

SETTLING INTO THE HEART OF BUDDHA:

Working With the Precepts

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This month, I want to introduce you to the Sixteen Observances of the Zen Peacemaker Order and to share briefly some perspectives on precept practice.

In our lineage, the sixteen precepts are one of the three pillars of practice, the other two pillars being Samadhi and wisdom. These precepts are the Buddha's precepts, the natural expression of our life as the awakened nature that is our birthright.

We practice the precepts from many different perspectives. Let's explore three of these perspectives from which to open up the ten grave precepts. These perspectives are:

- 1) the fundamentalist aspect
- 2) the compassionate aspect,
- 3) the absolute aspect.

From the outset, let me emphasize that our practice is to raise an awareness of all three perspectives and of when we are ignoring one or another. In this way, we come to know our life from as broad a view as possible, thus transforming our limited, short-sighted attitudes. These perspectives can help us to become as all-seeing and all-sided as possible, moving us beyond positions of merely solidifying opinions and attitudes.

The precepts are often stated as "do nots:" do not lie, do not steal, etc. The Zen Peacemaker expression (see next page) takes a different turn. Regardless of how one chooses to state these precepts, it is important to see that the precepts are not chains, not a list of "do and do not" that result in self-righteous and rigid behavior.

The precepts have their home in generosity for they are life-enhancing; in gratitude for they illuminate the functioning of our life; and in respect, without which we are something less than human. The precepts are a breath of freshness, inspiring us to live from truth and not as an imitation of what someone tells us we should or should not do. Precepts help us reflect deeply upon ourselves and examine how we live.

Now for the three perspectives. The first is the fundamentalist perspective. Sometimes it is called the literal or the Hinayana (Small Vehicle) aspect, but I prefer to call it fundamental because it is very basic, a black and white perspective, not characterized by the gray areas of interpretation. "Do not kill" means do not kill. "Do not lie" means do not lie. It is straightforward: simply don't do it. Another reminder is that this perspective engages the body: do not use one's body to lie, cheat, steal, etc.

The second perspective is of compassionate action. This is sometimes called the Mahayana (Bodhisattva or Great vehicle) aspect. It is characterized by the so-called gray areas of life where choices are not black and white, but where we confront the possibility that the "do not" may be a "do," and vice versa. Our partner begs us to help end their life due to unbearable pain. We find ourselves or our partner unexpectedly pregnant. We come into information that will hurt innocent people. We find ourselves in situations where the course of action is not clear cut: how do we engage our compassion?

When considering compassionate action, there are several guidelines which we can apply to help us make decisions. For any given situation, we can consider the facts, appropriateness, and motivation. Facts are fairly straightforward: who, when, where, how. Appropriateness is subjective: we consider the appropriateness of our actions and how much action is necessary. What is the right amount of caring? And third, we consider our motivation, paying particular attention to the inner whispers of self-protection.

We encounter many everyday life situations that are not grave, but push our buttons for some reason or another. When our buttons are pushed, we can raise our awareness. In doing so, we see how we project outwardly and can respond by softening the rigid boundaries of our self-protection. We have the opportunity to see tightly held beliefs and attitudes and open to the possibilities of life as it is.

Of course, no matter how well considered, our decisions have consequences. We cannot avoid cause and effect, and therefore the life of precept practice is revealed in how things unfold from moment to moment, year to year, lifetime to lifetime. In some sense, we never really know if we have acted sufficiently. Regardless, each of us is responsible for our life. We simply do the best we can do at any given time.

The third perspective is the absolute. Sometimes it is called the essential or Buddhayana (Buddha vehicle) aspect. This is the perspective of emptiness: no black, no white, no gray, no color. Here there is only the naked self, without the clothing of our conditioning. This perspective reveals to us that ultimately there is no such thing as stealing: no one to steal, no one to steal from, nothing to steal. In other words, non-stealing. This is the undifferentiated state in which stealing is not even possible; we have stepped beyond "do" and "do not."

Often when people hear of this absolute perspective, they say, "Well then, it doesn't matter what I do." This is wrong understanding. It matters very much what you do. Living life as emptiness is a life of decisive action based not on our personal issues, but on the impersonal nature of the Self. From this perspective, we begin to see that practice is not so much about making our life "work," but about settling into the heart of Buddha. The heart of Buddha is simply our life as it is.

Once again, let me emphasize that all three perspectives -- fundamental, compassionate, and absolute -- are essential for wholeness. To only be fundamental would result in unbearable rigidity; to hold only an absolute position would be psychopathic. How we practice with these perspectives reveals the kind of person that we are.

In precept practice, we simply do the best that we can. Whatever we do, we raise our awareness. This is a practice of continuous awareness. In the midst of the ever-changing conditions of our life, do we have the awareness to respond to whatever is happening in a way that exposes our life as it is? This non-attachment leaves us open to the infinite possibilities of the heart of Buddha. Deeply examine this heart of Buddha and realize it as your own life.

THE SIXTEEN OBSERVANCES OF THE ZEN PEACEMAKER ORDER

The Three Refuges of a Zen Peacemaker (The Three Treasures)

Inviting all creations into the mandala of my practice and vowing to serve them,
I take refuge in:

Buddha, the awakened nature of all beings;

Dharma, the ocean of wisdom and compassion,

Sangha, the community of those living in harmony with all Buddhas and Dharmas.

The Three Tenets of a Zen Peacemaker

The Three Pure Precepts: Do no evil, Do good, Do good for others

Taking refuge and entering the stream of engaged spirituality, I vow to live a life of:

Not-knowing, thereby giving up fixed ideas about myself and the universe.

Bearing witness to the joy and suffering of the world.

Healing myself and others.

The Ten Practices of a Zen Peacemaker (The Ten Grave Precepts)

Being mindful of the interdependence of Oneness and Diversity,

and wishing to actualize my vows,

I engage in the spiritual practices of:

1. Recognizing that I am not separate from all that is.

This is the precept of Non-Killing.

2. Being satisfied with what I have.

This is the precept of Non-Stealing.

3. Encountering all creations with respect and dignity.

This is the precept of Chaste Conduct.

4. Listening and speaking from the heart.

This is the precept of Non-Lying.

5. Cultivating a mind that sees clearly.

This is the precept of Not Being Deluded.

6. Unconditionally accepting what each moment has to offer.

This is the precept of Not Talking About others Errors and Faults.

7. Speaking what I perceive to be the truth without

guilt or blame. This is the precept of Not Elevating Oneself and Blaming Others.

8. Using all of the ingredients of my life.

This is the precept of Not Being Stingy.

9. Transforming suffering into wisdom.

This is the precept of Not Being Angry.

10. Honoring my life as an instrument of peacemaking.

This is the precept of Not Thinking Ill of the Three Treasures.