

Real Precepts Are Beyond Words

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(Today I want to) lecture on the precepts. When I say precepts, what you will think of is something like the Ten Commandments or the grave prohibitory precepts. But Zen precepts are not like that. To start with, the phrase "Zen precepts" means understanding zazen. So another interpretation of zazen is the precepts. Using words, word-precepts, we explain what Zen actually is. The purpose of receiving the precepts is not just to remember what you should or what you shouldn't do. The way we observe precepts is by practicing Zen, or by extending our practice to our daily life. So our idea of precepts is completely different from the usual understanding of precepts.

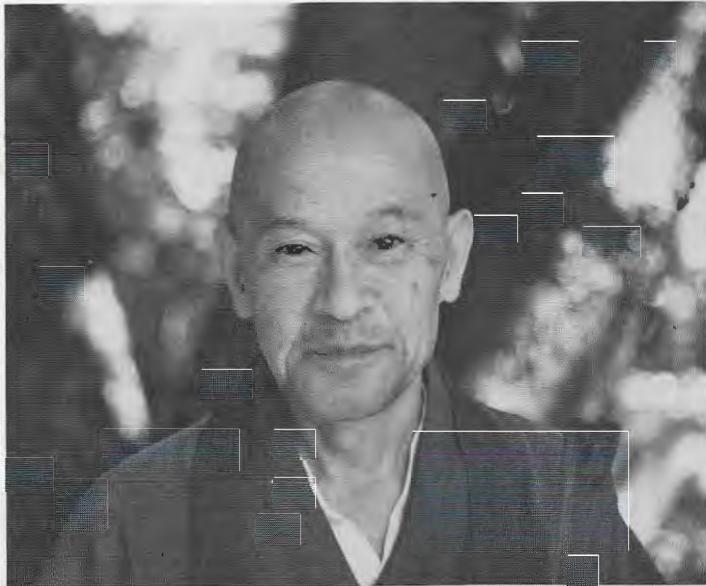
The foundation, or true meaning, of the precepts is (based on) the various ways of understanding the one reality which is always with you, the reality which is not divisible into three, or sixteen, or ten [precepts]. Tentatively, we divide. We explain from various angles. But that is just words. Real precepts are beyond words. We cannot talk about it. If we talk about it, already it is no longer the precepts. So if you think the meaning of the precepts is just to observe various rules, (your understanding) is very far away from the true understanding of the real precepts.

The first of the sixteen precepts we observe is—how can I say it—the one reality which cannot be divided into three or sixteen. It is the precept of one reality. You may call it emptiness or you may call it the absolute. That is the first precept we observe. All the precepts start from this precept. Without understanding this precept our sixteen precepts don't make any sense. It can be understood on the great scale of this universe.

We can observe the truth of a moral code, or rules, in the same thorough way that a scientist observes this universe. With this understanding, we can observe the precepts in various ways. Scientists understand in their own way and religious people understand in a religious way. There must be various ways of understanding it. But what we study, what we observe, is the one precept. That is what we receive when we receive the sixteen precepts.

You should understand, then, how you receive the precepts. The way you receive precepts is to just practice zazen. Just being yourself is the way you can observe the precepts.

It looks like I am talking about something like heaven, (laughs) but it is not so. I'm talking about each one of you, and myself, and about water, and about stuff. When stuff is really stuff, stuff includes everything. When you just practice zazen on your black cushion, your practice includes everything and you practice zazen with Buddha, with the patriarchs, and with all sentient beings. That is what I always repeat, over and over. Whether your practice is good or bad, it doesn't matter. If you accept your practice as your



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own, then that practice includes everything. At that time, you have the precepts which include everything, as the absolute being includes everything.

We say that something which includes everything is the absolute. But, actually, it is more than that. It is beyond our understanding. You may think that if you add up all the beings which exist in this universe that that is the absolute. But it is not so because the absolute cannot be understood by your mind. Something which you understand is already not absolute, because your mind limits the real understanding of the absolute. When you don't understand, and when you just sit, when you become a stone, or stuff, then you include everything. That is our zazen practice. This is such an important point for us. If you lose this point, you will easily be caught by some idea, or some experience, in your practice. "My practice is good, very good. Recently I saw Buddha in zazen. [laughs] All the Buddhas came to me and admired my practice." We are laughing, but that kind of practice exists and some people practice this kind of practice very sincerely. To just sit is much better than to see all the Buddhas in the world. Do you understand why? The point is to know what an important practice it is just to be yourself. Before I could read English, Alan Watts (helped me to express this): "When stone is completely stone, that is real stone." He put this Zen expression into words.

When a stone is really a stone, that is when a stone is really a stone through and through, that is really a stone. Not only is it really a stone, but, when it is really a stone, the stone includes everything. The stone cannot be picked

up by anyone when the stone is really a stone. When it is not a stone, someone may pick it up, but when it is really a stone, you cannot do so. You cannot do anything with it. When a stone is really a stone you cannot pick it up. Even though you think you picked it up, it is still part of the universe. It is you who thinks you picked it up, but actually, you didn't. It is still a part of the universe. You cannot pick up the whole universe. If you say, "I can pick up the whole universe," where are you? If you are a ghost, you are outside the universe. That is just delusion.

Nothing exists outside of the universe. All that exists is within the universe. So, to think that you can pick up a stone is a big delusion. Stone is still stone. You cannot do anything with it. If you understand this point and sit zazen, that is how you receive the precepts. That is the only way to observe perfect precepts. There is no other way to observe the precepts.

I don't know how to interpret the precepts which are not divisible into three. The first, threefold division is Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. What I have been talking about is the Dharma precepts which cannot be divided into three. The Dharma precepts are the law of the universe. There is some way in which things are always going. If you throw something up, it will eventually come to the earth because of the law of gravity. So there are some rules in the way things exist. So if we say rule, or law, that rule or law includes everything. Nothing is free from that law. That is Dharma. We say freedom. You may say you have complete freedom, but if you exist outside the law, you are a ghost. That is your own delusion. Actually nothing exists outside of the rules.

The second set of three precepts is called the pure law, or pure precepts. "Pure" means non-dualistic. When something is in duality, it is not pure. Usually, when you say "pure," "pure" is the opposite of "impure," and when you say "good," "good" is the opposite of "bad." When you think of good and bad as a pair of opposites, there is already separation. So when we say pure, it means non-duality.

When you sit, if you say, "My practice is good," that is already dualistic. Whether you say "good practice" or "bad practice," you are right there, sitting. You cannot say good practice or bad practice. There is some reason why someone's practice is the way it is. If someone cannot sit with a straight back there is some reason. So you cannot say good or bad. That is how he or she practices zazen. For her there is no other way to sit. For two days of sitting she is making her best effort and she practices zazen just to make her effort. Complete effort.

To be complete she is sitting; not to attain enlightenment and not to keep from falling into Hell. She is just sitting. No one can criticize her practice. If she criticizes her practice, she is not making her best effort. When she is making her best effort, she cannot criticize, and she will not feel regretful about her practice. That is her own practice. To continue this kind of practice, day after day, is the way we exist, or how we live, as a good Buddhist. That is how we keep our precepts.



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Anyway, there are some rules, and some reason why each person exists here. There is some reason why a plant is a plant and a star is a star. So when you say Dharma, Dharma includes everything. Dharma is another name of the Buddha, the absolute one.

The third one of the first division is Sangha. Sangha means to be harmonious. Buddha and the law of the universe are not two. When someone is practicing zazen in oneness with Buddha and his law, that is harmony. It is more than harmony. It is actually one. So this is why we say one is not divisible into three. We say the three precepts, but we cannot divide the one into three. But we can explain it in three ways. My practice, my zazen itself, is the precepts. That is one interpretation, one way of understanding the precepts.

There are rules, you know. If I do something good, the result will be good. You cannot escape from the law of karma. If you understand it in that way, then that rule, or that law, includes everything. We say, "the law of karma." You cannot escape from karma. Nothing can escape from karma. There is always some rule which determines how everything exists, and the rules are the same for Buddha himself. When we say Buddha, Buddha acts with karma, by karma, or for karma. So karma and Buddha are the same. And I, Buddha's disciple, am always one with Buddha. We cannot escape from it, so we call it the indivisible precept. We cannot divide it into three.

Now you are listening to my lecture, or, in order to study Buddhism, you may read many books. The books you read are not Buddhism itself, but an explanation of this truth. "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form": if we explain it like this, it is the study of the *Prajna Paramita* group of sutras. If we put emphasis on how, or why, to be Buddha, then that is the study of the *Lotus Sutra*.

What you will have by doing *koan* study is the relationship between our practice and reality. We have a glance at truth, or enlightenment, or Buddha, which is always one, which is not divisible, and which cannot be explained in words. That is how you study *koans*, and, through *koans*, or *koan* practice, you will have a glance at the truth: "Oh, this is reality!" That is *koan* practice. Whatever you say, or write, is a kind of way to put reality into words. If you are an artist, what you work on is how to convey your understanding of the truth. The study of Buddhism, of course, is included in our study of precepts. It is not just observing ten prohibitory precepts, "do not kill," "do not steal," etc. Those are the precepts, but, even though you observe the ten precepts completely, that is not how you observe our real precepts.

So we are not interested in explaining the two hundred and fifty, or more, precepts. I don't know how many more. Three or four hundred for a man, and more than five hundred for a woman. I am sorry to have to say this; each time I say it, some of you may not like it. But I always say, a female is more complicated spiritually and physically, so the rules must be more complicated. That is quite natural. Men are simpler. Too simple may not be so good: you may be a simpleton. So I am not proud of having half the

number of precepts that a woman has. I am not proud of it. I am too simple, too foolish, maybe.

Anyway, the point is not to observe those precepts one by one, one after another. The point is to learn how to be yourself, how to be a woman. Then you have the precepts. You have the complete precepts when you are just a woman. Then you keep more than the five hundred precepts. So actually even though you keep the five hundred written precepts, you may not be completely a woman. So the best way is just to be you yourself, then the precepts are with you always.

People may ask "What are you doing at Zen Center?" "What kind of practice do you have at Zen Center?" There may be many ways, but, in short, to be oneself is the purpose of our practice. How to be oneself, and how to keep the precepts, Buddha's precepts, is our point of practice. Those are the three indivisible precepts: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

The next one—I'm not continuing my lecture anymore (laughs) because you may get hungry if I continue. The other three are the three collective pure precepts—collection of all the goodies. Those are another three precepts. How about it? "Collection of all the goodies precepts," (laughs) and we have ten more. Those are the ten prohibitory precepts. Altogether, there are sixteen precepts, and we tentatively explain the framework of Buddhism by the explanation of the precepts. So the precepts are not just rules. They are a direct explanation of our life and Buddha's teaching and zazen practice. That is why it is important for you to receive the precepts.

Thank you very much.

Tassajara Zendo

