Taking and Receiving the Precepts

Part 3

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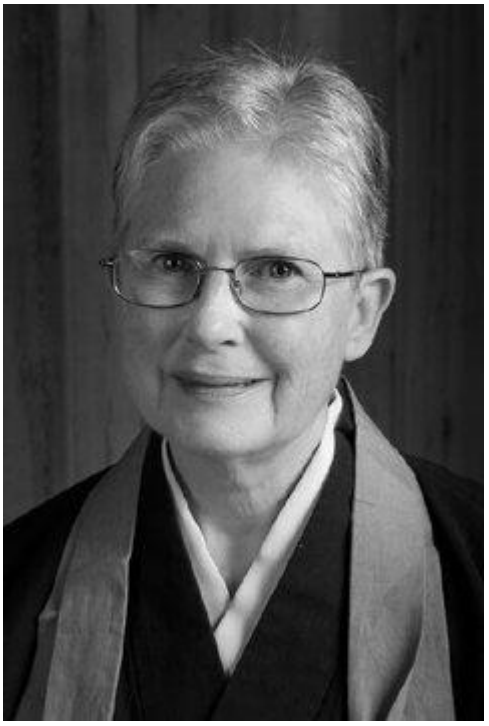

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There is a story about a Chinese Zen master who was called Bird's Nest Roshi. He got this name because he often meditated in a tree. One day an eminent man, who was both a governor and well-known poet, paid him a visit, arriving while he was up in his tree. When the governor found him, he said, "What a dangerous seat you have up there in the tree." Bird's Nest Roshi replied, "Yours is more dangerous than mine." The governor said, "I am the governor of this province and don't see what danger there is in this." Bird's Nest responded, "Then, sir, you don't know yourself very well. When passions burn and mind is unsteady, this is the greatest danger." The governor then asked, "What is the teaching of Buddhism?", and Bird's Nest Roshi recited a verse from the *Dhammapada*, "Not to commit wrong actions, But to do all good ones, And keep the heart pure, This is the teaching of all Buddhas." When the governor heard this, he was not impressed and said, "Any child of three years knows that." Bird's Nest Roshi said, "Any three-year-old child may know it, but even an eighty-year-old man cannot do it."

I would like to continue talking about the process of receiving the precepts as a lay person. In Zen, we use the Sixteen Bodhisattva Precepts to work with the activity of our body, speech and mind. These precepts are described as Three Refuges, Three Pure Precepts, and Ten Clear Mind Precepts. In the ceremony, after taking refuge, we are given the Three Pure Precepts, or Three Collective Precepts, which I would like to talk about today. The Pure Precepts developed from the verse that Bird's Nest Roshi quoted from the *Dhammapada,* which is one of the very earliest Buddhist texts. The traditional version of the Pure Precepts is "Renounce all evil, Practice all good, Keep the mind pure, Thus have all Buddhas taught." At the San Francisco Zen Center, and in Chapel Hill, we say the pure precepts as: "I vow to refrain from all action that creates attachment. I vow to make every effort to live in enlightenment. I vow to live to benefit all beings." Actually, the Three Pure Precepts aren't precepts in the sense of being prohibitions against a particular behavior. They are much more like vows, with the same kind of immeasurable scope that the Four Bodhisattva Vows have. Suzuki Roshi described them as "embracing good behavior, embracing good deeds, and embracing all beings and saving them." One way that Suzuki-Roshi translated them was, "With purity of heart, I vow to refrain from ignorance. With purity of heart, I vow to reveal beginner's mind. With purity of heart, I vow to live, and be lived, for the benefit of all beings."

In Suzuki Roshi's biography, *Crooked Cucumber*, David Chadwick recalls that Suzuki Roshi was sometimes hard to pin down on the precepts or other rules for practice. I think he may not have

wanted to give too clear a definition because of the human tendency we have to compare ourselves to a standard in order to measure our progress.

My guess is that the version of the precepts that was used at the San Francisco Zen Center developed from Dogen Zenji's 13th century commentary on them. I would like to go back over these precepts, comparing the different versions to Dogen's commentary. The first precept is, "avoid all evil" or "not to commit wrong actions," which we say as "refrain from all action that creates attachment." This has the meaning of non-harming or keeping the precepts. Dogen's commentary is, "Ceasing from evil: this is the abiding place of laws and rules of all Buddhas, this is the very source of laws and rules of all Buddhas." I think Dogen's influence is easier to see in the Meal Chant, and we will look at that in a few minutes. The second is, "Practice all good," which we say as "I vow to make every effort to live in enlightenment." Dogen's commentary is "Doing good: This is the Dharma of *Annutara Samyak Sambodhi*; this is the Way of all beings." This Sanskrit phrase *Annutara Samyak Sambodhi* means an "Unsurpassed, Complete and Perfect Enlightenment." It is one of the types of enlightenment–one of the more thorough types–and it is noted in the *Heart Sutra*. If we replace the Sanskrit with English, we can say Dogen's verse as "Doing good: This is the Truth of Unsurpassed, Complete and Perfect Enlightenment."

The third pure precept is, "keep your mind pure," and it reflects the emphasis in early Buddhism on working for individual enlightenment. When Mahayana Buddhism developed the notion of the Bodhisattva Vow, emphasizing the importance of practicing for the liberation all beings rather than for one's individual enlightenment, this line was changed to "save the many beings," or, as we say it here, "I vow to live to benefit all beings." Dogen's commentary is, "Doing good for others: This is to transcend the distinction between ordinary beings and sages; this is to liberate oneself and others." In *Hotsu Bodai Shin*, Dogen said, "Benefitting living beings means causing living beings to arouse the thought of liberating all others even before oneself is liberated."

The Pure Precepts also are related to Right Effort, the sixth aspect of the Eight-fold Path. The traditional meaning of Right Effort is one's endeavor or energetic will to abandon unwholesome states and to develop wholesome states. Wholesome states are those which have what in Buddhism is referred to as wholesome roots. The three unwholesome roots are greed, hate, and delusion, and so their opposites, non-greed or generosity, non-hate or lovingkindness, and non-delusion or wisdom are the roots of wholesome states. In Buddhism, volition, or the mind with which we act, determines whether an action is "good" or "bad," wholesome or unwholesome, rather than the activity itself being inherently good or bad. States of consciousness are regarded as karmically wholesome if they are the causes of wholesome karma results.

These Three Pure Precepts are pretty simple, but fundamental, and, therefore, pervasive in Buddhist teaching. In addition to being related to the verse in the *Dhammapada*, and to the Eight-fold Path, they are also used in our Meal Chant. Just before eating we say, "The first portion is for the precepts. The second is for the practice of *samadhi*. The third is to save all beings. Thus, we eat this food and awaken with everyone." Again, I think this wording reflects Dogen's commentary pretty directly. The literal meaning of this verse is something like. "The first bite or mouthful is to stop all evil. The second mouthful is to practice all good." I don't find the terms "good" and "evil" helpful, myself, not only because they sound so fixed and create a sense of polarization, but also because of their connotations in our culture. When I think of "evil," I think of some really extreme situation like Hitler or a fairy tale-like evil stepmother. If our vow is to "Renounce all evil," it is pretty easy to think, "Of course I renounce Hitler, or I renounce evil"; but if our vow is to abandon unwholesome activity or to

refrain from actions leading to attachment, this suggests much more subtle and pervasive activity. We really have to look at, and be present with, our actions and intentions in order to find how attachment and defensiveness set in, and to be aware of self-centered motivation. If I try to refrain from evil, it seems pretty easy since almost nothing I have ever done do I consider "evil." On the other hand, if I try to refrain from action that is motivated by greed, aversion, or delusion, i.e., unwholesome activity, I need to pay ***a lot*** of attention to what I am doing and thinking.

When we understand the nature of the precepts, we realize that harming anything is the same as harming ourselves, actually it ***is*** harming ourselves. An obituary I read some years ago for James Baldwin quoted him as saying, "It is a terrible, an inexorable law that one cannot deny the humanity of another without diminishing one's own." I think this gets to the heart of our real interconnectedness. In Zen practice, the ultimate function of the precepts is the realization of non-duality: the realization that we really are not separate, that there is no way we can harm anything without harming ourselves, just as there is no way we can benefit something without that benefit extending to all of us.

Traditional Buddhism holds that working with the precepts will lead to concentration, and meditative concentration leads to insight. But in Zen, working with the precepts includes concentration and insight, making the precepts fundamentally a discipline of the mind or mindfulness. Bringing our attention to the present activity of our body, speech, and mind is how we practice with the precepts. Trying to observe or obey the traditional commandments of not to kill, not to steal, not to commit adultery, not to lie, not to become intoxicated, and so on, may lead to wholesome conduct, but, as Thich Nhat Hanh points out, it is not sufficient for the development of concentration and insight.

I think Katagiri Roshi was expressing this in his book, *Returning to Silence*, when he said, *"Buddhist precepts are not moral or ethical imperatives...given by someone that people must follow. They are the ground of Buddha's world, through which we can manifest ourselves as buddhas. We are already enlightened and the precepts are already enlightened words. Each word is Buddha's mind completely beyond our speculation."* He said, "If we take the precepts as Buddha's mind, Buddha's teaching, we can each behave as a buddha. But if we take them in the moral sense we become moral people." When we put together a list of precepts or commandments, and then try to conform our behavior to them, we create duality between our activity and the standard that we are trying to achieve. In Zen our challenge is to find how to practice involving our whole presence but without a "me" at the center.

Zen Buddhism describes three ways of practicing with the precepts. The first way is to take the precepts literally by using them to regulate outward behavior, regardless of whatever mental activity or intention may accompany this behavior. Zen is critical of this approach and ascribes it to early Buddhist practice. At this level, if thoughts aren't expressed outwardly through our actions or speech, they are not a consideration. Although this may seem like a superficial way of approaching the precepts, I think it's helpful as a way to begin to define the precepts to ourselves; and, actually, since body and mind cannot be separated, as we develop our awareness of our physical activity, we also become aware of mental and emotional activity as well.

The second way of practice emphasizes intention by following the spirit of the precepts, which is non-harming or the mind of compassion. Actions that express a compassionate, reverent mind uphold the precepts, whereas actions that betray this mind break the precepts. Honoring the spirit of the precepts, or the mind of compassion, is emphasized in Mahayana Buddhism. Again, most actions in

themselves aren’t good or bad. We need to be present with each situation we are in to find what causes the least harm.

The third way of practicing with the precepts is hard to talk about but even harder to understand. It is called the way of the Buddha Nature Precepts, or the Bodhidharma One-Mind Precepts, which approachs the precepts from the position of the Absolute or unconditioned. The experience of Buddha Nature is non-dual: there’s no splitting things up into subject and object. In reference to this way, it is said that the three wheels are empty: the doer, the deed, and the person who is "done to." To follow the Buddha Nature Precepts means to act from enlightenment. Yasutani Roshi said that living in accord with the absolute truth is, in itself, maintaining the Buddha Nature Precepts. But because living in accord with the absolute truth is such a specialized condition, it can be dangerous to try to incorporate this attitude before enlightenment. We could say, sitting zazen is living in accord with the absolute truth; but when we aren’t sitting zazen, we have the precepts to help us live in the conditioned world, our everyday activity.