

## Dharma Talk 04/10/2022 On Precepts

Dear friends

You may know by now that I enjoy starting my talks with a poem. Today I have a different offering, a slightly modified version of the precepts used by the Everyday Zen community and an excerpt of "Taking our Places" :

The Threefold Refuge

I take refuge in Buddha.

This is the stillness, the clarity, the kindness that is the real nature of all life.

I take refuge in Dharma.

This is the way of life, day by day, that accords with Buddha.

I take refuge in Sangha.

This is the community of all being that is our refuge and support.

The Three Boundless Precepts

I vow to refrain from all action that increases suffering.

This is the intention to always practice a wise restraint.

I vow to perform all action that increases awareness.

This is the intention to actually do what occurs to us that can make ourselves and others truly happy.

I vow to live for and with all being.

This is the intention to always try to see everything with an unselfish eye.

The Ten Clear Mind Precepts

A follower of the way cultivates and encourages life, does not take life. One who is committed to following the way lives with awareness. Such a person can never knowingly harm a single thing.

A follower of the way honors the gift not yet given, does not steal. Everything belongs to us and nothing belongs to us; but we don't take anything unless it is offered to us as a gift.

A follower of the way remains faithful in relationships, does not misuse sexuality. There is no way to remain deeply in relationship without complete honesty and openness.

A follower of the way communicates truth, does not lie. Our speech must be true and

accurate and kind. We make and destroy worlds with our words.

A follower of the way polishes clarity, dispelling delusion, does not intoxicate self or others. To share spirits moderately with friends may be all right; but intoxication as a way to relax or cope, whether it be with substances or doctrines, creates confusion and unhappiness.

A follower of the way creates wisdom from ignorance, does not criticize others mindlessly. We make an effort to be thoughtful and caring in our speech about others. In this way we can love and be loved.

A follower of the way maintains modesty, praises others, not self. Please let each other know, frequently, how much you love and respect each other and why.

A follower of the way shares freely, is not stingy. Since there is nothing we can possess, especially others, we approach the world and each other with open hands.

A follower of the way dwells in equanimity, does not harbor anger or ill will. When there is anger, see it as anger; respect it but don't keep it close; try as much as you can to let it go. Try not to let a single day end with ill will between you. There is no justification for resentment. Remember this.

A follower of the way respects the Buddha, unfolds the Dharma, nourishes the Sangha. With the taking of these precepts we express our vow to live a life that is in accord with the sacred nature of all that is.

"In particle physics the search for the irreducible core of matter yields only a seemingly endless proliferation of parts. The more closely you look at the parts, the less easily they can be found-they seem to be indeterminate and relative to the very act of your looking. While on a gross level we can distinguish one thing from another, on a refined level no thing is actually find-able. Similarly, the more closely you look into your own conduct and the conduct of others, the less you will find a "me" to be right or a "you" to be wrong, and the less you will find a "right" or a "wrong," a "good" or a "bad." There is only the wide, true and deep effort to be effectively kind beyond moral judgment or discrimination. "

Last Wednesday we celebrated the precepts together in our new home at the Unitarian Fellowship. And doing that always makes me inexplicably happy. Maybe it is a carry-over from jukai or priest ordination. Maybe it is a way of rising up to meet the oneness,

the non-duality of life. If we do think in terms of one and not-two how can we think about breaking the precepts? Maybe it is remembering wise words I received when I needed them: If it is without love, it is not the precepts. We also need to recall how we are so profoundly tied up together, how our lives, are each completely interdependent. We are more intimate than the words can ever convey. We are all relatives. We are all family.

Now that I have said If we do think in terms of one and not-two how can we think about breaking the precepts, I ought to add the other part. Yes, we do break the precepts. Sometimes we may stick too closely to the literal meaning of the precept and at other times I just need rules. Rules. Reminders. We usually don't need reminders not to kill but gossip may sneak its way into our conversation. And of course, the literal meaning IS important. Sometimes our interpretation of the compassion aspect of a precept may be wrong, we are off what it means to be compassionate. And we need to see that abiding by the compassionate view of the precept is essential. Following a literal precept is not always our way. Our understanding of what is required of us may miss the point.

Last is the ultimate meaning which touches on deep understanding of the precepts. A superficial understanding of the ultimate level of the precepts can be harmful to practitioners unless it grows out of a solid grounding in the literal and compassionate levels. Yes, the cup is already broken – but that does not mean using a baseball bat to interact with fine crystal.

I am fortunate because last year and this year too I have been able to look at the the precepts together with fellow practitioners. In our events calendar it says that I am one of the teachers; however, I prefer to say that we are exploring the precepts together. This exploration brings our lives and hearts and experiences to the table. Speaking for my self, there is a vulnerable feeling, raw, an exposure about the subject. It is an offering to the community by all the participants.

A couple of decades ago, when I started to get serious about Zen practice, I frankly wondered why the precepts were such a big deal in our Soto Zen tradition. They show up at jukai, ordination, monthly full moon ceremonies, weddings, and funerals. So what was the big deal? After a while, I started to treat each precept as my personal koan.

One thing came up for me. I myself grew up in catholic family, so was this another version of the commandments? I did notice one difference early on: the precepts pretty much only have to do with my own conduct, how I relate to others. The first christian

commandments in contrast address the relationship of the believer with god:

I am the Lord your God. You shall not have strange gods before me.

You shall not make to thyself any graven thing; nor the likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, nor of those things that are in the waters under the earth. You shall not adore them nor serve them.

You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

Remember to keep holy the Sabbath day.

The precepts keep revealing themselves mostly on the cushion. In the quiet, the stillness, there is space for the heart to speak and in the silence I hear the voice usually drowned out by the next thing to do and the busyness that comes with being alive and a household and so on. Having a meditation practice brings clear seeing, one perceives ones place in the world, illusions and delusions fall away. Things I got away with gleefully now reappear stripped of their arrogance and attitude. Frankly, these insights are often not pretty. They are helpful, which is better. They bring wisdom and change and transformation. Instead of the feeling of getting away with something it turns to I will not make that mistake again. If the powerful impact of understanding of a mistake doesn't hit home, if it doesn't sear the soul, then I am not making proper use of the mistake. It will not serve to teach and tenderize your heart. Once I feel remorse for a mistake, I can start to process it. This process might take a good deal of time. And of course the process also includes restitution and conversations with the person I hurt if possible.

Precepts are the quick impulse control guardrails that help and support my interactions and conduct. They are not passive, rigid patterns we bump into. They are more like poles or a lattice that helps bean sprouts to grow into the sky. Of course we humans have a sense of what it means to live an ethical life. When we encounter a situation, our gut usually does have the right answer on hand. But there is desire, aversion, and delusion that may counter our honorable impulse. By having taken the precepts I have an obligation to the precepts. Oh, one more point: the way we practice is personal. I can say that I broke a precept. What I cannot talk about is that another person is breaking the precepts.

Why is ethical conduct necessary? Because it directly affects every thought and action. Today I create the karma that determines my life tomorrow. My teacher Norman Fischer said "meditation, ethical conduct and wisdom refine, deepen and balance each other, until little by little the vessel of your life stands strong. In Zen, the practice of ethical conduct is both beginning and advanced practice. While new students are encouraged to conduct themselves straightforwardly in order to learn the practice,

experienced students know that their conduct is the expression of their practice in the world—the most difficult accomplishment of all.”

He also said “Zen practice has two parts—sitting down and getting up. When we sit down, we calm, clear and illuminate the mind. When we get up, we live our life in this world as an extension and expression of the beauty of our sitting. Sitting down and getting up together comprise a full and mature human being, one who is receptive and open but also responsible and committed.”

Seen from this perspective, how do we sit down with the precepts? Open and humble, aware of our human impulses. And we get up with humility. The precepts I cherish are an expression of love. Aligning ourselves with the teaching we commit to a new life. To us Zen practitioners, practicing with the precepts offers a creative path toward maturity and freedom.

Dogen said: “Buddhas and ancestors  
realize the entire sky and the great earth.  
Manifesting the great body,  
in the sky there is no inside or outside.  
Manifesting the dharma body,  
on earth there is not an inch of ground.