Taking and Receiving the Precepts Part 5

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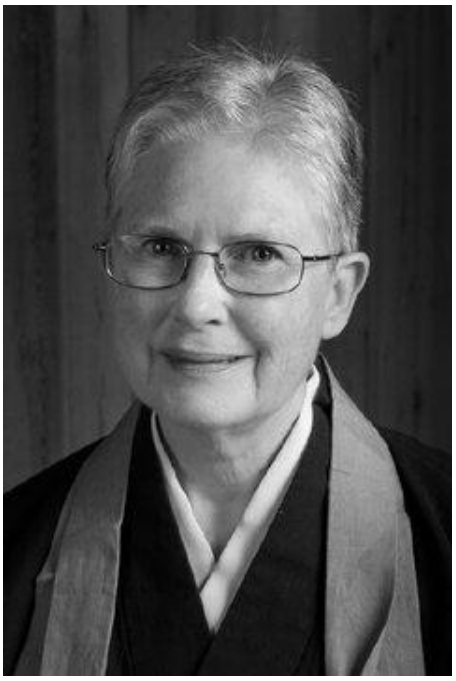

In Chinese Buddhism, there are ten precepts that are considered Major Precepts and forty-eight others which are considered Minor Precepts. For example, the first Major Precept is not to kill; not eating meat, on the other hand, is one of the Minor Precepts. This system of Ten Major Precepts and forty-eight Minor Precepts is taught in the *Brahma Net Sutra,* which is the Chinese *Brahmajala Sutra*. But in Japanese Zen, we emphasize the Ten Major Precepts, which are also called the Grave or Heavy Precepts, as well as the Ten Wholesome Paths and Ten Clear Mind Precepts.

Today I want to talk about the second Major Precept, "A disciple of Buddha does not steal," or as we often say it, "does not take what is not given." Traditionally this precept referred to appropriating anything belonging to someone else without first getting their permission, and it includes acquiring things through fraud or deception. Aitken Roshi considers carelessness with precious things as a kind of stealing, as well as using time foolishly, including wasting time in zazen by spacing out, indulging in fantasies, or through goal-oriented practice.

I find it helpful to look at the way the precepts are expressed in different Buddhist traditions. The *Brahma Net Sutra* says:

"The second Major Precept prohibits stealing. A disciple of the Buddha must not steal by oneself, encourage others to steal, facilitate stealing, steal with mantras, or involve oneself in the causes, conditions, methods, or karma of stealing, to the extent that one must not deliberately steal the possessions of ghosts, spirits, or any other beings–all valuables and possessions, including such objects as small as a needle or a blade of grass. A Bodhisattva should give rise to a mind of filial compliance, kindness, and compassion toward the Buddha nature....If instead a Bodhisattva steals another's valuables or possessions, a Bodhisattva Parajika (major) offense is committed."

In addition to getting a different slant on the precept, we also get a sense for some of the cultural differences between our culture and earlier Chinese culture.

The first ten precepts have been pretty much in their present form for over a thousand years, but Thich Nhat Hanh's order, the Tiep Hien Order, or Order of Interbeing, created another set of precepts in the 1960's which addresses 20th century culture and which emphasizes social responsibility. The version of this precept that the Order of Interbeing uses is, "Possess nothing that should belong to

others. Respect the property of others, but prevent others from enriching themselves from human suffering or the suffering of other beings."

The Bodhidharma One-Mind Precepts present the precepts from the position of non-duality as, "Self-nature is subtle and profound, in the realm of the unattainable Dharma, not having a thought of attainment is called the precept of refraining from stealing."

The state of mind of wanting, wanting something that we think we don't already have, is characterized by grasping. Seeing the world as if it were separate from ourselves is the view that propels us into wanting and taking. The state of not stealing, or not having a thought of attainment, is characterized by contentment. One way to practice with this precept is to look at your state of mind: do you find an underlying quality of dissatisfaction and wanting, or is it characterized by contentment? In either case, look at the source of it. This underlying state of dissatisfaction is the basis of all suffering and the basis of the Four Noble Truths.

Near Halloween, we have the *Segaki* Ceremony, the Ceremony of Feeding the Hungry Ghosts. The Japanese word, "*gaki*," means hungry ghost; these are beings who have large bellies swollen from malnourishment and tiny throats, like the thinnest of straws, who are always hungry. Sometimes they are depicted as being able to swallow only tiny portions of food, so they are never satisfied. At other times, they are described as having food around, but when they bring it to their lips, it turns into blood or hot coals. Another way they are depicted is being at a large banquet table loaded with food. When they sit down to eat, they discover that the handles of their utensils are three or four feet long, so long that they can't reach their own mouths. They would, however, be able to reach across the table and feed each other, but they are so consumed with their own desire that it never occurs to them. The hungry ghost also refers to the human condition which is never satisfied with who we are or what we have.

Suzuki Roshi said, "When we think we do not posses something, then we want to steal. But actually everything in the world belongs to us so there is no need to steal." He took his glasses as an example. "They do not belong to me or to you, or they belong to all of us. But you know about my tired old eyes so you let me use them." This attitude of just using whatever we have without identifying it as mine, or belonging to me, is helpful in loosening up the solidity or fixedness of what we think of as the self. When we treat our possessions and even our body as something we have been given temporarily to take care of and use, then we won't have such a strong tendency to define who we are by what we have. In the book *Death and Dying*, Elizabeth Kübler-Ross said that people who were the most successful and powerful by conventional standards often had the hardest time when they became weak and helpless and were facing death. It's almost as if the more you have, the harder it is to let it go and move on.

The antidote to attachment and greed is renunciation. The Tibetan Buddhist teacher, Pema Chodron, said that the most fundamental form of renunciation is renouncing our "storyline." The storyline is the story of our lives that we are continually, consciously or less consciously, spinning out, in which we explain the world to ourselves and how we fit into it. Simultaneously, we may also be explaining who we are to the world . Recently someone described this storyline as the story of me, written by me, directed by me, starring me. The realization that this storyline acts as an intermediary between our direct experience and our consciousness is the first step in being able to work with it.

Jack Kornfield, a *Vipassana* meditation teacher, suggests practicing with not stealing by acting on every impulse of generosity that spontaneously arises in our heart for one week. In doing this, he links the precept of refraining from stealing to the practice of generosity. Giving, being the opposite of taking, is also considered an antidote for stealing and grasping. The development of generosity or giving, called *dana* in Sanskrit, is one of the fundamental practices in Mahayana Buddhism. The basis for the Bodhisattva's practice is the Six Paramitas, or Perfections, and they begin with *Dana Paramita*, the perfection of giving. Buddhism teaches that even compassion, the quality which we associate with the Bodhisattva, is practiced and developed chiefly by giving.

Some of the aspects of generosity that are emphasized in Buddhism are liberality, open-handedness, the warm-hearted readiness to give which is indicative of an unattached, spontaneous mind. The readiness to give has a lot to do with flexibility, the ability to let go of our train of thought or the object of our attention, and to be ready for whatever we encounter. An essential condition for true giving is that we are happy and joyful when we give.

The *Diamond Sutra,* which is held in high regard in Zen, teaches that the highest form of giving is done without depending on any motive or object. It says, "...a Bodhisattva who gives a gift should not be supported by a thing, nor should he be supported anywhere. When he gives gifts, he should not be supported by sight-objects, nor by smells, tastes, touchables, or mind-objects." To be "supported" means that we are resting on something–something we can touch, hear, smell, taste–or resting on an idea or concept. Being involved in the idea of giving, with thoughts such as "*I* am giving something," or " giving is good," or "I am helping others by giving," are examples of being supported by a mind-object. The idea becomes a support or motive for acting, and what it is supporting is a sense of self.

Sangharakshita, the founder of the Western Buddhist Order, says that "The way to avoid 'being supported' in this way is not to allow our thinking to be totally determined by the immediate subject matter of our perception. We are not being expected to do without concepts of things altogether, but we should not treat those concepts as anything more than provisional. We should *use* concepts but not settle down in them." He describes the Perfection of Giving as giving without any concept of giving so that giving becomes a natural response like a reflex.

The practice of giving is also included in the Bodhisattva's Four Methods of Guidance, which is a teaching on how to live harmony. Dogen wrote a commentary on these four methods which is translated in *Moon in a Dewdrop*, and Suzuki Roshi and Katagiri Roshi both express this teaching. In *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* Suzuki Roshi said, "To give is nonattachment....just not to attach to anything is to give. Not to be attached to something is to be aware of its absolute value. Everything you do should be based on such awareness...then whatever you do is true giving."

If we take the phrase, "Just not to attach to anything is to give," we can use it to practice with our breath. When we feel threatened, the breath tends to become tense or restricted, as if by holding our breath we can hold back what we fear. Sometimes we use our breath for protection, but usually we breathe without attachment to the breath. We may not be present with our breath, but usually it's because our attention is wandering somewhere else, rather than because we are grasping some breath from the past, which we associate with great pleasure, the memory of which we are trying to hold onto so we can repeat it in the future. This is the way conditioning works: it is human nature to try to

repeat what is pleasant. As we inhale and exhale without attachment, we can let this be a model for letting our thoughts come and go in zazen without attachment.

Non-attachment is the attitude of being ready to let go, or to move, or to open. It's the basic willingness to change. When we don't give, when we hold back or hold on, we impoverish ourselves. Commentaries on this precept say that if one is poor, a poor spirited or a mean spirited person cannot become rich by taking another's possessions. Likewise, someone who is full-spirited, or rich, cannot become poor through being deprived of his possessions by a thief.

In *Returning to Silence,* Katagiri Roshi said, "All beings that exist in this world manifest themselves as the practice of giving just by being whoever they are....When we do zazen we have to completely give away our body-mind to zazen. This doesn't mean to destroy our body-mind...." This means that we give our body-mind completely to zazen without holding back or measuring our progress; and when the bell rings, zazen gives us back. This is also the way to practice with activity, to give our body-mind completely to whatever we are doing.

In his commentary on the Bodhisattva's Four Methods of Guidance, Dogen wrote, *"Giving means non-greed. Non-greed means not to covet. Non-greed is to give away unneeded belongings to someone you don't know, to offer flowers blooming on a distant mountain to the Tathagata, or to offer treasures you had in your former life to sentient beings....Even if the gift is not your own, that does not hinder giving. The principle is that the effort must be genuine."* And he says, *"When you learn giving well, you see that to accept a body (or to be born) and to give up a body (or to die) are both forms of giving. All productive labor is fundamentally giving. Entrusting flower petals to the wind, birds to the season, also must be meritorious acts of giving....The mind of living beings is difficult to transform. In the beginning it must be done through giving."* He adds, *"Mind is beyond measure. Things given are beyond measure. Moreover, in giving, mind transforms the gift and the gift transforms mind."*

To practice with not taking what is not given, look at the mind of attachment or the mind of accumulation, get to know its weight. Whether the attachment is to material possessions, to states of mind or experiences, or to what we hold onto as our identity, it is a burden; and its antidote is giving. What is the most fundamental thing we can give?