

Taking and Receiving the Precepts Part 6

by Josho Pat Phelan

I have been talking about the precepts and the process of receiving the precepts as a lay person, and today I would like to finish up these talks. So far we have talked about five of the Ten Major Precepts: not killing, not taking what is not given, and the three precepts regarding speech. Today I would like to go over the remaining five: not misusing sexuality, not intoxicating self or others, not being possessive, not harboring ill-will, and not ignoring the Three Treasures.

The third precept is "A disciple of Buddha does not misuse sexuality." Originally this was a prohibition against any sexual activity for monks. The Chinese *Brahma Net Sutra*, which addresses the precepts, lists everything considered to be sexual misconduct. For monks this is any kind of sexual activity—with the opposite sex, with animals, with gods, goddesses, ghosts or spirits, and other forms of lustful behavior, as well as all "perverse" types of sexual conduct.

Later when lay people began taking the precepts, this precept had the meaning of not committing adultery. However, I think the core of this precept is attachment to sensuality, i.e., attachment to anything we experience with our senses, sights, sounds, smells, taste, as well as touch.

Suzuki Roshi said that this precept especially emphasizes attaching to a particular thing in the way we attach to a man or woman. *Crooked Cucumber*, his biography, relates how Suzuki Roshi had a soft spot for Japanese antiques. Suzuki Roshi said, "I was scolded by my master many times, 'you are committing adultery.' In my temple, there was no female but still he said, don't commit adultery. He was right, I think." This precept refers to lustful or sticky desire whether it is for sex or some other object of the senses.

In *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom*, Jack Kornfield describes working with this precept as conscious sexuality by observing how often thoughts and feelings of sexuality arise and by noting what particular states are associated with them such as love, tension, compulsion, caring, loneliness, desire for communication, greed, pleasure, aggression, and so on.

I don't want to slip into moralizing about this, or conceptualizing good and bad behavior, because working with the precepts in Zen is fundamentally a way of working with our state of mind. Katagiri Roshi said, "Buddhist precepts are not moral or ethical imperatives...given by someone that people must follow." 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." I think the distinction he is making is between modifying one's behavior to conform to a way that we have conceptualized as "good" and developing insight—not that these two are always separate, but they often are. Rather than moralizing, I think it is more helpful to look at our self-centered desire and how it shuts us off from others. By looking at self-centered desire, we get a sense for how breaking this precept of not misusing sexuality works in concert with other precepts. For example, sexual misconduct is often facilitated by misusing speech to manipulate others, and self-centeredness leads to treating people like possessions or objects.



Another way we misuse sexuality is by indulging in intoxicating fantasies about sex or being carried away by euphoric feelings. Most of us do this, sometimes, but I'm referring to a fantasy that is indulged in to the point that it replaces larger and larger portions of our life—real life. Again, I am not saying people receiving the precepts should not have sexual fantasies or dreams, or that they should not get angry and so on. This is the stuff we practice with. It is said that there are 84,000 delusive paths, and each path, or each delusion, if we practice with it, may become a path to realization. To practice with delusions, first notice the impermanence of these states, i.e., that they come and go, that they are not "us" but something that arises and passes through us. We can also practice with our emotional states by trying to be aware of how a particular state affects us, and how we react or respond to it, and by being aware of what preceded it and how one state leads into the next. The point of the precepts isn't to keep us from having fun, but to help us be aware of how we separate ourselves from everything else, and, in regard to this precept, by not misusing the original intimacy of relationship between self and other.

Bodhidharma's commentary on this precept is "Self Nature is subtle and profound. In the midst of the unstained Dharma, not creating a *vener* of attachment is called the precept of not misusing sexuality."

The fifth precept is "A disciple of Buddha does not intoxicate mind or body of self or others." The literal meaning of this precept is not using or selling intoxicants. Aitken Roshi said that "this precept encompasses everything that clouds the mind. It is really about greed, hate and delusion; self centered delusions that cloud and darken the mind...not just alcohol, drugs, tobacco, coffee, television, but our thought patterns—our own delusive patterns of thinking. Things in the world are not drugs of themselves, they become drugs by our use of them." He added, "When we direct phenomena to justify ourselves, that is delusion...not giving rise to delusion is called the precept of not giving or taking drugs." Thich Nhat Hanh brings up the related issue of the production of alcohol. The large quantities of grain and fruit that are used in making alcohol could, instead, be used to reduce the number of starving people in the world. So, when we drink alcohol, we are decreasing the amount of food available to the world-wide community.

Suzuki Roshi gives a different slant on this precept. He said it also means not influencing others to give rise to upside-down thinking. He said, "Do not sell liquor means not to boast or emphasize the advantages of things....If you boast about the profundity of Buddhist teaching, you are selling a kind of liquor to the people. Any spiritual teaching by which we are intoxicated is liquor. Do not sell liquor means absolute freedom from all teachings." The Bodhidharma One-Mind Precept is "Self Nature is subtle and profound. In the midst of the intrinsically pure Dharma, not being blinded by ignorance is called the precept of not intoxicating oneself or others."

The eighth precept is "A disciple of Buddha is not possessive of anything, not even the teaching." This precept is directed to stinginess, to withholding material aid or Buddhist teaching or dharma. The state of mind of stinginess, or possessiveness, is indicative of mental tightness, holding onto our view or our position which doesn't allow us to let go, or give up, or relax our grip on reality. This is similar to the mind of wanting or taking. The Bodhidharma One-Mind precept is "Self Nature is subtle and profound. In the midst of the all-pervading truth, not attaching to one form is called the precept of not attaching anything, not even the teaching." Any way we can find to let go relates to this precept, whether it is letting go of the exhalation at the end of our breath, letting go of our compulsive mental activity, or letting go of our point of view, each of these allows for some ease or movement.

The ninth precept is "A disciple of Buddha does not harbor ill will." In zen this precept isn't a prohibition against the mental state of anger, it refers to holding onto anger, indulging in it, letting it fester, or bearing a grudge. Anger often serves the purpose of helping us uphold our position by justifying it, by formulating how something is unfair or undeserved. This justification solidifies not only our point of view but our sense of separate self. Thich Nhat Hanh said, "Treat your anger with the utmost respect and tenderness, for it is no other than yourself. Do not suppress it—simply be aware of it....When you are aware that you are angry, your anger is transformed. If you destroy anger, you destroy the Buddha, for Buddha and Mara are of the same essence." The Bodhidharma One-Mind precept is "Self Nature is subtle and profound. In the midst of the selfless Dharma, not contriving reality for the self is called the precept of not harboring ill will."

The tenth precept is "I vow not to ignore the Three Treasures, Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, my own True Nature." The Bodhidharma One Mind precept is, "Within the Dharma which is undivided reality, not arousing a dualistic view of sentient beings and Buddha is called the precept of not turning away from the Three Treasures." The way we abuse the Three Treasures is to view them as separate from ourselves or by forgetting about them. Keeping our connection with Buddha, Dharma and Sangha is taking refuge, returning to our source.

In the ordination ceremony, the initiates are asked, "Will you receive these precepts?" and after the precepts have been given they are asked, "Will you continuously observe them?" Maezumi Roshi said, "...there is nothing to be defiled, nothing to be maintained; yet, because we are constantly creating separation, through our body, speech, and mind, there is something to defile, something to maintain....When we are given the precepts, we are not given something that exists outside ourselves. In receiving the *kai* [precepts], we reveal our life as the very body, form, and functioning of the enlightened state itself."

The Sanskrit word used for precepts or right conduct is *sila* and it is derived from the word meaning "to exercise, or to practice." In *Returning to Silence*, Katagiri Roshi said that *sila* means to form a habit. "Forming a habit of living in a way that is based on Buddha's teaching is ...called vow....We have to put this vow into practice in our everyday life....Every day, constantly, we have to form the habit of living in the way that is based on Buddha's teaching. The deep meaning of precept is that it is Buddha-nature or Truth." He said, "To receive the precepts is to awaken to the Buddha-nature. Even though we don't understand what Buddha-nature or truth is, to receive the precepts is awareness." "The main purpose of Buddhism is to form the habit of practice as a vow forever....It is like walking in a mist. We don't know what the mist is, we don't know where we are walking or why; all we have to do is just walk. This is Buddha's practice."

Not knowing "where we are walking or why" may seem rather abstract or not relevant to working with the precepts. What I appreciate in this is the way it leads away from the literal meaning of the precepts, which is so easy to conceptualize as good or bad behavior, and, instead, the way Katagiri Roshi directs us toward non-duality, going beyond our ideas of how we *should* be. Our work in Zen, including the precepts, is to push beyond the limits of what we know through our thinking and to learn to trust something else, something wider.

Receiving the precepts in ordination is like an intentional rebirth. When people are ordained, they receive a new name. They receive lineage papers which show their new family tree, which ends with the name of the new ordaineer, linking them back through their teacher and their teacher's teacher all the way back to Shakyamuni Buddha. They also receive new clothes, a *rakusu* which they have sewn.

Suzuki Roshi said: "The dualistic idea of whether to observe or not observe the precepts takes place within your *mind* when you practice Zen. There are no precepts to break and there is no one who is violating the precepts. To make up your mind to make the very best effort to observe the precepts constantly, forever, whether your effort is complete or not, is Buddha's, Buddha Mind's effort."

For me the work involved in practicing with the precepts is actually about realizing our deepest intention, our most fundamental intention; Suzuki Roshi called this our inmost request. Aligning ourselves with, staying in connection with, our inmost request is how we fulfill the precepts.

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