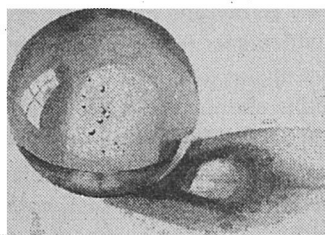


# Taking Five Precepts: What Does it Mean?

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What does it mean to take five precepts? First of all, it's a wonderful way to make a statement that you are interested in practicing Zen; it means that you are willing to look at who you really are and who you thought you were. You're stating an intention to inquire into the true nature of this world, which is your own true nature, and to develop the direction of the Buddha. The direction of offering yourself, to helping all sentient beings. It is a great thing.

The implications can look intimidating or scary, because training with rules tends to make us look at it in terms of, "What won't I be allowed to do?"

The precepts aren't rules that say you're allowed to do this, and you're not allowed to do that. The precepts are guidelines against which we reflect our behavior and against which we reflect our minds. They reflect back to us what our intention was in a particular situation, so that we see what it is that we want to do and also what the situation asks of us, which may not have been our first impulse before we bounced it off of this precept mirror.

Keeping the precepts actually doesn't limit your behavior any more than not keeping the precepts. Actually what keeping the precepts does is that it liberates you from the very confined behavior of following your desire, anger, and ignorance. In fact, not keeping the precepts means staying with a way of behaving which is repressed, self destructive; not sound of self or in relations. Keeping the precepts means turning away from tunnel vision, a very wide range of behavior; and not keeping the precepts means keeping a very, very narrow range of behavior, because you're just stuck in the same habit of "I, my, me."

It becomes evident after sitting just one Zen retreat. If you hold tightly to some particular thinking that appears during sitting, and you're stuck with it, then it gets very painful, or consuming. But if you let it go, and just look, "what is this?" then as a difficulty it dissolves. Situations in life are like that. If you hold to your desire, anger or illusion, then it gets very painful and constructed. But if you let that go, and enter into the situation, which means following the precepts, then you're free. This willingness to have the precepts guide us means our trust is strong and our direction is clear—we call this "try mind." Then little-by-little you accomplish *your life*, practice blossoms, and the emotions and conditions that once controlled you are under control. The kernel of compassion ripens; the great sadness and suffering which Buddha saw as characterizing this world becomes yours; "how may I help?" appears.

This isn't a burden you're taking on. In fact, you're letting go of a burden: all of your impulsive, habitual ways of making problems for yourself and other people.

**The first precept:** "I vow to abstain from taking life." For a lot of people in our school and for a lot of Buddhists, that means being a vegetarian. For some Buddhists, that doesn't mean being a vegetarian. Vegetarianism is not a strict rule which must be followed, but a great many people find that not eating meat or eating it very rarely makes a lot of sense. But you have to decide what makes sense for you; if you're a parent and you have children, you have to be sensitive to that condition in a way that works. It is like visiting our parents on Thanksgiving and being served turkey—the wisdom and love that allows a vegetarian offering to eat turkey often makes a parent very happy.

For some people, this precept has implications for a whole wide range of behaviors which affect life on this earth. A guy who is not a Buddhist, the singer/songwriter Utah Phillips, union activist, old-time Socialist, was traveling around in his van doing gigs when the Gulf war broke out a few years ago. He pulled his van off the road and found a place to leave it for a while. I forget just how he traveled (as a union activist he wouldn't take a Greyhound bus), but he decided for the rest of the war he wouldn't drive his van, because, he said, "This van doesn't run on blood." This was his decision. He felt that a lot of people were dying for him to be able to buy cheap gas.

It comes down to each person deciding what makes sense, not what's convenient. Just to live, just to continue living in this body, you must take life. That's the nature of life, that it requires other life to sustain it. So, you have to decide how far you're going to go. I'm vegetarian except when I visit my parents or some other together action demands otherwise. The main reason for me has to do with staying low on the food chain, because the lower you are on the chain, the less life you have to take in order to sustain your own. Also it uses fewer resources and allows more resources for others. That's my conclusion. We all have to look at the effects of our actions and make our own decisions.

**The second precept:** "I vow to abstain from taking things not given." Interesting wording—not "I won't steal things." Here again, there are implications in our daily interactions with other people; there are implications in our relationship to the earth, to our society. It's a good example of how keeping the precepts really widens our possible behavior.

It you long for something which isn't yours, then maybe you don't need it. Maybe you have some habit which causes you to desire it. If so, then consciously not taking it can start to free you from that habit and introduce you to some new experience. Most likely the experience will involve a more attentive relationship with the world, because you will choose it consciously. So you are brought back to don't know, back to your correct relationship with the world and the things and people of the world. And in the end, that will probably be a lot more enjoyable than snatching whatever it was that you wanted.

What about the situation when you want something which isn't yours and you really do need it, or it's in that gray area where maybe you need it and maybe you don't, but pursuing it wouldn't be harmful. Well, pursue it. But pursue it openly, not, "Well, nobody will know if I..." If you are compelled to do it surreptitiously, then ask why this is so. It's an opportunity to look into your own intention. Does this thing actually have significance or am I just pursuing it as a symbol of something else?

What is your relationship to the other people, beings, things in this situation? That's really what all of the precepts are about: your relationship to what's going on, inquiring into that relationship, into the way in which you don't have "enough mind" in this situation. Maybe when you inquire, you will realize that what you have really is enough. Maybe you will conclude that you need something from that situation which isn't coming. So, pursue it. Don't check, only do it, but own your actions. Do it consciously, by choice, openly, and by developing or changing your relationship with the other beings who have relationship with whatever you want. That means you're transforming something, which is liberating to you and others. Some karma is somehow going to shift, some habit is going to have to change.

**The third precept:** "I vow to abstain from misconduct done in lust." Again, interesting wording. Some Western Buddhist schools translate it differently and make it much more specific, but in our school we say it this way, "What does that mean?"

First of all, the word lust can be very broad. The original precept was referring to sexual behavior, and I'll get back to that specifically. You can lust after money, power, food, all kinds of things. So, what is misconduct done in lust? Basically, what it means is vowing not to do harm. This does not mean, "Oh, well, it's not hurting anybody." Usually, that's an excuse for hurting somebody. Maybe not yourself, but somebody. So, this is a view not to do harm. With lust after something like food, the question may be one of doing harm to yourself. This isn't a guilt thing, saying you're bad because you ate that ice cream. Maybe it was good for you to eat that ice cream. Maybe it was a really good idea. Holding the precept, attaching to the precepts, is a mistake. Using the precept as a mirror: if you pig out, you feel lousy. Cause and effect are clear. Very simple. Or maybe you have wild reactions to sugar, so you eat ice cream, and you crash later and have a headache and beat up somebody. Cause and

effect are clear. If the desire for ice cream causes you to bulldoze your way over other people's needs, then something is not right. If you just eat ice cream, and enjoy the ice cream (because otherwise there's not much point to it), then it's finished.

So, looking specifically at sexual behavior, what is misconduct done in lust? If you're a monk, certain things are very clear. If you're married, certain things are very clear. But for anybody, what it means is a vow that you are not going to manipulate others because of your sexual desire, and you are not going to use anybody else's sexual desire as a tool to manipulate them, and you are not going to allow anybody to use your sexual desire as a tool to manipulate you. So, if you're a monk, if you're married, if you're single, what is misconduct done in lust? A lot of manipulative stuff happens, not necessarily sexual acts, just people using the sexual energy to get what they want. This is a vow to put an end to that.

So, how does this precept become a liberation to a wider behavior? If there was this impulse to do some sexual behavior or to use sexual energy to get some other results, that means that there's some kind of relationship there. Probably some kind of relatively close relationship with some other human being. What is the nature of that relationship? If I choose not to behave in this manipulative way toward which I felt compelled, what is it that I need from this relationship, and what is it that this relationship asks of me? Why am I in this relationship with this person? What is the purpose of this karma that we're making together? If I choose not to do this manipulative acting, how do I use this relationship to help us both? How do I deepen the bond, whatever it is?

It's really an opportunity to discover how to relate to people, how to build relationships that help this world. Maybe it means having a sexual partner and a strong bond, not based on manipulating each other to get what you want, but based on challenging each other to become your true self, and taking the energy from that to help the world. Maybe it means none of that. Always inquire, "What is this?"

**The fourth precept:** "I vow to abstain from lying." Someone said that this precept was the one they found most difficult to keep. Afterwards, I thought about that. Why is that? I think it is because, of the types of behavior described by these five precepts, lying is the one that is most accepted. We all basically know that you don't kill people, that you don't steal, that you don't mess with people over weird sexual stuff, and it's not a good idea to get drunk and abuse people either. But, somehow, lying is the one that's accepted. "Well, everybody does it." In one sense, this is also the most central of the five precepts, because our practice is all about the truth and being honest. Right from the start, "The wall is white, the floor is brown." That's the truth. That's what our practice is about. Our practice is about waking up from our dreams and perceiving the truth, acting the truth, and speaking the truth. So this is a very important precept.

We say in the temple rules: know when the precepts are closed and when they are open—when to keep them and when to break them. This is Zen style precepts, which we talk about in the Precepts Ceremony. With Zen precepts, the purpose of the precepts is to ask why you are doing what it is that you are doing. It's not necessarily that this particular action is good and this action is bad; it's why do you do it? If it's "I want something," then return to your practice at that moment. Practice is just paying attention. Return to your practice and ask, "What is this?"

So, the mouth opens and you see a lie coming out. Why is it that you feel this need to violate the truth? It may be that upon looking closely, you'll see that it's a situation where it's appropriate to break the precepts. That's probably several orders of magnitude more rare than we like to think. In that moment, inquire, "Why do I feel this need to violate the truth?" Which means, to violate my practice, my commitment to the truth. Why do I feel this need to abandon that?

It's a great moment, because that's your practice right there. Perceive your karma. If you just perceive it and see, and probably struggle with it for awhile, and stay with it through the struggle, and then let it go... in that moment, you're Buddha. What a great liberation.

The precept says, "I vow to abstain from lying." So, start with the person you spend the most time with. You're vowing not to lie to yourself anymore, which is a great gift to give yourself. It may sometimes be painful. It's a lot easier to abstain from lying to others than to abstain from lying to yourself. Someone once said to me that, since there isn't really a self, you have to make up a self in order to lie to yourself, so how can you lie to yourself? Well, we say in the Precepts Ceremony, if you're not thinking, you don't need the precepts. If you have no mind, then you don't need the precepts. But if you have a mind, if a little bit of thinking appears, the precepts are necessary.

**The fifth precept:** "I vow to abstain from intoxicants taken to produce heedlessness."

Once again, what does that mean? A number of senior people in our school have no problem with a glass of wine with dinner. Some abstain completely from alcohol. What is the intention? Why have a glass of wine? Well, why eat good-tasting food? Why not just rice and beans every day and a few plain vegetables? Why add the pleasurable aspect which doesn't add anything to the ability of the food to sustain your practice? The answer lies in the fact that allowing yourself simple pleasures like good food actually can add something to

supporting your practice. Buddhism is called the middle way, which means not too tight, not too loose. If we are too strict with ourselves for too long, our desire mind can actually get stronger because we are forcing it into submission and it is fighting back. If we are not strict enough then our desire mind controls us, and we follow it around without direction or purpose.

So, sometimes enjoying the pleasure of delicious food can help to quiet the food-desire demon so that it will not distract us from the needs of the moment. Also, putting too much energy into the procurement of good food draws us away from the needs of the moment and into breaking the precepts. Similarly, for some people, a moderate amount of alcohol may provide a simple pleasure which stills the voice of desire or inhibition without indulging it to the point of giving up the power of decision. But that line is very thin, and it is easy to delude ourselves into thinking that we are keeping things in balance when we are pushing toward the edge of "heedlessness." So, we must always pay attention.

For some people, abstaining from intoxicants includes making changes to their consumption of sugar, tobacco, and caffeine. What is your relationship with other people? Just pay attention and see, and decide for yourself whether any change is necessary.

The precepts are all interrelated. Most behaviors that break one of the precepts break at least one of the other precepts, because what it all comes down to is intention. If your intention is a genuine response to the situation, then you're probably keeping the precepts. If it is not genuine, at the very least you're lying, and you're probably doing something else. Misconduct done in lust often involves taking things not given, as well as lying, and might easily include intoxicants. Taking life is often done out of greed, which violated the second precept. Stealing and lying are closely related.

Finally, taking the precepts means that you are officially becoming Buddhist. It doesn't have to mean leaving behind any other religious or ethnic affiliation. You can still be a Jew or a Christian or a neo-pagan or whatever. But in addition, you have taken a vow to follow the teachings of Buddha, which means a vow to become Buddha. You can be a Muslim Buddha or an ecofeminist Buddha or a Jewish Buddha or a Catholic Buddha. These five precepts were first set down by Sakyamuni Buddha for his lay disciples. And, as I said at the very start, that's making a powerful statement to ourselves and to the Sangha about your commitment to become Buddha. ☉

