

Precepts as Path

Kyogen Carlson

In the lineage tradition handed down to me from Jiyu Kennett Roshi and Chisan Koho Zenji, the Sixteen Bodhisattva Precepts are more than just a foundation for practice. They are complete path. The tradition offers a method for using the precepts as a karmic mirror for self-reflection to establish and develop zen practice. Over time the arc of practice develops through refining one's relationship to the precepts, leading to the heart of zen.

At Dharma Rain we offer the precepts in the ceremony of Jukai once a year each March. We use a fairly traditional version of the precept ceremony at the end of a week-long sesshin. In preparation for the retreat we have a six-to-ten week series of classes on the precepts that are always one of our best attended each year, even after many years of covering this material. Those taking the precepts in a given year have one or two interviews with the preceptor in the weeks leading up to the sesshin.

When I meet with people about the precepts I explain that on one hand they are rules of conduct. "Do not kill" means exactly what it says. But while they are clearly rules, for us they are better understood as a path. In the truest sense there is no specific standard regarding any precept that marks where you have to be as a Buddhist. For example, a person is ready to receive the precepts when they want to turn toward them, not when they have reached some degree of purity regarding them. As Oliver Wendell Holmes once said, "The great thing in the world is not so much where we stand, as in what direction we are moving." The Buddha ordained Angulimala, a feared murderer, when he turned away from that path and toward the precepts. No doubt he needed a lot more work in refining his conduct, but the way-seeking mind had arisen, and that was what mattered. I doubt many people at that time would have regarded Angulimala as a virtuous person, so he would not have been seen to "deserve" his ordination. So where is the line in the sand regarding conduct that marks where one is or is not ready to receive the precepts and become a Buddhist? This way of seeing it is in contrast to some religious traditions that have clear lines that demark when one is part of the "tribe" in a pact made with God. As a good Mormon, for example, you do not drink coffee and you wear the ritual underwear. When it comes down to specific Buddhist countries or communities, of course, there are standards that arise regarding various behaviors, and that is as it should be. But at the very core of it, these standards are not the primary point.

So what does it mean to take the precepts and to keep them? Taking the precepts means to acknowledge them as our path. Keeping them means to hold them and to measure our lives and actions against them, and to let this have an effect. They become a karmic mirror we use to see ourselves clearly. The ceremony of Jukai, receiving the precepts in this way, is a public statement that we are taking this path as our own.

In the zen tradition we also emphasize the koan aspect of precepts. Any close examination of them reveals how they cannot be kept perfectly. We're always killing, of course. All eating is killing, and our immune systems are always at work. In some traditions the line is clearly drawn at not killing another human being. For us it's not so simple. Some people think that without a clear line we will permit anything, but in fact it means we can refine our understanding. We work to minimize the harm we do in many dimensions, and looking at it this way the koan aspect of the precept arises. The second precept is sometimes worded as "do not take what is not given." That is far more subtle than "do not steal," and gets to the heart of the matter.

Understanding what is given and what is not becomes much more subtle. As the line gets fuzzy, what is the real meaning of a precept? That is where it gets interesting. Yet another way the precepts turn into koans is when we have to break the letter of one precept to keep the real spirit of another. I will go into the method we use for examining the precepts and how it clarifies the koan a bit later.

When we look at precepts as hard and fast rules, another sort of koan arises. The more idealistic we get about the precepts, the more we try to keep them in some absolute way, the more trouble arises. The effort it takes to keep one precept absolutely inevitably causes the others to be distorted, which leads to all sorts of absurd behavior. One way to resolve this is to create hierarchies of ethical values, and to parse out each situation accordingly. This can be helpful, actually, but in the end it leads right back into paradox, and to the fact that precepts are essentially koans.

When I'm in conversation with Evangelical dialog partners I often say that our understanding of precepts is rather like the theory of relativity, but that I am not referring to moral relativism, a real red cape to them. A simplistic misunderstanding of the theory of relativity comes down to the phrase, "everything is relative." A variation on this view is sometimes used to justify all manner of behavior, since something *could* be seen as right if viewed from a different cultural perspective. While it is true that cultures vary tremendously, and that can change the context for many actions, putting it this way suggests there is no way to orient ourselves to a deeper moral compass. The theory of relativity does not suggest that everything is relative, but instead shifts a constant from space and time to the speed of light. Newtonian physics assumes that space and time are constant, but at the extremes of speed and mass that assumption breaks down and measurements no longer work. Around very great masses space bends, and for objects moving at very different speeds time passes at different rates. Shifting the constant to the speed of light resolves the problem. In daily life, however, the laws of Newtonian physics work out just fine. Bent space and time shifts do not get us out of missed appointments. Moral precepts as basic rules of behavior also work well in daily life. But in extreme conditions, in the more difficult ends of the moral sphere, simple rules also break down, and we encounter the koan aspect of the precepts. In physics the problem is resolved by a shift in constant from space and time to the speed of light, but is there an equivalent shift in constant with regard to the precepts?

When we look at the commentary in the Kyojukai for each of the ten grave precepts, we get a good clue. The second precept of not stealing is, "Do not steal – Honor the gift not yet given." Bodhidharma's comment on this is "In the realm of the unattainable Dharma, holding no thought of gain is the precept of not stealing." The "realm of unattainable Dharma" points past gain and loss to original completeness. What could be gained or lost? Dogen's comment says, "The self and the things of the world are just as they are; the mind and its object are one. The gateway to enlightenment stands open wide." This eloquently depicts how when we seek nothing, we hold the whole universe in open hands. In original mind everything is complete. Grasping at this or that we lose touch with that completeness. The fourth precept says, "Do not speak dishonestly – communicate truthfully. In the realm of the inexplicable Dharma, putting forth not one word is the precept of not speaking dishonestly. The Dharma wheel turns from the beginning. There is neither surplus nor lack. The sweet dew covers the earth and within it lies the truth." The "realm of the inexplicable Dharma" refers to the place where anything said is extra; spoiling what is already perfect and complete. When we look at the precepts this way, we see that the constant referred to is original mind itself, our open, unobstructed and undefended natural connection to everything. That is the central meaning of the precepts in zen, and the loadstone for our moral compass. On one hand the precepts describe the enlightened perspective, how Buddhas see the world. On the other, they offer clues as to how we lose touch with that perspective, and this is

how they guide us on the path of practice. This aspect of the precepts is not about how one should judge what someone else should do. That is a different question altogether. This is all about how someone on this path opens to a deeper relationship with the dharma, with things as they are, and with our own deeper nature.

Now we come to how we practice with the precepts, how they become a karmic mirror, and how this clarifies the koan aspect of the precepts. Years ago at Shasta Abbey we were given practice instructions around the time of Jukai, the sesshin and ceremony of giving and receiving the precepts. There were two parts to our practice; first, reading the Kyojukai in a meditative way, then something called “recollection,” a way to carefully recall the events of the day.

For reading the Kyojukai we were instructed to do it in a manner rather like chanting. Reading it out loud is a good way to accomplish that. When we were learning how to chant we were taught to put our attention on the breath, the voice, and to listening. One monk complained that when he did that he couldn't pay attention to the meaning of the chant. Roshi told him that the right way to chant was as a body practice, and to forget about the meaning of the sutras and shastras we were chanting. I found that a very powerful way to practice with the sutras. It removes the lens of interpretation, the echo chamber of our own opinions, the habit energy of thoughts and views which we are actually paying attention to when we think about the meaning of a sutra. When chanting as a body practice the sutra goes straight in, bypassing the filter of our own interpretation. Practicing like that I found passages from the sutras coming up during the day; sometimes randomly, but sometimes in a way that was clearly in response to whatever I was facing at the moment. The lines from the sutras revealed themselves to me from a deeper place in my own consciousness, and I felt that I was learning them from the inside out. Reading the Kyojukai in this manner, drawing it through the mind as if chanting, we let the precepts reveal themselves to us in just this way. Phrases, particularly from the commentary, will start to arise during the day. It isn't necessary to recognize how they apply or what they mean. It is enough to just keep watching it happen, and to allow an understanding to emerge from a place deeper than our habitual way of interpreting things.

The other practice, recollection, is done in a similar way. At the Abbey we had time set aside in the evening, before zazen at the end of the day. We sat in comfortable chairs in a quiet room and recalled the day in a meditative way. The instructions were to recall the events of the day, drawing them out in a thread from the store of memory. The point is to recall the thread of awareness as it ran through the day, rather than the details of events. It can take some time and practice to get the hang of this. On one hand we can get distracted by the many details that come to mind, and then follow them off into other memories and speculations, just as we can get lost in our thoughts in zazen. On the other hand, we can easily skip right over the very things that are most important for us to notice if we move too quickly. There is a middle way to this, staying on track by discarding unnecessary side details, but holding attention firmly on the essential thread. It takes a little time and practice, but it is worth the effort.

Just as in reciting the Kyojukai or in chanting morning service, we don't have to interpret or judge what we recall. Just notice things, note their qualities, and move on. We pull the thread of recollection through the mind in a steady, even manner, letting go of commentary while paying attention to the feeling tones associated with each thing. In particular, we are looking for moments of contraction; clenching in the jaw, stomach, fists or shoulders. Or, it could be a sinking feeling, a moment of “ick,” where we encounter something we don't enjoy recalling. This could be about fear, avoidance, aggression, regret, or any number of things. Contraction also happens around grasping as a tightness that is extra to desire or enjoyment. Again, we want to drop the lens of interpretation. There is tremendous habit energy around these feelings; habits

of judging self and others, good and bad. Just let that go. We want to allow an awareness about the patterns in these events to arise from a place of deeper insight. We can pay attention to context, the “who” “what” and “when,” and that is sufficient. Over time, these moments of contraction become familiar in a new way and we begin to see patterns in them. Our insights into them start to align with insights about precepts, particularly from the commentary, that arise from the Kyojukaïmon reading. The way this happens can be very instructive.

This method of recollection is based on ancient Buddhist practice. It is described by Buddhaghosa, a late 4th century Indian monk in his *Visuddhimagga* or *Path of Purification*, a treatise on meditation. In it he says

A monk who is still a beginner, and who wants to learn how to remember his previous lives, should in the afternoon, after he has finished his meal, go to a solitary and secluded spot, and enter successively into the four [samadhis]. He should then emerge from the fourth [samadhi], which is the basis of the Superknowledges, and think of the last thing he did before his meditation, which was the act of sitting down. After this he should, in reverse order, think of everything he did during the day and night, i.e. how he spread the seat on which he sat down, (etc.) from there everything he did early in the day, everything he did in the last and everything he did in the first watch of the night.

All this becomes manifest to the ordinary mind already, but to the mind which is prepared by [samadhi] it stands out most distinctly ... He should furthermore think back in reverse order on what he did two days ago, three, four, and five days ago, ten days ago, half a month ago, one month ago, up to one year ago. In this manner he goes on for ten years, twenty years, and so on, until he comes to the time of his birth in this becoming, and then he should also direct his mind on the mental and physical processes which took place at the moment of his decease in his immediately preceding existence.

A clever monk can manage already on his first attempt to penetrate beyond the moment of rebirth to a perception of the mental and physical processes at the time of his decease. But for those who are not very wise the passage from one existence to another is hard to see, and must seem impassable and very obscure, for the reason that the psycho-physical organism of the previous existence has wholly ceased and another one has arisen in its stead. [1]

Remembering events in reverse order can seem very awkward if you think of it as a film running in reverse. But what is meant is something like dream recollection, which comes to us backward in segments. When we first wake up from a dream, it is the very end of the dream that we are aware of. We wake up aware of the final sequence, but if we turn our attention to the dream, as is done in dream recall technique, then an earlier segment comes to mind. After that still earlier segments appear until we can often recall the whole dream. The process of recalling events in reverse order works the same way. The monk recalls events of a day in segments, from later to earlier. Some people find our recollection practice easier when done that way, rather than starting at the beginning, and that is certainly an option.

Some people find Buddhaghosa’s reference to previous lives a bit odd, even unnerving. But the concept of past lives is not just fanciful, and it is much more than a metaphor. We don’t need to go back over years and into previous existences to do this. Just looking carefully at each day brings up all kinds of past karma and previous lives, because the past is, indeed, held in the present.

Looked at this way, what do we mean by past lives? I often use a simple example of a man having an argument with a co-worker late on a Friday afternoon. His confrontation is with someone with whom he has a history of conflict, and the situation flares up very quickly, then is over as each wishes to end the day and go home for the weekend. After spending a very pleasant time with friends, our worker returns to work on Monday in a good mood, and feeling at peace with the world. Then he sees his adversary, they lock eyes, and in an instant the “self” from Friday is reborn on Monday. This happens because the “seed of predisposition” left over from Friday sprouts on Monday. This is the first of the twelve steps of dependent origination leading to rebirth on the wheel of samsara. The rebirth of former “selves” happens all the time, moment by moment, day by day, year by year, and these rebirths become quite obvious when we pay attention to them.

Our practice of recollection is an exercise in “catching the self” at it appears. When we make note of the moments of contraction in a day we will locate the moment of the rebirth of a self in opposition to things as they are. In such a moment we lose site of original mind, undefended and open to everything. Recollection practice prepares us, by paying attention to and making note of these moments, to be aware of them when they arise again in the future. At first we wake up and become aware of them some time after the feeling tone, the negative mind state, is present again. Then we start to catch it earlier and earlier until we are aware of it just after it happens. Eventually we can watch it as it happens, but we can do nothing to stop it.

This is where our zazen practice comes into play. In zazen we learn to hold the mind still in the midst of conditions. We let thoughts and feelings arise and fall while remaining still but awake on the cushion. Years of practice at this really pays off. When the seed of predisposition sprouts, it is like a match being struck; there is friction and heat, and then ignition of the old karma. When we are unaware of this, we usually wave the match around until soon our whole house on fire. Or, we may push it down into a pocket where it smolders and just burns a hole in our clothes. But being fully aware of it, staying still while letting the match flame arise and fall, without reacting to it, the match will simply go out by itself. Buddhist teaching on the seed of predisposition says that its sprouting happens non-volitionally. It is bound to sprout when conditions are right. It is very liberating to realize this. Ignorance and predisposition, the two causes of the past, give birth in the present moment to the body sensations, thought patterns, impulses, and awareness, the “skandhas,” of a being from the past.^[2] What we do with it is called “the three causes of the present.” When we act out the old karma, the steps of dependent origination describe the turning of the wheel of samsara, endless rebirth. We repeat the old karma, the self of opposition is born, acts out the karma, then passes away, leaving a new seed of predisposition like the seed appearing in the ripe fruit. Our practice takes place in those three causes of the present as a different way to handle the rebirth. It is just to be still, to recognize karma as karma, and to not react. This is not being deceived by karma, as old master Hyakujo put it.

When we stay still and let the match burn out we can take the next step. This is to take an action that is not conditioned by the old karma. The first part, being still, is the first pure precept: “Cease from evil – release all self attachment.” The next step is “Do only good – take selfless action.” That action is one moment of liberation. It would be wonderful if that was sufficient to overcome the karma and habit energy we have accumulated. Unfortunately, it practically never is. It is just one moment, and habit energy must be undone bit by bit. Nonetheless, it has tremendous power. Once we see that we can slip the bonds of old habits, the days of bondage are numbered.

I mentioned that we have a way of understanding the arc of zen practice as a refining of our relationship to the precepts. That is worth a sizable article of its own. But describing it briefly, the path begins with the recognition of dukkha, which means to see that the problem is with our selves, not with the way the world is. We see that we need to change the way we go about things, and this is the essence of contrition, the first element in the Kyojukaimon. Next, when we trust our intuition that there is something to seek, something to awaken to, we have the first appearance of taking refuge in our own deeper nature, our own Buddha mind. When we follow this intuition and seek a path, and a teaching about a path we are taking refuge in Dharma, no matter what path is taken. When we chose a teacher or community and make a commitment we are taking refuge in the Sangha. These are the three treasures in an elemental form.

Next, applying the teachings and making some changes in our lives is the first application of the three pure precepts. Someone might stop partying or drinking, or break off a toxic relationship. These are all “ceasing from evil.” But this requires seeking something better, a more healthy way to live. Coming to a Zen Center might be part of that. This is “doing good.” As we do this, the third pure precept of doing good for others arises. This means we allow ourselves to be engaged in life; we let it affect us and practice with it in the same way we practice with our own thoughts and feelings. Our practice embraces everything.

While this may sound great in theory, in practice it is very difficult. Life is pretty messy, and when you really focus on the details of life events, you come up against the ten grave precepts. The precept practice described here is about that part of the arc of practice. This work can bring us a long way in coming into harmony with original mind, but the koan aspect of the precepts is inescapable. Inevitably, we face the paradox inherent in them, and we come to a place where we must drop the self and all our struggles completely. Here the three pure precepts and the three refuges meet. Dropping self attachment, we go beneath it to the next level of ceasing from evil where we take refuge deeply in the Buddha, our own true nature. Then, as we take action from an unconditioned space, with original mind, we express the precept of do only good. Now we can see that meeting the moment right in front of us is taking refuge in the Dharma. Choosing to engage in the messiness of life and allowing it to touch us is doing good for others in a profound way. Here the whole world becomes the refuge of Sangha. This is living from and expressing our true nature, seeing the truth everywhere, and understanding our true connection with everything.

[1] As found in *Buddhist Scriptures*, Edward Conze, Penguin Classics, 1959, page 131-132.

[2] See “The Six Worlds” chapter in my booklet *Zen Roots*, (Dharma Rain Zen Center, 1989) specifically pages 31-37 for more information on *Paticca Samuppada*, “dependant origination,” for more on the Buddhist understanding of rebirth.