1.2.4

The Third Precept: From Craving to Contentment
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Positive form: With stillness, simplicity, and contentment, I purify my body.
Negative form: I undertake the training principle of refraining from sexual misconduct.
Pāli: Kāmesu micchācāra veramanī sikkhapadaṃ samādiyāmi.

Introduction: sex is just one craving
This guideline is about freeing ourselves from the addictions and cravings that keep us from experiencing peace of mind – it is not about taking a puritanical view of sex. In the traditional negative form of the precept, sex is singled out as probably the most powerful human craving, and therefore potentially the greatest obstacle to contentment. But really we are being advised not to let any desire turn into the sort of neurotic craving that can keep our mind in a whirl – and sex here stands for all our desires. In the negative form of the precept, the idea of ‘sexual misconduct’ does not imply any moralistic attitude to particular forms of sexual activity, such as sex outside marriage, homosexuality, or masturbation. The sort of ‘misconduct’ the precept is advising us against is sexual behaviour that harms others, or ourselves.

Neurotic craving
Practising this precept involves exercising some control over our desires and appetites, to help us experience ‘stillness, simplicity and contentment.’ Buddhism sees ‘craving’ as the enemy of contentment, but it does not see all desires as ‘bad’. Many desires are healthy and necessary. When we are hungry, thirsty or cold, then our desires for food, water or warmth are all natural and positive. Our desires for friendship, community, beauty, creativity, and for a productive outlet for our energies, are also positive. Finally, we seem to have an inbuilt desire to fulfil our spiritual potential, and without this we would never grow and develop.

To do away with all desire would condemn us to a life of stagnation. So we need to distinguish between healthy desire, which is necessary for life and growth, and neurotic craving, which keeps us bound to a cycle of never-ending dissatisfaction. Neurotic craving could be defined as desire for something that cannot satisfy the need we are trying to satisfy. For example, if we overeat, we are not eating because our body needs nourishment. Perhaps we are looking for comfort in food because we lack affection or self-esteem. But food can never give us either of these – in fact, overeating will make it more difficult for us to get what we really need.

Becoming creative
Unfortunately a lot of our desire is neurotic. Until we begin to manifest more of our spiritual potential we will experience a sense that something is missing in our lives. Usually we try to satisfy this sense of inner dissatisfaction by grasping at things in the outer world, like pleasures and possessions. But these can only distract us temporarily from our sense of inner need, just as comfort-eating can only distract us from our need for affection. This displaced neurotic desire is the force that drives the consumer society, and it also drives many people’s
lives. It puts us on an endless treadmill, chasing an imaginary carrot. But happiness does not come from catching the carrot – it can never be caught. Instead it comes from getting off the treadmill, and looking for fulfilment where it actually can be found.

For most of us this would mean a radical shift in the way we approach life, and we are not likely to make this shift all at once. But practising this precept gives us a way to start, by beginning to leave behind our more obvious patterns of addictive behaviour based on neurotic craving. This can be one of the main ways we practice becoming creative, rather than simply repeating old comfort-seeking behaviours that deepen our reactive patterns. So for example when we feel the urge to escape from our sense of dissatisfaction by taking refuge in our normal distractions – food, cigarettes, shopping, drink, drugs, sex, or whatever – instead of responding in an unconscious way we can remain conscious, exercise our freedom, and choose to do something different and creative. At first this will mean that we have to face up to some discomfort, because changing old patterns is uncomfortable. But in the longer term – and perhaps quite quickly – we are likely to experience more and more positive mental states, and a growing sense of freedom and power in our lives.

The dangers of distraction
The ways we distract ourselves from our sense of inner dissatisfaction may not be ‘bad’ in themselves, but unless we keep them in their proper place, they can have at least three negative consequences. Firstly, if we orientate our life around them they stop us focusing our attention on what can really satisfy us, so that we waste our lives by constantly looking for fulfilment in the wrong place. Secondly these ways we distract ourselves often become addictive. The more we overeat, drink, smoke, take drugs, acquire property, shop, consume, masturbate, indulge in romantic fantasies, or whatever, the more difficult it becomes to disentangle ourselves from our habits and look for satisfaction in a different, more effective way. Thirdly, our addictive distractions often give rise to negative mental states, so that instead of helping us to be happy they actually separate us even further from the parts of ourselves that could give us real fulfilment. For example, when our desires are thwarted we may well feel anger or ill-will towards the people who stand between us and what we want. In fact our attempt to find happiness by consuming, owning or experiencing things in the outer world may cause a host of negative actions and mental states, including dishonesty, resentment, envy, and anxiety.

Sex
In its traditional negative form this precept focuses particularly on sex, as the most powerful craving for many people. Buddhism does not see sex in itself as ‘evil’, but sex can be a powerful focus for our neurotic desire, so we need to bring our creativity and ethical sense into our sexual lives.

For the lay Buddhist the negative form of this precept was traditionally taken to mean that we should avoid adultery, rape, and abduction. This is not much help as a guideline in present-day society, so we need to go back to first principles. The principle we need to apply is obviously that we should avoid harming others or ourselves through our sexual behaviour.

The following section has been written by a man, from a man’s perspective. For a fuller discussion of this issue from a woman’s point of view, see Appendix 1 below. Whatever your gender, both discussions are likely to have some relevance to you.
Not harming others
Our sexual desires are likely to harm others if we look for our own pleasure without taking other people into account. We should therefore try to see sexual partners as important in their own right, basing our relationships on mettā, and not exploiting others or treating them as sex objects. This would include not entering into unequal relationships where the partner has expectations we have no intention of fulfilling. We should also avoid causing pain to third parties for the sake of sex, for example by having sex with one member of a settled couple. In the present day, pornography too needs to be seen in the light of this precept.

Not harming ourselves
Our sexual desires harm us if we allow them to turn into neurotic craving, or if they are so demanding that they stop us experiencing peace of mind. We need to manage our sex drive so that it does not dominate our experience or set our life agenda – if we let it, sex can control our whole existence. Managing our sex drive means not stoking up our sexual desires unnecessarily. This involves what is called 'guarding the gates of the senses' – controlling how we use our senses to reduce the amount of sexual stimulation we receive. We have a choice about where we put our attention, and if we constantly choose to focus on what we find sexually stimulating, then we will find peace of mind very difficult to achieve. Guarding the gates of the senses also involves watching how we use our mind, so that we don’t use sexual fantasies as a way of distracting ourselves from our experience. (In Buddhism the mind is seen as the sixth sense, as it is another gateway through which stimuli can enter our awareness.)

Managing our sex drive in an ethical way involves neither glorifying sex as something sublime, nor demonising it as something evil, both of which give it a power it does not deserve. Our sex drive is part of our animal inheritance – neither spiritual nor demonic.

Abstinence
Complete abstinence from sex has traditionally been seen as an important practice for monks, nuns, and other people seriously following the spiritual path. In the days before contraception this was partly for practical reasons. But celibacy is also an important practice in its own right. Freeing the mind from the constant disturbance caused by sexual desire is an enormous step towards contentment. Abstinence also makes energy available for other purposes, especially meditation. Because of this many Buddhists who are not normally celibate voluntarily refrain from sex for specific periods, perhaps for just a few weeks while on a retreat, perhaps for longer.

Stillness, simplicity, and contentment
The aim of this precept is to help us to become happier. By freeing ourselves from neurotic desires and slavery to biological urges we create a space in which we can experience peace of mind and positive mental states. But in the twenty-first century world craving is not the only enemy of contentment. Our society encourages a fast, hurried pace of life, which leaves little space for more expansive mental states. Many of us work too many hours, at jobs we do mainly for the pay cheque, at a pace that depletes our energies and causes high levels of anxiety. So much of our lives can be spent either earning money or spending it that we don’t have the energy to use our brief periods of rest creatively. ‘Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.’ And our over-active states of mind can become addictive, so that we find it difficult to switch off, and spend our precious leisure time giving ourselves even more input, doing things like watching TV or surfing the web.
Cultivating simplicity

If we want peace of mind – what the precept calls stillness and contentment – then we need to see simplicity as a positive quality, and we need to cultivate it. We may need to make some decisions about our priorities, and to simplify our lives accordingly. We may need to see that having fewer things – and spending less time earning the money to buy them – can make our life richer rather than poorer. We may need to overcome the conditioning that tells us that simplicity equals poverty, and instead see it as beautiful and desirable. Simplicity in life, like simplicity in art, is an aspect of elegant good taste, because it gets rid of unnecessary clutter, and opens up a sense of space, light, and freedom.

Cultivating stillness, simplicity and contentment does not mean that we should sit around doing nothing. We have energies, and we need to use them, or they will turn against us. But in our prosperous societies many of us could live more simply than we do, and this would allow us to spend less time working for purely economic reasons. This is in fact what many practising Buddhists choose to do, reducing the time spent on economic work, in order to spend more time on spiritual practice, altruistic activity, and creative pursuits, as well as making life more relaxed and spacious. For many people this sounds like an attractive idea, but achieving it involves disentangling ourselves from the consumer society – which may not sound so attractive, and requires some determination and strength of character, because it often runs completely counter to the values of our present society.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Do you agree that a lot of the desires that drive human activity are ‘neurotic’? If so, think of some examples.

2. “Happiness does not so much come from getting what we want, as from having fewer wants.” Do you agree? If so, what does this say about the approach to happiness offered by the consumer society?

3. What are some of your neurotic cravings and addictions (we all have them)?

4. How often do you think about sex? To what extent do you tend to seek out sense impressions that will increase your sexual desire, or on the other hand guard the gates of the senses to limit sex desire?

5. Do you see simplicity - in the sense of keeping what we own and consume down to what is necessary for a healthy life - as a positive or negative quality? How much scope do you have for simplifying your life?

6. Is your life too busy, or is it not busy enough? Either way, what could you do about it?

Suggested exercises

1. Give yourself at least an hour alone to do absolutely nothing this week – preferably longer. Notice any underlying sense of boredom, anxiety or dissatisfaction. Notice what you want to do to escape any discomfort. Instead, sit with the discomfort for a while, then do something skilful, such as meditating or exercising.
2. Consider taking a personal precept related to this ethical guideline for a week, for example:

- To give up some minor addiction for the week.
- To avoid television for the week.
- To simplify your life in some small way, like giving away a possession.
- To practice guarding the gates of the senses this week, avoiding sexual stimuli, or avoiding sense impressions that stoke up some other craving that is more relevant to your practice – desire for food might be an example.

3. Decide to go on retreat. Consult an Order member about which retreats might be appropriate, set aside at least a week, and make a reservation.

Appendix: Reflections on the Third Precept for Women
Written by Vajratara.

The introduction to the third precept gives a good overview of the underlying craving that gives rise to neurotic, addictive patterns of wanting, for example, food, cigarettes, shopping and sex. It also gives some suggestions of how we can work with that craving. Sex is used as the most powerful example of craving, and the third precept traditionally focuses on the area of unskilful sexual behaviour: rape, adultery and abduction. The question then arises, how can we practise the third precept in our modern situation, what does it mean for us now? Sex and sexual relationships are certainly a huge preoccupation for many people. This addition to week 4 of the course is from a women’s perspective. In it I offer some suggestions of discussion topics based on themes that I have encountered while exploring how to live a Dharma life and practise ethics as a woman in the UK. From that point of view it is necessarily culturally and socially specific. It may be useful to talk to someone from a different culture about sex and relationships. In the West we can assume our way of multiple relationships is the best, but from another culture’s point of view we can seem restless and unsatisfied. As the Dalai Lama said ‘we have won our freedom, but we lack contentment’. The norms around sex and sexual relationships differ widely in different generations and cultures. This addition to week 4 is not intended to be the definitive answer to the questions that arise when discussing this area, but rather some topics to think about and explore. By their nature they will be more relevant to women, but whatever your gender identification, you may find something of interest to reflect upon.

What do you really want?
In the introduction, neurotic desire is defined as ‘desire for something that cannot satisfy the need we are trying to satisfy’. Of course, sexual relationships don’t always have to be neurotic, but we do have to examine what we really want and whether we are communicating to the other person what we really want. Is it pleasure we want, or comfort, or deeper communication? Do we want friendship or emotional support? Do we want excitement, or a sense of emotional wholeness or engagement? If we examine what we really want, the next question is can sex or a particular sexual relationship really satisfy that need, or are we expecting something from that relationship that it cannot possibly satisfy?

A major issue that has come up in discussion with other women is entering into relationships with unequal expectations. An example of this is when one person wants sex, one person
wants a long term relationship. To get what we want, it is tempting to be unclear about expectations or to agree to what the other person wants despite our own deeper desires. This leads to suffering in the long term as both partners have to face not getting what they wanted from the other person.

A topic that has come up in study groups I have led for women is being vague about contraception, having a buried desire to have a baby that leads to unconscious slips with contraception. We called this getting pregnant ‘accidentally-on-purpose’. Having a child is a huge responsibility and commitment and it is important that both partners are fully behind the decision to bring a life into being. If you want a child, it is better to be honest about that both with yourself and with your partner so that you can go about it in a conscious and careful way, setting up the best conditions possible.

In his book *The Noble Eight-Fold Path*, Sangharakshita talks about the positive counterpart to the third precept, contentment, as ‘a positive state of freedom from using sex to satisfy neurotic needs in general and, in particular, using it to satisfy the neurotic need for change’. It may be interesting to reflect on whether a need for change, or a dissatisfaction with our current situation, is underlying our desire for sex or a sexual relationship. Dissatisfaction with our current state can be very uncomfortable to experience, even painful at times. Sangharakshita calls it ‘the flame of desire that burns unsatisfied from birth to birth until once and for all extinguished in the cool waters of Nirvāṇa’\(^1\). The Buddha made it clear that there is a certain kind of desire that can only be satisfied by spiritual fulfilment. He called this ‘dharma-chanda’ which means desire for the Truth. We may look to sex or romance to fulfil that desire, but only spiritual practice can satisfy that deeper need. In this case devotional practice such as pūjā and mantra recitation can be better than looking for another person to fulfil what is essentially an existential problem.

**Projection**

We are often led to believe that sexual attraction is independent of our will, we are shot through the heart by a flowery bow and arrow! The Buddhist view is that everything that arises, does so in dependence on conditions. This includes sexual attraction. There is a volition to fall in love or be attracted to someone. Often we are attracted to someone because they embody our emergent qualities: qualities that we are developing or would like to develop. Sangharakshita describes this process of ‘projection’ in the following way: ‘Because one does not experience certain qualities in oneself, in the sense of not having integrated them into one’s conscious being, one is unconsciously drawn to finding them outside oneself.’\(^2\)

An exercise that might be useful to explore is to examine why you are attracted to someone – is it their confidence, their spontaneity, their spiritual practice? Once you identify that quality, you can look for it in yourself. It is likely that you do possess that quality, at least in germinal form, and you would like to develop it more fully. The difficulty with getting into a sexual relationship with someone else who we are projecting those qualities onto is that we look to them to embody them, rather than developing them in ourselves. It may also be the case that they don’t embody them at all, it was something we projected onto them. When the projection fails one can experience deep disappointment with them. This doesn’t mean we should never get into a relationship with someone who embodies qualities we admire, but if we do, we

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Sex and Power
The traditional formula of the third precept clearly indicates abstention from forcing someone to do something against their wishes: rape and abduction. The examples are usually taken to be from a man’s perspective. It is important we heed the advice to abstain from any form of violence, but we also need to look at the more subtle manifestations of violence in our own lives: exploiting someone or manipulating them to get what we want. Women are perfectly capable of doing this as well as men. One has to ask oneself honestly if we have ever used our sexual power over someone else to further our desires.

Power used in this way can indicate a deeper lack of self worth. If we lack confidence in ourselves we can habitually use sex and relationships to bolster our sense of self. It is easy to look to sex and sexual attractiveness to feel better about ourselves. If other people find us attractive or desire us in some way, this makes us feel we are worth something. In this way we look to others for approval and affirmation. We want other people to be attracted to us so that we can feel our place in the world. Through Buddhist practice, particularly the Mettā Bhāvanā, we can cultivate inner confidence and self worth that means that we no longer have to look outside of ourselves for affirmation. This means that our relationships are healthy; mutually appreciative rather than exploitative.

Cultivating Aesthetic Appreciation
Underlying sexual and romantic attraction is the tendency to make oneself a subject in a position of grasping an object. This can happen when we are first attracted to someone as well as when we are in a long-term settled relationship. If we identify someone as an object, we ‘objectify’ them. We enter into a relationship with someone as someone we can have or reject, rather than a person in their own right, independent of our own desires. The Buddhist tradition talks about this as pema, ‘sticky attachment’. This means grasping onto someone as an object that we want, that somehow makes us feel complete as a subject. That attachment gives rise to painful mental states, particularly when we don’t get what we want. We feel that somehow our self identification is threatened and we want to hang on to that person at any cost. We can experience jealousy even over quite trivial events if the object of our desire seems to move their attention to someone else. Our attraction can turn to hate if the object of our desires rejects us in any way.

The way to work against this tendency is to cultivate aesthetic appreciation for the other person. Aesthetic appreciation is neither a denial of attraction, nor an identification with it, seeing ourselves as a subject grasping an object. Aesthetic appreciation is akin to mettā. Mettā does not seek to own its object, but to delight in it. If we see a person with mettā we see them as beautiful, but we don’t want to own that beauty. Because we see that person as existing independently of us with their own hopes and fears and qualities, we naturally want to help them to grow and develop, even if that means getting out of their way. As Sangharakshita explains: ‘Metta is disinterested. When it’s a question of lust you want to grab; when it’s a question of aesthetic appreciation, you just want to stand back and contemplate.’ We can relax around our attraction, we can relax with our long term partner. We can delight in them without trying to have or own them.

Conclusion
The main message that the Buddha and Sangharakshita give when exploring these issues is to take an honest look at the whole area of attraction, sex and settled relationships. What seems

should make sure they really do embody those qualities, and let them inspire similar qualities in us.
most important is clarity. What mental state are you expressing in your sexual behaviour? Are you really being free and non-conventional, or are you acting out of craving and fear? What do you really want from the relationship? No one can tell you the answer to that, one has to look inside oneself for one’s true motivation. We also need to examine the likely consequences of our behaviour. We may be attracted to someone who is already in a settled relationship, and they may be attracted to us, but what will be the consequences of following that attraction through? If we read sentimental romantic or erotic novels, or watch films with those themes, what will be the likely effect on our mind?

Sangharakshita advised the Triratna Buddhist Order to ‘move towards complete brahmacharya’, which means a state without sexual polarisation or objectification: celibacy. He said it isn’t a case of some people being totally celibate, and some people being totally non-celibate, we all experience states without sexual polarisation, or more positively speaking, contentment. If we can make more space for contentment in our lives, for aesthetic appreciation and simple pleasures, we will find that we won’t need to be so preoccupied with sexual relationships. They simply won’t take up as much space in our lives. If we are in a settled relationship, it will mean we get into more satisfying, open communication with our partner based on mettā rather than grasping.

Eventually this may lead to periods of time without sex or sexual relationships, perhaps even a lifetime. Most people experience periods of time without sex as very satisfying, for example when we go on retreat, or between relationships. We experience ourselves in a different way. Perhaps we get more in touch with our deeper longings, or with what we really want in life. We put more energy into our friendships and other relationships. We become less preoccupied with our sexual and romantic desires.

This is a radical thing to do in this society where we are given the message that somehow we are not complete unless we are in a sexual relationship or having sex. Sexual relationships are taken as a sign of worth in society, and sexual attractiveness a validation of our femininity. We may be frightened that if we don’t have sex, we will be cutting off our emotions. Emotional intensity and intimacy are associated purely with romance and sex, and if we give up on them, we may feel our emotions will become dry or stagnate. However, it doesn’t have to be that way. We can feel our femininity, our sense of self worth and emotional intensity through other means, particularly through friendships. Perhaps it is better to think more in terms of cultivating deeper friendships than giving up sex. Celibacy, temporary or permanent, doesn’t have to be a colourless state, but a state of contentment, delight and beauty.