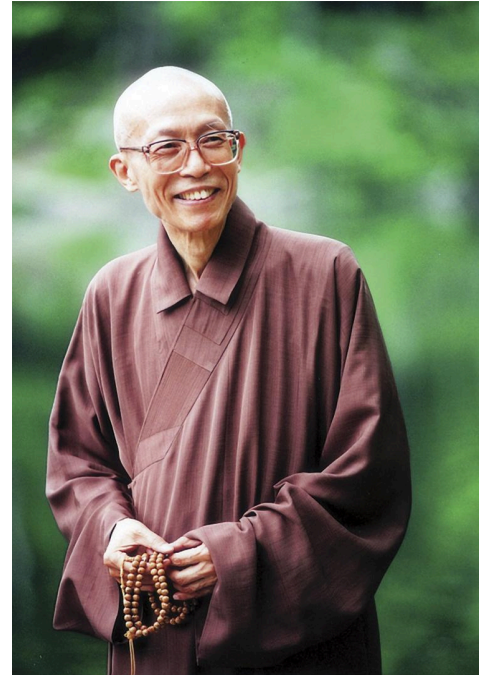


## The Three Sets of Pure Precepts

by Master Sheng Yen

The precepts that have been discussed above are common to both the Theravada, the vehicle of individual liberation, and to all schools of the Mahayana, in which emphasis is placed on a bodhisattva practitioner's striving for the benefit of all sentient beings. The essential purpose of the transmission of the bodhisattva precepts is to arouse in people's minds an altruistic spirit of service to others and a firm dedication to the pursuit of enlightenment. Such a spirit is called the bodhi-mind. Bodhi is a Sanskrit word derived from the same root as Buddha, and it can be translated to mean "awakening," "enlightenment" or "wisdom." The foundation of the bodhi-mind is embodied in the four great vows we take: to deliver innumerable sentient beings, to cut off endless vexations, to master limitless approaches to the Dharma, and to attain supreme Buddhahood.



To help us actualize these four vows, we need to vow further to observe certain principles and guidelines that may help us conduct ourselves in an ethical and humane manner and purify our minds of the three poisons of craving, aversion, and ignorance. For this purpose, here we transmit what are known as the three sets of pure precepts, which contain the essential principles of all the different systems of bodhisattva precepts codified over the course of Mahayana Buddhism's long, rich history. Functionally, these three sets of pure precepts lead a practitioner to (1) renounce evil deeds by keeping the precepts, (2) accumulate merit by performing beneficial deeds, and (3) work for the salvation of all sentient beings. The vows to keep these precepts embody the spirit of all Mahayana Buddhist practices: to stop evil, to do good, and to deliver all sentient beings. In a very real sense these vows can be seen as the ultimate expression of the aspirations of all Buddhists in all eras.

In following the first in the three sets of pure precepts, which is to keep all pure precepts, we can begin by applying ourselves with vigor to practicing the five precepts and ten good deeds in our daily lives in order to purify our minds and avoid causing harm to ourselves and others. From the viewpoint of the bodhisattva practice, observing the ten good deeds involves more than just passively refraining from the ten evil deeds: one should also actively practice and cultivate the ten corresponding beneficences. Therefore, in this light, the precept against killing can be seen as an injunction to regard sentient beings with compassion and thus to nurture, comfort and protect them; the vow to renounce stealing, by the same token, becomes a commitment to practicing generosity and selflessness. Thus the practice of the Buddhist precepts—considered by many to be passive and negative—is in truth active, dynamic, and positively involved with the world.

This attitude of positive involvement is precisely what lies at the core of the second set of pure precepts—to practice all good deeds. Regarding this particular set, we might do well to consider the idea of 'merit' as it applies to the bodhisattva practice. Many of us know that the performance of virtuous deeds generates merit, and that in many Buddhist ceremonies we

transfer such merit to others or to all sentient beings. Some people associate this idea exclusively with securing a good rebirth for themselves as the result of accrued merit recorded in some celestial ledger. However, the Buddhist concept of merit has nothing to do with this whatsoever.

It is said that by receiving the bodhisattva precepts, one generates "a vast amount of merit." This can be understood as follows. When you take the precepts, a seed is planted deep in your consciousness. Because this seed has been planted for the benefit of all sentient beings, the natural consequence of its maturation, as you nurture it by keeping the precepts, is a growth in your compassion and a weakening in your propensity to do harm. With sustained practice, there naturally arises in you a tendency toward wholesome actions. As you increasingly go through life acting on the basis of compassion, you will come to experience a sense of security and stability.

Why is this? Because, quite simply, you are no longer living your life in an obsessively self-concerned, self-centered way, always worrying about your own well-being and feeling constantly threatened and insecure. As your life is dedicated to others, you become less and less concerned with your personal benefit, gain or loss; consequently, you no longer live in fear and cease to be agitated or plagued by vexations, which are all caused by self-attachment. You achieve stability of mind.

The stability and security you so experience then creates, in turn, an atmosphere of stability and security around your person that is palpable to other sentient beings. They feel safe around you, and because you, out of genuine compassion, never intend to harm them but only try to be of help, they also feel a sort of joy in your presence. Thus in an immediate and very concrete way, you, after receiving the bodhisattva precepts, are benefiting sentient beings, a deed that generates "a vast amount of merit." And it is in this way that we undertake the practice of the third set of pure precepts-to deliver all sentient beings. The observance of this precept actualizes our intention as put forth in the four great vows, and sets us decisively on the bodhisattva path.

All systems of bodhisattva precepts fall within the range of the three sets of pure precepts, which can be seen as a distillation of all the various aspects of the bodhisattva practice. Using the three sets of pure precepts as a working principle gives practitioners tremendous flexibility in their practice, allowing them to choose to observe either a simpler, more generalized code or one that is detailed, complex, and rigorous, depending on their temperament and abilities. The three sets of pure precepts can be practiced either generally or in detail since their meaning and applicability can be either broad or specific. As they, like all the other systems of precepts, are based on the older precepts of the vehicle for individual liberation, the Theravadan codes of conduct can also be included under this rubric. However, the emphasis on a practitioner's dedication to cultivating all virtuous practices to deliver all sentient beings highlights the unique spirit of the bodhisattva precepts, distinguishing them from the older precepts of the Theravada tradition.