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“Excerpt from *Being Upright: Zen Meditation and the Bodhisattva Precepts*”

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TEN GRAVE PRECEPTS: The Activity of Buddha's Mind

A disciple of buddha does not kill.

A disciple of buddha does not take what is not given.

A disciple of buddha does not misuse sexuality.

A disciple of buddha does not lie.

A disciple of buddha does not intoxicate mind or body of self or others.

A disciple of buddha does not speak of the faults of others.

A disciple of buddha does not praise self at the expense of others.

A disciple of buddha is not possessive of anything, especially the dharma.

A disciple of buddha does not harbor ill will.

A disciple of buddha does not disparage the triple treasure.

The Bodhisattva Initiation Ceremony

THE TEN GRAVE PRECEPTS indicate a way of wholesome living that arises spontaneously from the ground of our buddha nature. They are buddha's wisdom in action and are the natural expression of a compassionate heart. The practice and realization of each precept enacts the ancient Teaching of All Buddhas, namely, refraining from evil, practicing good, and purifying the mind.

Even though they read like prohibitions, the Ten Grave Precepts are not given to prevent us from acting in unwholesome ways, but rather are meant to awaken us from delusion. When our actions come from delusion, the violation of these precepts is a natural consequence. Therefore their purpose is not to control or limit beings in any way, but to encourage the fullest flowering of life.

In interpreting one of the Ten Grave Precepts, perhaps the most helpful and readily available commentary is the other nine. For example, in contemplating a sexual relationship you are unsure whether sexual greed is involved, consider if there is any intention to deceive others about this aspect of the relationship (lying). Inquire if there is an urge to intoxicate, to take what is not given (stealing), to be possessive, or to express anger. In violating one of the precepts, all the others are violated. In fully realizing one of the precepts, the others are upheld. Similarly, if you feel an overwhelming certainty - to the point of self-righteousness - about the meaning of one precept, contemplating how the other nine apply may be helpful in gaining a wider perspective. Examining one precept through the lens of the others may broaden your compassionate view of that precept. Consulting the other precepts protects you from a narrow understanding and supports the realization of their complete meaning. Finally, meditating on the interdependence and mutual support of the Ten Grave Precepts shows that no individual precept has any independent fixed meaning.

The Ten Grave Precepts and the Sangha

Anyone who is committed to practicing the precepts is in danger of becoming self-righteous or puritanical. When you're a beginner, you're more likely to become finical about them, because you're afraid that if you are not absolutely strict, then you'll lose sight of your commitment. If you're in this initial, self-righteous phase, then it's important to remember that by taking refuge in the sangha you're practicing as part of the community.

As part of a sangha you expose your fanaticism to more mature practitioners, who, having worked through their own self-righteousness, can help you to open up to other possible meanings of the precepts. They can show you that although your understanding is valid as one particular aspect of the truth of the precepts, there are other possibilities, including some of the thoughts of people who disagree with you. Listening to the experience of other practitioners, both senior and junior to you, will naturally soften your vantage point and help you to relax your understanding.

At the other end of the spectrum, you may fall into complacency and avoid examining your life for fear of arousing anxiety. You don't usually emerge from complacency unless some crisis presents itself. If you're complacent, then something has to wake you up, either from inside or the outside.

Most often, you wait until an experience of pain and suffering breaks through your denial system, but a kind and generous person can also open your eyes to your life and help you notice your pain. Then you realize that you don't want to be complacent, because life is really wonderful. This generous being makes you feel, I want to do more than just get by. I want to be generous, too. Or you might see something beautiful, and that beauty opens you to both the beauty and the pain of your life.

In sangha, the complacent people have to bump up against the fanatics, and the fanatics have to run up against the complacent people. Each group can learn from the other. The fanatics need to relax more, and the complacent people need to open up to the anxiety of the self-righteous fanatics. The more mature and balanced people in the community can help those who are leaning to either of the extremes.

If you are committed to the precepts, you need to be in dialogue with other practitioners in order to remain honest about your practice. Otherwise, you can get caught up in your own fixed ideas of what the precepts are. The precepts are never what you think they are or what I think they are. They are something that all of us arrive at together.

For instance, if you give me something, then I may assume that you want me to have it - that you have given me a gift. But if I ask you for confirmation, then you might say to me, Well, actually, I felt coerced into giving it to you. You kind of forced me to give it away. If I don't consult you, I might assume self-righteously that it was a gift and never find out that in your eyes I was breaking the precept of not stealing. If I ask you about it, and you assure me that it was a gift, then I can be more confident, not because of my personal opinion but of your confirmation. When you begin to take other people's views into account, you move from a self-centered interpretation of the precepts to a more compassionate understanding.

The Ten Grave Precepts and Sitting Meditation

The spirit of your meditation should always be in accord with the precepts. When you're sitting in formal meditation posture, you may not be literally killing anything, but in subtle ways you may wish to annihilate certain states of mind or certain feelings. Or you might get angry at your neighbor in the meditation hall and wish him or her harm. If you're harboring thoughts of ill will toward anyone, then you're out of balance in your meditation. If you let these thoughts drop away, then you can return to a more upright attitude.

Just as you consult the other members of the sangha, you can take the Ten Grave Precepts to the cushion one by one and check to see whether your sitting is in accord with them. For example, you can apply the precept against taking what's not given to your sitting meditation to see if you're trying to get something that has not been given to your sitting meditation to see if you're trying to get something that's not been given to you by your life. Are you willing to work with what you have in terms of your state of body or mind, or are you hoping for more or less than what you have? If you are sitting in the spirit of taking something that's not been given to you, you are not being upright, and in a sense you are out of line with the precept of not stealing.

Similarly, if you don't work gratefully with what's happening to you, then you're slandering your experience by saying, This experience is not good enough for me to meditate upon. I want some calmer or happier state. By checking to see if your meditation is in accord with the precepts, you can use the precepts consciously as guides in how to meditate. If there's a lack of accord, then the precepts themselves will help you find the proper way of sitting or standing or walking.

When you sit upright, being open and attentive to whatever comes, you satisfy all the precepts. As the great American mystic Henry David Thoreau writes, "You only need sit still long enough in some attractive spot in the woods that all its inhabitants may exhibit themselves to you by turns," from *Walden*, 1984.

When you sit with the attitude of not trying to gain anything out of the sitting, you don't kill what's happening to you. You don't wish for something else; you don't use your sexual energy to manipulate your state; you don't lie; you don't use what's happening to intoxicate yourself; you don't slander what's happening; and you don't take sole credit for what's happening. You are also not possessive of whatever is happening, if it happens to be good. You don't get angry with what is happening. You don't disparage the Triple Treasure, because you are working in the way that a buddha would work. Working with the truth of what is happening, you are joining the community of those who work in this way. When you maintain this nongaining approach to sitting, you realize all the precepts.