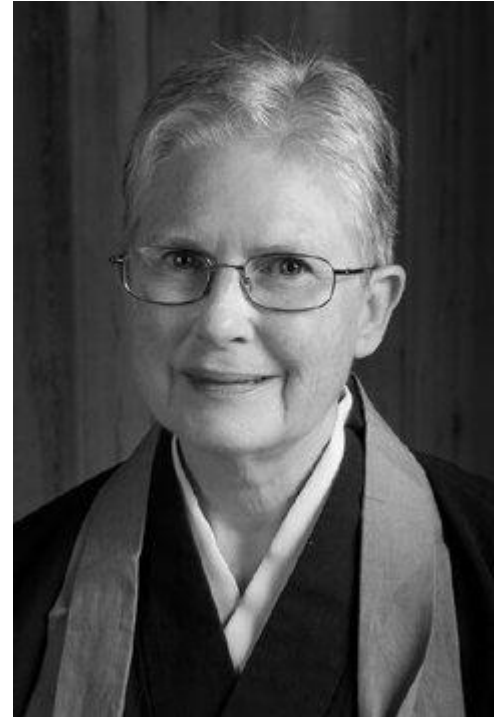


Taking and Receiving the Precepts

Part 4

by Josho Pat Phelan

Unwholesome conduct tends to produce agitated, restless states of mind which make it difficult to be calm enough to sit down and sit still, whereas wholesome conduct supports concentration. Working with the precepts and meditation practice mutually support each other. Zazen helps us slow down so that we can get in touch with our habitual, unconscious activity, and practicing with the precepts is the way we extend our meditation practice into everyday life. Suzuki Roshi said that the way to receive the precepts is just to practice zazen. However, when we work more specifically with the precepts, we need to be careful not to externalize or objectify them by turning them into a moral code or standard to which we compare ourselves since this would create duality between us and the precepts. In Zen, creating such dualities is a kind of violation of true practice. The first precept is "A disciple of the Buddha does not kill."



When I hear "Do not kill" as one of the Ten Commandments, I feel fairly clear about its meaning: do not kill other people. But when I hear "Do not kill" in a Buddhist context, the question comes up for me, do not kill what? People, animals, cockroaches, the enthusiasm, or generosity, or investigative nature of others? Exactly what are we not to kill?

Harming, not to mention killing, produces fear in others, and, according to Buddhism, it destroys our seed of compassion. In Buddhism, compassion means wishing to relieve the suffering of others, and I think that, for a long time, we tend to work in both directions by harming in less conscious ways while at the same time fostering the intention to relieve suffering.

According to Roshi Philip Kapleau, "To willfully take life means to disrupt and destroy our inherent wholeness and to blunt our feelings of reverence and compassion arising from our Buddha Nature." We cannot intentionally harm others or ourselves without harming our own wholeness, including our capacity for compassion.

James Baldwin said, "It is a terrible, an inexorable law that one cannot deny the humanity of another without diminishing one's own." My first teacher said: "You've seen people with hands or arms or legs missing. Whenever you hate anything, you are cutting off a part of yourself." Both of these ideas resonate with the Buddhist teaching of interconnectedness, or the interdependence of all beings and all things. What that means is that no one thing can exist by itself apart from causes or conditions. According to the teaching of interdependence,

nothing comes into existence without a cause and every cause has an effect on everything else.

Living beings are the result of many factors and conditions. Some of these are the presence of sperm, an egg, the condition of fertility, and the presence of a being desiring a form. Once living beings are created, there are other conditions necessary for their survival, such as sunshine, warmth, air (or the absence of these) as well as water and food. Many of the things that make up our world were once alive and depended on these same conditions, like wood, paper, cotton, wool, and oil products. Even stones and diamonds, and the planet itself, are the result of many related factors. All causes and conditions are interrelated. Yet, because of our conditioning and our delusions, we are easily confused and distracted from seeing our true relationship to all things. I think the nature of delusion is that it makes us feel separate, giving the illusion of duality.

In *Taking the Path of Zen*, Aitken Roshi writes, "There is fundamentally no birth and no death as we die and are born. When we kill the spirit that may realize this fact, we are violating this precept. We kill that spirit in ourselves and in others when we brutalize human potential, animal potential, earth potential..."

Dogen taught that we have the precept "Do not kill" because we cannot kill. When we look into the nature of birth and death, we see we do not have the power to create life force or to destroy it. By life force, I mean the karmic propensity or drive, the energy that propels us into the next moment, or into the next situation, or into the next realm of existence. Some of us are parents, and, according to the laws of nature, we are responsible for creating our children. If there had been no procreation, there would be no children; but from the position of the absolute, we cannot create life. Life force is beginningless. The repentance verse begins, "All my ancient twisted karma, From beginningless greed, hate, and delusion...." Life force or karmic energy isn't something that is created at birth and destroyed at death. When the necessary causes and conditions come together a living being is created, and, when they change, the living being dies, but not the karmic energy. Something cannot be made from nothing, nor can something be turned into nothing. So Dogen said that we must not kill because in actuality we cannot kill, and by not giving the "appearance" of killing, we are honoring this actuality.

Precepts have been developing since Buddha's time as a way for people practicing together to live in harmony. There are many versions of the precepts. Generally there are five to ten precepts that are considered major, and then a number of minor precepts, ranging from forty-eight to about two hundred. Some of the minor precepts are directed to the many details of monastic living. These precepts regulating monastic conduct are similar to the forms we follow here, such as taking off your shoes when entering the meditation hall, and making sure your feet and clothes are clean. At the San Francisco Zen Center, there are small altars in the halls outside the bathrooms. This is based on the Japanese monastic model. The practice is to bow before entering the bathroom (and if you are wearing an ordination robe, a *rakusu* or *okesa*, to take it off) and then bow again when leaving. Stopping and bowing helps us acknowledge our present activity.

Other monastic practices, such as taking care to complete each action, can be applied in our everyday activity. For example, when you take a break at work, after you are through with your coffee or tea, complete the action by washing your cup and putting it away, rather than abandoning it wherever you are when you take your last swallow. It's traditional when walking to and from the zendo, to walk with the hands in the *shashu position*. This position helps us collect and focus our attention so we start collecting our mind before we sit down. When we carry our cushion (or eating bowls), we try to carry it with two hands, so that we can bring our presence to the act of carrying the cushion, rather than casually holding it with one hand dangling by our side as if carrying the zafu really had nothing to do with our present activity. These kinds of details are practical and they also foster mindfulness, so we make use of them. But in Zen when we refer to the precepts, we usually mean the Ten Major Precepts.

The essence of the precepts, and especially the first precept, is "non-harming." One way to practice with the precepts is to look closely at what you are doing: in this moment, are your actions encouraging life? Or throughout the day ask yourself, right now, what does it mean to not kill? Another way to practice with the precepts is to look at your motive or intention as you begin each action of body, speech, and mind: is it wholesome or unwholesome? If it is unwholesome, do not continue it into further activity. This doesn't mean you must stop and think before each thing you do. It means being aware of your intention before you act on it. I think of it as developing an internal barometer that helps clarify my intention. The more we become aware of our activity and its effects, the more we begin to realize that we can't live without harming. On the gross level, simple things like using coffee and chocolate, or furniture made from teak, and using petroleum products directly affect the way people in other countries live their lives. The common activities of flushing toilets, cutting trees, paving roads and parking lots, and growing vegetables with pesticides have effects on beings around us, and when we do these things on a collective basis, the effects are profound. The precepts help us acknowledge what we are actually doing, and the more we become aware of what we are doing and its effects, the better chance we have to minimize the suffering we are causing.

In his book, *Returning To Silence*, Katagiri Roshi expressed Dogen's teaching on this precept saying, "In Buddha's world, to refrain from taking life means that we cannot take life. We cannot take life because in order to 'take life' there would have to be before life and after life and in Buddha's world there is no room to let our intellect poke around with these dualistic ideas. There is just energy in motion, life itself in dynamic motion. We simply are not able to take life. How can we know this?" he asks. "All we can do is just go through it. Life energy is present before birth and after death whether we can see it or locate it or not."

In a different talk, Katagiri Roshi gave another description of not killing from the position of the absolute saying that we shouldn't see things from the perspective of our conditioning, projections, or our needs, which he compared to a telescope through which we see the world. He said, in the relative world of comparisons, there are emotions, memories and lots of complications. In this realm we are immediately separated from everything else, and he used a table as an example. He said, "the table itself is really a certain being rooted at the bottom of the ocean, [*he explained this expression "rooted at the bottom of the ocean" as*] so-called

eternity, timelessness." Our usual experience is of being the subject looking outward at a table as an object. Katagiri Roshi continued,

"All we have to do is manifest the table as eternal time. At that time the table as an object is really rooted at the bottom of the ocean, so-called eternal time, buddha-nature, truth whatever you say....This is to animate the life of the table. But if you see the table according to your telescope you kill the life of the table, that is you kill the buddha-life....Not to kill life doesn't just mean [not] to physically kill people or animals; you have to deeply understand the meaning of 'not to kill'. Not to kill the life of the table is not to handle the table according to our telescope which separates us from others....If we handle this table according to our telescope we may end up breaking it and using it as firewood....We have to deal with the table as a manifestation of eternity, eternal time. This is really the life of the table, the life of toilet paper, the life of your suit, the life of your boots. At that time this is called oneness between subject and object—exactly one, no gap between them....This is to animate the life of the table as buddha."

This doesn't mean that we give life to the table. Rather, to practice with the table we need to let go of our conceptualizations that categorize the table according to our needs, and instead be open to the table from the table's perspective or from a universal perspective.

When we treat people and things as objects out there, as something we can use or manipulate, we have already separated ourselves. We can kill the enemy or cows or termites or trees because we see them as separate from us.

The Bodhidharma One-Mind Precepts express the nondual nature of reality through the precepts. The first of these is, "Self Nature is subtle and profound. In the midst of the everlasting dharma, not producing a view of extinction is called the precept of not taking life."

In Suzuki Roshi's teaching on the precepts, and in his teaching in general, he emphasized nonduality above all—using the precepts in such a way that they lead to nonduality. Suzuki Roshi said,

"If you think 'I have to observe the ten precepts, one by one,' that is wrong practice. The foundation...of precepts is based on the various ways of understanding the one reality which is always with you. The reality is not divisible into three [refuges] or sixteen [bodhisattva precepts] or ten [prohibitory precepts]. Tentatively we divide [the precepts into ten] and we explain them from various angles, but those are just words. Real precepts are beyond words. So if you think the meaning of precepts is just to observe various rules, your understanding is very far from true understanding of real precepts. So the first of the...precepts we observe is one reality which cannot be divided into three or sixteen. The precepts of one reality—you may call it emptiness or you may call it the absolute. This is the first precept we observe....Without understanding this precept, our precepts don't make any sense."

Traditionally in Zen training, the precepts aren't taught as a separate practice. Our effort in zazen, our effort to realize unconditioned nature, includes maintaining the precepts. These aren't two different practices. Suzuki Roshi said, "'Do not kill' means do, do realize your true nature."

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