit, it is not of great splendour, nor very pervasive.

## The Noble One's Uposatha

“What, Visākhā, is the Noble One's Uposatha? The defiled mind, Visākhā, is cleansed by skilful action. How, Visākhā, is the defiled mind purified by skilful action?

### The Recollection of the Buddha

Here, Visākhā, the noble disciple recollects the Tathāgata: ‘Such indeed is the Blessed One, worthy (*araḥaṃ*), fully enlightened by himself (*sammāsambuddho*), endowed with knowledge and conduct (*vijjācaraṇa-sampanno*), fortunate (*sugato*), seer of the worlds (*lokaavidū*), an incomparable trainer of trainable persons (*anuttaro purisadammasārathi*), teacher of gods and humans (*satthā devamanussānaṃ*), enlightened (*buddho*), and blessed (*bhagavāti*).<sup>2</sup> Recollecting the Tathāgata the mind becomes bright and joy arises. The mental defilements are abandoned, it is like, Visākhā, the soiled head being cleansed by skilful action. And how, Visākhā, is the soiled head cleansed by skilful action? Dependent on shampoo (*kakka*),<sup>3</sup> bath-powder (*mattika*), water, and the appropriate effort of an individual, thus, Visākhā,

<sup>1</sup> Visākhā was married to the son of Migāra, a disciple of the naked ascetics (Nigaṇṭhā).

<sup>2</sup> Please see the footnotes to the [Mahānāma Sutta](#) for a full description of these attributes from the Visuddhimagga.

<sup>3</sup> A paste made from embolic myrobalan. Commonly used in inks, shampoos, and hair oils, the high tannin content of Indian gooseberry fruit serves as a mordant for fixing dyes in fabrics.

the soiled head is cleansed by skilful action. In the same way, Visākhā, the defiled mind is cleansed by skilful action. Herein, Visākhā, a noble disciple recollects the Tathāgata: 'Such indeed is the Blessed One, worthy, fully enlightened by himself, endowed with knowledge and conduct, fortunate, seer of the worlds, an incomparable trainer of trainable persons, teacher of gods and humans, enlightened, and blessed. Recollecting the Tathāgata the mind becomes bright and joy arises, and the mental defilements are abandoned. Thus, Visākhā, the defiled mind is purified by skilful action. Visākhā, I call this a noble disciple observing the Brahma Uposatha, dwelling with Brahma, and it is with reference to Brahma that the mind becomes bright, joy arises, and mental defilements are abandoned. Thus, Visākhā, the defiled mind is purified by skilful action.

### The Recollection of the Dhamma

"The defiled mind, Visākhā, is cleansed by skilful action. How, Visākhā, is the defiled mind purified by their skilful action? Here, Visākhā, the noble disciple recollects the teaching: 'The Dhamma is well-taught by the Blessed One (*svākkhāto Bhagavāta dhammo*), visible by oneself (*sandiṭṭhiko*), timeless (*akāliko*), inviting investigation (*ehi-passiko*), leading onwards (*opaneyyiko*), to be realised by the wise (*paccattam vedītabbo viññūhī'ti*).' Recollecting that teaching the mind becomes bright and joy arises. The mental defilements are abandoned, it is like, Visākhā, the dirty body being cleansed by skilful action. And how, Visākhā, is the dirty body cleansed by skilful action? Dependent on a back-scrubber (*sottim*), clay (*cunṇam*), water, and the appropriate effort of an individual, thus, Visākhā, the dirty body is cleansed by skilful action. In the same way, Visākhā, the defiled mind is purified by skilful action. And how, Visākhā, is the defiled mind purified by skilful action? Here, Visākhā, the noble disciple recollects the teaching: 'The Dhamma is well-taught by the Blessed One, visible by oneself, timeless, inviting investigation, leading onwards, to be realised by the wise.' Recollecting that teaching the mind becomes bright and joy arises. The mental defilements are abandoned. Visākhā, I call this a noble disciple observing the Dhamma Uposatha, dwelling with the teachings, and it is with reference to the teaching that the mind becomes bright, joy arises, and mental defilements are abandoned. Thus, Visākhā, the defiled mind is purified by skilful action.

### The Recollection of the Saṅgha

"The defiled mind, Visākhā, is cleansed by skilful action. How, Visākhā, is the defiled mind purified by skilful action? Here, Visākhā, the noble disciple

recollects the Saṅgha: ‘The community of the disciples of the Blessed One practises well (*suppaṭipanno bhagavato sāvakasaṅgho*), practises honestly (*ujjappaṭipanno bhagavato sāvakasaṅgho*), practises wisely (*ñāyappaṭipanno bhagavato sāvakasaṅgho*), practices dutifully (*sāmicippaṭipanno bhagavato sāvakasaṅgho*). That is to say the four pairs of persons (*cattāri purisayugāni*),<sup>1</sup> the eight individuals (*aṭṭha purisapuggalā*), this community of the disciples of the Blessed One (*esa bhagavato sāvakasaṅgho*) is worthy of gifts (*āhuneyyo*), worthy of hospitality (*pāhuneyyo*), worthy of offerings (*dakkhinēyyo*), worthy of reverential salutation (*añjalikaraṇīyo*), an incomparable field of merit for the world (*anuttaraṃ puññakkhettaṃ lokassā’ti*). Recollecting that community the mind becomes bright and joy arises. The mental defilements are abandoned, it is like, Visākhā, a stained cloth being cleansed by skilful action. And how, Visākhā, is a stained cloth cleansed by skilful action? Dependent on boiling (*usmañca*), and caustic soda (*khārañca*), and cow dung (*gomayañca*), and water, and the appropriate effort of an individual. Thus, Visākhā, a stained cloth is cleansed by skilful action. In the same way, Visākhā, the defiled mind is purified by skilful action. And how, Visākhā, is the defiled mind purified by skilful action? Here, Visākhā, the noble disciple recollects the Saṅgha: ‘The community of the disciples of the Blessed One practises well, practices honestly, practices wisely, practices dutifully. That is to say the four pairs of persons, the eight individuals. This community of the disciples of the Blessed One is worthy of gifts, worthy of hospitality, worthy of offerings, worthy of reverential salutation, an incomparable field of merit for the world.’ Recollecting that community the mind becomes bright and joy arises. The mental defilements are abandoned. Visākhā, I call this a noble disciple observing the Saṅgha Uposatha, dwelling with the Saṅgha, and it is with reference to the Saṅgha that the mind becomes bright, joy arises, and mental defilements are abandoned. Thus, Visākhā, the defiled mind is purified by skilful action.

### The Recollection of One’s Own Morality

“The defiled mind, Visākhā, is cleansed by skilful action. How, Visākhā, is the defiled mind purified by their skilful action? Here, Visākhā, the noble disciple recollects his or her own morality as unbroken (*akhaṇḍāni*), faultless (*acchiddāni*), spotless (*asabalāni*), unblemished (*akammāsāni*), liberated

<sup>1</sup> For each of the four noble ones, there is one person striving to attain the path, and one who has attained the path. The path consciousness arises only momentarily, and is immediately followed by fruition consciousness. The Stream-winner can enter into and abide in fruition at will, and with more practice can become adept at staying in fruition for longer periods. To strive for the higher path, they have to forgo the fruition of Stream-winning to develop the higher stage of the path.



(*bhujissāni*), praised by the wise (*viññuppasatthāni*), not clung to (*aparāmaṭṭhāni*), leading to concentration (*samādhisaṃvattanikāni*). Recollecting that morality the mind becomes bright and joy arises. The mental defilements are abandoned, it is like, Visākhā, a dull mirror being polished by skilful action. And how, Visākhā, is a dull mirror polished by skilful action? Dependent on oil (*telañca*), and ashes (*chārikañca*), and a coarse cloth (*vālaṇḍupakañca*), and the appropriate effort of a person. Thus, Visākhā, a dull mirror is polished by skilful action. In the same way, Visākhā, the defiled mind is purified by skilful action. And how, Visākhā, is the defiled mind purified by skilful action? Here, Visākhā, a noble disciple recollects their own morality as unbroken, faultless, spotless, unblemished, liberated, praised by the wise, not clung to, leading to concentration. Recollecting that morality the mind becomes bright and joy arises. Visākhā, I call this a noble disciple observing the morality Uposatha, dwelling with morality, and it is with reference to morality that the mind becomes bright, joy arises, and the mental defilements are abandoned. Thus, Visākhā, the defiled mind is purified by skilful action.

### The Recollection of Deities

“The defiled mind, Visākhā, is cleansed by skilful action. How, Visākhā, is the defiled mind purified by their skilful action? Here, Visākhā, the noble disciple recollects the deities: ‘There are the deities of the Four Great Kings (*Cātumahārājikā*), the deities of the Thirty-three (*Tāvatiṃsā*), the deities of Yāmā, the deities of delight (*Tusitā*), the deities who delight in creating (*Nimmānaratino*), the deities who delight in the creations of others (*Paranimmitavasavattino*),<sup>1</sup> there are the deities of Brahma’s company (*Brahmakāyikā*) and deities higher than these. I too have such faith ... morality ... learning ... liberality ... wisdom as those deities had before they died and arose there. Recollecting one’s own faith, morality, learning, liberality, and wisdom that those deities possessed, the mind becomes bright and joy arises. The mental defilements are abandoned, it is like, Visākhā, impure gold is refined by skilful action.<sup>2</sup> And how, Visākhā, is impure gold refined by skilful action? Dependent on a furnace (*ukkañca*), salt (*loṇa*), red chalk (*gerukañca*), a blow-pipe (*nālika*), tweezers (*saṇḍāsañca*), and the appropriate effort of a person. Thus, Visākhā, impure gold is refined by skilful action. In the same way, Visākhā, a defiled mind is purified by skilful action. And how, Visākhā, is the defiled mind

<sup>1</sup> The deities who delight in the creations of others are in still in the realm of sensual happiness (*kāmasugati bhūmi*). The Brahmakāyika deities are in the first *jhāna* stage of the realms of form (*rūpa loka*), which is a realm remote from sensuality.

<sup>2</sup> The similes of cleaning the head, the body, a cloth, a mirror, and gold for reflecting on the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Saṅgha, one’s own morality, and the virtues of deities are so appropriate. I have translated *upakkiliṭṭhassa* as defiled, soiled, dirty, stained, dull, or impure to suit.

purified by skilful action? Here, Visākhā, a noble disciple recollects the deities: ‘There are the deities of the Four Great Kings, there are the deities of the Thirty-three, there are the deities of Yāmā, there are the deities of delight, there are the deities who delight in creating, there are the deities who delight in the creations of others, there are the deities of Brahma’s company, there are deities higher than these. I too have such faith ... morality ... learning ... liberality ... wisdom as those deities had before they died and arose there. Recollecting one’s own faith, morality, learning, liberality, and wisdom that those deities possessed, the mind becomes bright and joy arises, and the mental defilements are abandoned. I call this a noble disciple observing the deity’s Uposatha, dwelling with deities, and it is with reference to the deities that the mind becomes bright, joy arises, Thus, Visākhā, the defiled mind is purified by skilful action.

### The Morality of the Arahants

‘The noble disciple, Visākhā, reflects thus: ‘As long as they live, the Arahants abandon the killing of living beings, abstaining from killing living beings, having put down sticks and weapons, conscientious and sympathetic, dwelling harmless and compassionate to all living beings. Today and tonight<sup>1</sup> I will abandon killing living beings, abstaining from killing living beings, having put down sticks and weapons, conscientious and sympathetic, dwelling harmless and compassionate to all living beings. I will also emulate this factor of the Arahants, and the Uposatha will be observed by me.

‘As long as they live, the Arahants abandon the taking of what is not given, abstaining from stealing, taking only what is given, wishing only for what is given, dwelling honestly without deceit. Today and tonight I will abandon the taking of what is not given, abstaining from stealing, taking only what is given, wishing only for what is given, dwelling honestly without deceit. I will also emulate this factor of the Arahants, and the Uposatha will be observed by me.

‘As long as they live, the Arahants abandon sexual intercourse, remote from sexuality, abstaining from sexual activity. Today and tonight I will abandon sexual intercourse, remote from sexuality, abstaining from sexual activity. I will also emulate this factor of the Arahants, and the Uposatha will be observed by me.

‘As long as they live, the Arahants abandon lying, abstaining from lying, speaking the truth, upholding the truth, reliable and trustworthy, not deceiving anyone in the world. Today and tonight I will abandon lying, abstaining from lying, speaking the truth, upholding the truth, reliable and trustworthy, not deceiving anyone in the world. I will also emulate this factor of the Arahants, and the Uposatha will be observed by me.

<sup>1</sup> The Pāli idiom is “This night and day (*imañca rattiṃ imañca divasaṃ*).”

As long as they live, the Arahants abandon intoxicants that cause heedlessness, abstaining from intoxicants that cause heedlessness. Today and tonight I will abandon intoxicants that cause heedlessness, abstaining from intoxicants that cause heedlessness. I will also emulate this factor of the Arahants, and the Uposatha will be observed by me.

As long as they live, the Arahants eat only one meal,<sup>1</sup> abstaining from eating at the wrong time. Today and tonight I will eat only one meal, abstaining from eating at the wrong time. I will also emulate this factor of the Arahants, and the Uposatha will be observed by me.

As long as they live, the Arahants abstain from dancing (*nacca*), singing (*gīta*), music (*vādita*), entertainments (*visūkadassana*),<sup>2</sup> garlands (*mālā*), perfumes (*gandha*), cosmetics (*vilepana*), and wearing ornaments (*dhāraṇa-maṇḍana*) for adornment (*vibhūsanatṭhānā*).<sup>3</sup> Today and tonight I will abstain from dancing, singing, music, entertainments, garlands, cosmetics, perfumes, and ornaments. I will also emulate this factor of the Arahants, and the Uposatha will be observed by me.

As long as they live, the Arahants abandon high and luxurious beds and seats, abstaining from using high and luxurious beds and seats, they arrange a low seat or bed,<sup>4</sup> or a straw mat. Today and tonight I will abandon high and luxurious beds and seats, abstaining from using high and luxurious beds and seats, I will arrange a low seat or bed, or a straw mat. I will also emulate this factor of the Arahants, and the Uposatha will be observed by me.'

---

<sup>1</sup> One meal (*ekabhikkā*), is one of the thirteen ascetic practices, but it seems that it would be the regular practice for Arahants. The Buddha recommended it for health, but he also allowed the use of gruel made (by a novice or lay-attendant) to be taken in the early morning. He also allowed those who wished, to keep back some food from the morning meal after almsround to eat later in the morning, but before midday. Eating at night is for lay people who may be working in the fields or market place all day, and must survive on snacks until they can return home to have a cooked meal in the evening. The monastic rules are flexible, as the dietary needs of young novices, grown men in vigorous health, the sick, and the elderly, are obviously very different.

<sup>2</sup> Either performing these acts of dancing, singing, playing music, entertainments such as acrobatics or juggling, or watching or listening to others doing these things. Even drumming with one's fingers would be regarded as playing music.

<sup>3</sup> Any kind of jewellery, even a wrist watch, any kind of adornment such as bangles or brightly coloured clothing would be included. White clothes are generally worn, but any kind of plain and modest clothing is appropriate. An exception is usually made for wearing wedding rings.

<sup>4</sup> The monastic rule allows a bed with legs of eight inches measured to the bottom of the bed frame. This is to offer some protection from snakes and other crawling creatures. Mattresses and cushions stuffed with cotton are not permitted. A straw mat offers a bare minimum of protection from dust and small stones on the ground. A *Zabuton* meditation cushion stuffed with buckwheat hulls is ideal for meditation as it will adjust to one's posture.

“Thus, Visākhā, is the Noble One’s Uposatha. Thus observed, Visākhā, the Noble One’s Uposatha is of great fruit, of great benefit, or great splendour, and very pervasive.”

## How Great is the Benefit?

“How great is the fruit, how great is the benefit, how great is the splendour, how pervasive is it? If, Visākhā, one ruled over these **sixteen great nations** full of abundant precious things, namely: Aṅga, Magadha, Kāsi, Kosala, Vajji, Malla, Ceti, Vaṅga, Kuru, Pañcāla, Maccha, Sūrasena, Assaka, Avanti, Gandhāra, Kamboja, that would not be worth one sixteenth of this Uposatha accompanied by eight factors. What is the reason for that? Human sovereignty is insignificant compared to celestial happiness.

“Fifty human years, Visākhā, is just one day and night for the deities of the Four Great Kings. Thirty such days make a month, and twelve months make a year. The lifespan of the deities of the Four Great Kings is five hundred celestial years.<sup>1</sup> It is possible, Visākhā, that a woman or man, having observed this Uposatha accompanied by eight factors, on the break-up of the body after death, could arise in the company of the deities of the Four Great Kings. It was in connection with this that it was said: ‘Human sovereignty is insignificant compared to celestial happiness.

“A hundred human years, Visākhā, is just one day and night for the deities of the Thirty-three. Thirty such days make a month, and twelve months make a year. The lifespan of the deities of the Thirty-three is a thousand celestial years.<sup>2</sup> It is possible, Visākhā, that a woman or man, having observed this Uposatha accompanied by eight factors, on the break-up of the body after death, could arise in the company of the deities of the Thirty-three. It was in connection with this that it was said: ‘Human sovereignty is insignificant compared to celestial happiness.

“Two hundred human years, Visākhā, is just one day and night for the Yāma deities. Thirty such days make a month, and twelve months make a year. The lifespan of the Yāma deities is two thousand celestial years.<sup>3</sup> It is possible, Visākhā, that a woman or man, having observed this Uposatha accompanied by eight factors, on the break-up of the body after death, could arise in the company of the Yāma deities. It was in connection with this that it was said: ‘Human sovereignty is insignificant compared to celestial happiness.

<sup>1</sup> 50 years x 30 days x 12 months x 500 celestial years = 9 million human years.

<sup>2</sup> 100 years x 30 days x 12 months x 1,000 celestial years = 36 million human years.

<sup>3</sup> 200 years x 30 days x 12 months x 2,000 celestial years = 144 million human years.

“Four hundred human years, Visākhā, is just one day and night for the deities of delight. Thirty such days make a month, and twelve months make a year. The lifespan of the deities of delight is four thousand celestial years.<sup>1</sup> It is possible, Visākhā, that a woman or man, having observed this Uposatha accompanied by eight factors, on the break-up of the body after death, could arise in the company of the deities of delight. It was in connection with this that it was said: ‘Human sovereignty is insignificant compared to celestial happiness.

“Eight hundred human years, Visākhā, is just one day and night for the deities who delight in creating. Thirty such days make a month, and twelve months make a year. The lifespan of the deities who delight in creating is eight thousand celestial years.<sup>2</sup> It is possible, Visākhā, that a woman or man, having observed this Uposatha accompanied by eight factors, on the break-up of the body after death, could arise in the company of the deities who delight in creating. It was in connection with this that it was said: ‘Human sovereignty is insignificant compared to celestial happiness.

“Sixteen hundred human years, Visākhā, is just one day and night for the deities who delight in the creations of others. Thirty such days make a month, and twelve months make a year. The lifespan of the deities who delight in the creations of others is sixteen thousand celestial years.<sup>3</sup> It is possible, Visākhā, that a woman or man, having observed this Uposatha accompanied by eight factors, on the break-up of the body after death, could arise in the company of the deities who delight in the creations of others. It was in connection with this that it was said: ‘Human sovereignty is insignificant compared to celestial happiness.’

“One should not kill, and one should not steal,  
 Do not tell lies, and do not drink intoxicants.  
 One should refrain from sexual activity, from unchastity  
 Do not eat at night, or the wrong time.

---

<sup>1</sup> 400 years x 30 days x 12 months x 4,000 celestial years = 576 million human years.

<sup>2</sup> 800 years x 30 days x 12 months x 8,000 celestial years = 2.3 billion human years.

<sup>3</sup> 1,600 years x 30 days x 12 months x 16,000 celestial years = 9.2 billion human years. The lifespan of the Brahmakāyikā deities in the formless realms, but four times 9.2 billion human years would be greater than the age of the known universe. Other sources give the life-spans of such beings measured in aeons (Mahākappa). In Buddhist cosmology there is no beginning to this cycle of birth and death, and the Buddha could recollect any number of aeons. Ninety-one aeons ago, the Bodhisatta vowed at the feet of Dīpaṅkara Buddha to attain full enlightenment, and Dīpaṅkara Buddha gave him a firm assurance that he would achieve his goal ninety-one aeons later.

“One should not wear garlands and perfumes.  
 Spread a bed to lie down on the ground.  
 Thus indeed is great eight-factored Uposatha,  
 Made known by the Buddha who ended suffering.

“The moon and sun, both beautiful to see,  
 Illuminate wherever they roam.  
 Dispelling darkness as they cross the sky,  
 Lighting up the sky, pervading all directions.

“Wealth existing within this realm,  
 Pearls, gems, the best lapis lazuli,  
 Gold like a cow’s horn, or shining gold,  
 Or that gold stored by ants.

“The Uposatha endowed with eight factors,  
 They are not even a sixteenth fraction of it.  
 As the radiance of the moon exceeds all the stars.

“Therefore, a virtuous woman and a man,  
 Observing the Uposatha endowed with eight factors,  
 Having made merit resulting in happiness,  
 Blameless, attain a heavenly realm.”

## **The Traditional Observance**

Only in one monastery where I stayed, Wat Pah Nanachat in North East Thailand, did a few of the lay people follow the traditional observance of the Uposatha. After taking the eight precepts in the morning, they offered alms to the monks, and spent the day and night in meditation, only returning home the following morning soon after dawn when the monks went for alms. They were mostly elderly and devout disciples of Ajahn Chah.

The traditional observance can be gleaned from several sources in the Tipiṭaka and the Commentaries. The Commentary to verse 161 of the Dhammapada relates the story of the lay disciple Mahākāla.

“By oneself is evil done;  
 it is self-born, it is self-caused.  
 Evil grinds the unwise  
 as a diamond grinds a hard gem. (*Dhp.v.161*)

# 31 Planes of Existence

## Arūpa-loka

(Formless Realms)

31 Nevasaññānāsaññāyatana	Sphere of Neither Perception nor Non-perception	84,000 Mahākappa
30 Ākiñcaññāyatana	Sphere of Nothingness	60,000 Mahākappa
29 Viññāṇācāyatana	Sphere of Infinite Consciousness	40,000 Mahākappa
28 Ākāsānañcāyatana	Sphere of Infinite Space	20,000 Mahākappa

## Rūpa-loka

(Realms of Form)

27 Akanitthā	Peerless Devas	<b>Suddhāvāsa</b>	16,000 Mahākappa
26 Sudassī	Clear-sighted Devas	Pure Abodes	8,000 Mahākappa
25 Sudassā	Beautiful Devas		4,000 Mahākappa
24 Atappā	Untroubled Devas		2,000 Mahākappa
23 Avihā	Durable Devas		1,000 Mahākappa
22 Asaññasattā	Mindless Devas	<b>4th Jhāna</b>	500 Mahākappa
21 Vehapphalā	Very Fruitful Devas		500 Mahākappa

20 Subhakiñhā	Devas of Radiant Glory	<b>3rd Jhāna</b>	64 Mahākappa
19 Appamāṇsubhā	Devas of Unbounded Glory		32 Mahākappa
18 Parittāsubhā	Devas of Limited Glory		16 Mahākappa

17 Ābhassarā	Devas of Streaming Radiance	<b>2nd Jhāna</b>	8 Mahākappa
16 Appamāṇābhā	Devas of Unbounded Radiance		4 Mahākappa
15 Parittābhā	Devas of Limited Radiance		2 Mahākappa

14 Mahābrahmā	Great Brahma	<b>1st Jhāna</b>	1 Mahākappa
13 Brahmapurōhitā	Brahma's Ministers		1/2 Mahākappa
12 Brahmāpārisajjā	Brahma's Retinue		1/3 Mahākappa

## Kāmasugati Bhūmi

(Planes of Sensual Happiness)

11 Paranimitvasavatti	Devas Who Delight in Creation Māra resides here.	16,000 years 1 day = 1,600 human years
10 Nimmānarati	Devas Who Delight in Creating	6,000 celestial years 1 day = 800 human years
9 Tusita	Heaven of Delight Bodhisatta's Penultimate Existence	4,000 celestial years 1 day = 400 human years
8 Yāma	Heaven of the Yāma Devas	2,000 celestial years 1 day = 200 human years
7 Tāvātimsa	Heaven of the Thirty-three Sakka resides here.	1,000 celestial years 1 day = 100 human years
6 Cātumahārājika	The Four Great Kings King Dhātathra controls Gandhabbas in the East King Virūhaka controls Kumbhāndas in the South King Virupākha controls Nāgas in the West King Vessavana controls Yakkhas in the North	500 celestial years 1 day = 50 human years
5 Maṇussa Loka	Human Realm Human rebirth is brief and very rare.	10 Years Upwards Average Life-span Varies

## Kāmaduggati Bhūmi — Apāya

(Planes of Misery — States of Loss)

4 Asura	Demons
3 Peta	Ghosts and Unhappy Spirits
2 Tiracchāna	Animals
1 Niraya	Hells (Eight Major Hells)
	1. Saṅghava Nāraka
	2. Kālasutta Nāraka
	3. Saṅghāta Nāraka
	4. Rorūva Nāraka
	5. Mahārōruva Nāraka
	6. Tāpasa Nāraka
	7. Mahātipāna Nāraka
	8. Avīci Nāraka

## **The Lay Disciple Mahākāla**

This devout layman, having listened to the Dhamma throughout the night, was washing his face at the monastery's pond in the morning. At that time, a thief who was being pursued, threw his stolen goods near him and fled. The owners, mistaking Mahākāla for the thief, beat him to death. When the young novices found his dead body, they wondered why the lay disciple died after listening to the Dhamma. They asked the Buddha about it, who explained that it was due to his past evil kamma.

### **The Soldier and the Beautiful Wife**

The king of Benares posted a soldier at a frontier town, with orders to escort travellers through a forest where there were robbers. One day, a man and his wife arrived. On seeing the man's wife, the soldier fell in love with her at first sight. In spite of the man's protests, he had the carriage turned back, and arranged for them to be lodged for the night. During the night, the soldier hid a precious jewel in the travellers' carriage, and made a noise as if thieves had broken in. In the morning he 'discovered' the theft, and sent his men to search for the thieves. When the man and his wife left in the morning, their carriage was searched, the gem discovered, and the headman of the village had the man led away and beaten to death. After the soldier died, he was reborn in hell, and during the Buddha's time he was reborn as Mahākāla.

Having told this story of Mahākāla's past life, the Buddha uttered the above verse.

## **Practising for the Entire Day and Night**

The traditional practice — as I observed it in Wat Pah Nanachat — is to meditate for an entire day and night, not just for part of the day with tea-breaks, lunch-breaks, afternoon juice breaks, and so forth.

To be effective, meditation should be continuous, diligent, and relentless without stopping for any breaks. When one needs to eat, then one should eat mindfully, paying scrupulous attention to each and every movement of the eyes or hand, noting every smell, taste, and touch so that one does not lose mindfulness and get engrossed in enjoyment of the food. When thirsty, one should drink just plain water, or fruit juice if it is available, but stimulants like tea and coffee are best avoided. The mind is agitated by caffeine, which makes concentration more difficult. If one is sleepy, one should practise walking meditation, getting some fresh air if possible, or at least standing up to stretch the limbs.



## Maintaining Noble Silence

The precept of abstaining from wrong-speech (*musāvāda*) when observed properly includes abstaining from lying, slandering, abusing, and idle-chatter. For most people, this can only be fulfilled by not talking at all. The default should be to maintain silence, unless there is a good reason to speak. One may ask the meditation teacher for further instruction, or ask for a chair or to open a window, *etc.*, but all non-essential conversation should be avoided.

## The Eight Precepts

The additional three precepts further to the five that should be observed by all lay Buddhists, are concerned with abstaining from sensual pleasures. The third precept, to abstain from unchastity, is like the discipline of the monks to abstain from all sexual activity, even touching or laughing and joking with the opposite sex.

The sixth precept is to abstain from eating at the wrong time (*vikālabhojanā veramaṇi sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi*). Here, the wrong time means before dawn and after midday. In the UK, in the summer months, the first light of dawn may be as early as 2:40 am, while in mid Winter it is as late at 6:43 am. For practical purposes we can wait until light is clearly visible in the sky to the north east. Midday is determined when the sun is at its highest point in the sky, which is 1:00 pm during British Summer Time. One may drink clear fruit juice, or eat sugar or honey if famished just enough to allay one's hunger.

The seventh precept is to abstain from dancing, singing, music, and entertainments; from wearing garlands, perfumes, cosmetics, and jewellery (*nacca-gīta-vādita-visūkadassana-mālā-gandha-vilepana-dhāraṇa-mañḍana-vibhūsanatṭhānā veramaṇi sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi*). This includes both performing or watching entertainments whether live or via a computer, mobile phone, or music player. Even listening to or singing devotional stanzas is not permitted by this precept. Please refer to the [Gitassara Sutta](#) for the explanation.

The eighth precept is to abstain from using high or luxury beds and seats (*uccāsayana-mahāsayanā veramaṇi sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi*). The purpose of this training rule is to overcome attachment to the physical sensual pleasures of lying down, or reclining in armchairs, sun-beds, etc. If one is unable to sit for long periods on the floor due to age or physical disability, it is allowed to use a dining room chair, but one should hold one's own spine upright without leaning on the back if possible.

## Recommended Sitting Postures

It is important to be able to sustain the same sitting posture for an hour or more without severe discomfort and without constantly adjusting the position of the limbs. The back should be erect, the legs should be crossed, and the arms composed. If you can sit in the full lotus or half-lotus position, that is fine, but there is no need to torture yourself. The Burmese position with one leg tucked in and the other in front, both on the ground is comfortable for most meditators.



Check the position of your head and back from time to time, and straighten it up if necessary. If the spine is curved or the head is falling forwards you may feel drowsy, and experience pain in the neck, shoulders, or low back after some time. Relieve tensions by lifting your shoulders or rolling your neck slightly, then sit still again. If you need to uncross and cross your legs more than once during a session, get up and practise walking meditation instead.

## Walking Meditation

Only experienced meditators will be able to sit for long periods without severe discomfort. Beginners and ordinary meditators will become drowsy or the limbs will be stiff after an hour or two at the most. It is advised to balance sitting with walking meditation. Sit for one hour, then walk for one hour; or sit for thirty minutes, then walk for thirty minutes. Longer sessions are better for deeper concentration, but beginners will have to start with shorter sessions. One hour is a reasonable target, and long enough to gain concentration.

Walking meditation should be done outside, or in another room to avoid disturbing those who are sitting. Walk very slowly back and forth (six metres or twenty feet is enough, but one can manage with half that by taking shorter steps). Keep the eyes downcast, but do not bend down your head (to avoid a stiff neck). Do not get distracted by details on the floor, just gaze about two metres ahead while keeping inwardly focused on the movements of the feet. At first, just note as left, right, then gradually increase the number of parts of each step to be noted as concentration improves.

Soon you may be able to note: intending to lift the foot, lifting, moving, dropping, pressing down; then intending to lift the other foot, etc. On reaching the end of the walking area, note as reaching, standing, intending to turn, turning, turning, turning, standing, before starting to walk back again. Do not rush ahead or day-dream. If the mind should wander or the eye gets distracted, then stop walking, note thinking, seeing, *etc.*, before resuming walking by noting each part of the step as before.

## Eating and Drinking

Like monks, meditators should not be too much concerned with what they eat. They must be content with whatever is offered, though it is OK to request or bring one's own food if one has special dietary needs. When eating, note every action involved in the process: looking, seeing, fetching, putting, chewing, tasting, swallowing, etc. Take one morsel at a time; do not fetch another morsel while still chewing the current one, nor anticipate what you are going to eat after fetching and eating the morsel on your spoon. That is taking three morsels at a time, which is how unmindful people eat even when they are not talking as well. When drinking, follow the same practice.

There are only a few kinds of food that the Buddha proscribed for monks, and most are not eaten by human beings anyway. The meat of horses, elephants, snakes, dogs, and some wild animals, as well as raw meat or fish, are not permitted for monks, but meditators can eat whatever is available. The Buddha said that the best food is that offered with loving-kindness. Vegetarian food is commonly offered on Uposatha days, but whatever food is offered, a meditator should be content with it.

On Uposatha days, lay people may take breakfast before going to the monastery or meditation centre, then they need only one meal.

## Reverting to Five Precepts

After meditating for the entire night in the monastery or meditation centre, those observing the Uposatha can undertake the five precepts before returning home. Before leaving, they can offer breakfast alms to the monks, and then eat some leftovers, or wait until returning home.

The customary observance of five precepts at the end of the day defiles the Uposatha observance. If lay people eat in the evening then their undertaking of the sixth precept is a sham. If they sleep together with their spouse at night, then their observance of the *brahmachariya* is meaningless. If they watch entertainments in the evening, etc. then what little concentra-

tion they gained during the day will soon be dissipated. If the Uposatha observance is undertaking thinking: "When I get home I will eat such-and-such food, or watch my favourite TV program," *etc.*, then the meditator is not being mindful of the present realities, and cannot gain even shallow concentration, and without deep concentration, no insight will arise. The fruit of such superficial wholesome deeds is not stable. Probably, those good people serving the food for the meditators will make more merit than those who only pretend to be meditating.

To meditate effectively for the entire day and night is difficult. Ordinary monks will struggle to stay awake. However, like all difficult things that are worth attempting it becomes easier and more beneficial with repeated practice.

## **When to Observe the Uposatha**

In the Sakka Sutta the Buddha admonishes his relatives in Kapilavatthu to observe the Uposatha regularly. It seems that they were only accustomed to observing it occasionally. The Uposatha is the Buddhist holy day observed on 1st, 8th, 15th, and 23rd nights of the lunar month. The traditional practice during the Buddha's time (as stated in the Dhammika Sutta) was for lay devotees to observe four Uposatha days a month during five months of the year. This was during the month preceding Āsāḷha (July/August) when the Rains Retreat begins, and the month following the Rains, when the Kathina ceremony is held. The monks assemble to recite the Pātimokkha rules every fourteen or fifteen days on the Full-moon and New-moon days.

During the rainy season in India the people would have had no ploughing or harvesting to do, and travelling was difficult, so the monks stayed in one place. This was an ideal opportunity for the lay people to learn the Dhamma and practise meditation more. In western countries we need to make some adjustments to enable more people to benefit from the teachings. During the school Summer holidays, children would also be able to attend with their parents. Most Buddhist temples hold the Uposatha day celebrations on Sundays when more people will be able to attend. However, if one has to stay up the entire night then go to work the next day, it is not very practical. We should, perhaps, observe the Uposatha on whichever Saturday is closest to the Uposatha day. If the Uposatha day falls on Sunday, Monday, or Tuesday, we could observe it on the preceding Saturday; and if it falls on Wednesday, Thursday, or Friday, we could observe it on the following Saturday. In the UK at least, doing the weekend shop early on a Sunday morning after observing the Uposatha all night on Saturday, would not be a problem.