

The Meaning of the Precepts

When Gautama Buddha lived in India he had many disciples. They studied the teachings of their master and practiced Zazen diligently. Many among them attained the truth and became masters themselves. In this way the Buddhist teachings spread quickly. People gathered around the Masters to study and practice, and to live their lives according to the teachings. They formed the Buddhist order: it was called the Sangha (sangha in Sanskrit).

When people live together in one place many problems arise. This is very natural – we have all experienced this fact. The Sangha was no exception to this rule. It was a kind of community, and as in other communities, some rules were needed to regulate the conduct of its members. The Buddha realized this fact and so he gave advice to his disciples as to how to live correctly. He taught them many standards by which to judge their behavior – he gave them the precepts.

As the Sangha grew in size and spread through the world many diverse and complicated situations were encountered. Efforts were made to construct rules for these varied situations, but if we try to have a rule for every situation, we will soon have more rules than we can remember. This is apparently what happened in the years following the Buddha's death. At one point, there were 250 rules for priests and 350 rules for nuns. In such a situation, the rules themselves had become a problem.

So about 400 years after Gautama Buddha died, a patriarch of the Buddhist order summarized the rules of Buddhist life into sixteen precepts. They became known as the bodhisattva precepts. A bodhisattva is a person who has recognized the truth of Buddhism intuitively and is on his way to the final attainment of the truth. Thus, receiving the bodhisattva precepts became the entry way into Buddhist life itself.

The sixteen precepts are divided into three groups. They are the Three Devotions, the Three Universal Precepts, and the Ten Fundamental Precepts. The Three Devotions are devotion to Buddha, devotion to Dharma, and devotion to Sangha.

Buddha refers to Gautama Buddha foremost. As Buddhists we feel tremendous devotion to the man who attained the truth 2500 years ago; the man who established the truth as a religion and who taught his followers the method to attain the same truth. The nature of truth has been realized by many people since his time. They were all buddhas – they all found the truth through their own efforts. They passed the teachings through the centuries to our own time. We are very grateful to them. When we devote ourselves to Buddha we are devoting ourselves to all the buddhas of the past, the present, and those yet to come: the buddhas of the three times.

Devotion to Dharma is devotion to the Universe itself. The Universe has its order, its beauty, its laws. As Buddhists we seek to follow the rule of the Universe; we seek to enter into the order of the Universe itself. We devote ourselves to that order; we devote ourselves to the rule of the Universe, we devote ourselves to Dharma. Devotion to Dharma is the fundamental principle of Buddhism.

Devotion to Sangha is devotion to the priests, nuns, laymen and laywomen of the Buddhist order. Gautama Buddha taught us to honor our companions in this Buddhist life: to devote ourselves to the community or society of those who are seeking the truth.

The second group of precepts are the Three Universal Precepts. As I said before, too many precepts accumulated in the days after the Buddha's death so there was a need to simplify: to find the widest, most essential guidelines for living. So the universal precepts were established. The first is the observance of rules. Every society has its rules. If we fail to follow the rules of our society our life will be disturbed, so as Buddhists we should observe the rules of society.

The second universal precept is called observance of the moral rule of the Universe. To observe the rule of the Universe is to act appropriately in all situations. It is to act correctly – to act right. Thus observance of the rule of the Universe can be called the observance of morality. There are many social rules, but we need to follow a morality which transcends the social situation. We need to follow a morality based on the order of the Universe itself.

The salvation of all living beings is the third universal precept. Buddhism teaches us that we are part of the Universe. We are not isolated entities, but elements of a system – a grand system which is reflected in every small part: in every being. So all beings in the Universe share a quality or essence which cannot be named or described; it is an ineffable something – it is the basis of life itself. So if we are to express our true nature as human beings, it is natural for us to care for that which we have in common with all living beings. It is natural for us to want to save other living beings.

These first two kinds of precepts are very wide and inclusive but perhaps they are too abstract. So there are ten more precepts. They are also condensed or summarized, but they have a very concrete nature. They are the Ten Fundamental Precepts.

No.1: Don't destroy life. We all have our life, The Universe is life itself. We should not destroy that of which we are a part. We should not destroy life in vain.

No.2: Don't steal. We have our own place in the world; our own position and property. We should not invade another's position. We should not steal.

No.3: Don't desire too much. We all have desire. Desire is an important factor in our life. But excessive desire is not the origin of happiness. It destroys our composure. Too much desire tends to make our life unhappy. So Gautama Buddha

recognized the existence of desire but he warned against too much indulgence. He advised us not to desire too much.

No.4: Don't lie. We are living in the Universe. The Universe is the truth itself. Truth and honesty are bound together. If we want to find the truth we must be honest. If we are not honest we can never find our real situation in the Universe.

No.5: Don't live by selling liquor. This seems rather strange as a religious precept. I feel that the original concept might have been not to drink liquor. Perhaps as Buddhism spread from India to countries like China and Japan this precept was altered to suit local conditions. In those northern countries alcohol was considered an important aid to survival during the cold winter months. So personally I feel that it is important not to drink, but we should recognize the precept in the form that it has come to us from the past.

No.6: Don't discuss failures of Buddhist priests and laymen. As Buddhists we try our best to live and practice the Buddhist life. In doing so we often make mistakes. This is natural. Our mistakes come directly from our efforts. This may sound strange, but it is the fact in our life. So when we see the mistakes of others we should not be critical, for their mistakes are only the product of their efforts in this life.

No.7: Don't praise yourself or berate others. Modern psychology tells us that most of us have some sort of superiority or inferiority complex. I think this is basically true, and because of these personal inclinations we are prone to praise or criticize ourselves and other people. But we are all human beings. If we recognize the true situation it is impossible to blame others for their faults, and praising ourselves is needless – it is a waste of breath.

No.8: Don't begrudge the sharing of Buddhist teachings and other things, but give them freely. Our tendency is to want more than we have. We want more teachings; we want more things. But when we see our situation clearly we realize that we are part of the wide and glorious Universe. We have everything we need already. In such a situation it is natural to give. We want to share the teachings and what wealth we have with others. It is a natural activity of our true situation.

No.9: Don't become angry. Many of us are prone to become angry. It seems a natural outcome of our personality, but in fact anger is not our natural state – it is not our natural condition. In Buddhism we seek to maintain our composure. To be composed is our natural condition. To be natural is the teaching of Gautama Buddha.

No.10: Don't abuse the three supreme values. Buddha, Dharma and Sangha are the foundation of Buddhist life. We must honor them, esteem them and devote ourselves to them.

The precepts are not theoretical or romantic. They are very concrete and practical. In this they reflect the fundamental character of the Buddhist religion. Buddhism

is a practical religion. It is concerned with finding the right way to live. To live correctly is not so easy. When we are beginning our Buddhist life we need some guidelines: some criteria by which to decide what we should do and what we should not do. The precepts were created to fulfill that function. They were made to help us live properly and correctly. In other words, the precepts teach us how to live a happy life.

Q. You said that accepting the precepts was the entry-way to the Buddhist life. Does it involve a formal ceremony? Could you describe it?

A. Yes, receiving the precepts is a formal ceremony. When a person sincerely wishes to become a Buddhist and follow the teachings of Buddhism he or she vows to keep the sixteen bodhisattva precepts for the rest of his or her life. During the ceremony the Master reads each precept loudly and then asks the receiver if they can keep the precept. He asks the same question three times and the receiver must answer "yes I can" each time. After the precepts have been given, the receiver sits in the place of the Master and the Master praises the receiving of the precepts, saying that a person who receives the precepts enters the state of Buddha at once; he or she stands at the same level as Gautama Buddha; he or she is the son or daughter of Buddha. Thus the receiver becomes a Buddhist and a disciple of their Master. It is a simple ceremony but an important one. It marks the beginning of Buddhist life.

Q. If we are afraid that we won't be able to keep the precepts what should we do? Does it mean that we cannot become Buddhists?

A. To answer your question, we should consider the true intent or purpose of the precepts. In most religions, precepts are considered to be the commandments or laws of god. They form the basis of the religion itself and they must be adhered to strictly. But in Buddhism the precepts are fundamentally different. Keeping the precepts is not the aim of Buddhist life. Perhaps this sounds strange to you but it is the fact in Buddhism. Master Dogen said that following the precepts is only the custom of Buddhists; it is not their aim. He felt that the precepts were only standards by which to judge our behavior. As such they are very useful to us, but we should be careful not to make them the aim of our life.

The precepts have been described as a fence which surrounds a wide, beautiful meadow. We are the cows in that meadow. As long as we stay within the fence our life is safe and serene and we can play freely in the meadow; but when we step outside the fence we find ourselves on shaky ground – we have entered a dangerous situation and we should return to the pasture. When we do, our life becomes safe and manageable again.

So to return to your question, as Buddhists we realize that in our long life there will be many situations in which we will be unable to keep the precepts. This should not prevent us from receiving the precepts. We receive the precepts sincerely, recognizing their value and purpose in our life. We esteem the precepts but we don't worry about them. This was Master Dogen's theory: it is our way.

Q. You mentioned that the moral code in most religions is based on the word of god. What is the basis of the Buddhist moral code?

A. The basis of Buddhist morality is reality itself. It is the order of the Universe itself. It is the facts of life which are facing us at every moment. In Buddhist theory the most important thing is to see what there is. Buddhist morality is **here**.

In other words, Buddhist morality has no basis other than Buddhist morality itself. To understand this point we must realize that morality is not a theoretic or intellectual problem. Morality is a practical problem – a **real** problem. What to do here and now is the problem and the answer is contained in the situation itself. This is the fact, and the facts are the basis of Buddhist morality itself.

Q. So what is the relationship between the precepts and morality?

A. The precepts guide us in our life. They have come from the experience of the truth in the past, so we can say that they are based on reality. But our lives are tremendously complex and varied. If we try to apply the precepts too strictly we may lose the freedom to act. We are living here and now so we must find rules which can be used here and now. We must find our precepts at every moment. Reality is changeable so our rules must also be changeable. True rules must work in the real world. True precepts are changeable and at the same time unchangeable. This is the nature of Buddhist precepts. They help us to live correctly. They provide a framework which is exact and rather narrow, and yet we are free to act in the moment by moment situation of our life.

A Chinese priest once said, "No rule is our rule." This statement expresses the Buddhist attitude precisely. The precepts are valuable to us. They can help us before and after we act, but in the moment of the present we cannot rely on any rule. We must make our decisions directly: at the moment of the present to be without precepts is our precept. No rule is our rule.

Q. So is it important to keep the precepts or not?

A. It is important to keep the precepts.

Q. Then I am still confused about the relationship between the precepts and our real life. If we can't rely on the precepts at the moment of the present how can we hope to obey the precepts at all?

A. I'm afraid we can't. Trying to obey the precepts is a hopeless task. The harder we try the more difficult it becomes. Gautama Buddha, Master Dogen, and the great patriarchs all gave up trying to obey the precepts. This sounds strange but it is true. They found they could not obey the precepts by their conscious efforts so they worked on the problem from another angle. They found that when they practiced Zazen every day their lives became simple and clear. They found in fact that they could not disobey the precepts.

In our life we must make our decisions moment by moment. They are instantaneous: they are dependent on the condition of our body and mind at the moment. Therefore when our body and mind are balanced and composed, our action reflects our composure. When we are `right', our actions will also be right. So the only way to obey the precepts is to change our body and mind through the practice of Zazen. When we practice Zazen we resume our original nature – our Buddha-nature. We find ourselves in harmony with the Universe at every moment. In such a state it is impossible for us to break the precepts. When we practice Zazen we become persons who cannot disobey the precepts.

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