

Fall

A precepts ceremony talk by Zen Master Wu Kwang

Down Seven Times

First, thanks to all of you for taking the precepts and also thanks to all of us who reaffirm our commitment to these precepts over and over again in these ceremonies. If we don't choose either complete hedonism or rigid fundamentalism, then the business of living an ethical and moral life is a little bit tricky. The sixth patriarch, giving instruction to a monk, once said, "Don't make good and bad." To not make good and bad is considerably different from "there is no good and bad." Not making good and bad means not constructing in your mind some idea of good and bad, and then pasting it on the nose of the situation in front of you. And then, not fabricating some story to substantiate how you're going to react to your construction at that point. If you do that, you make a big problem.

If you don't make good and bad, if you don't make anything, if you return to zero [*hits table*], then your original empty mind appears in front of you in the moment and allows you to see what is correct in that particular situation. That means you have to find your own inner gyroscope, to find your balance moment to moment, and act correctly. If you are fundamentally connected to the basic precept of cherishing all of existence, then your inner gyroscope will appear naturally. As we practice, it appears more and more frequently. Some karma immediately [*hits table*] goes, but there is also a sticky kind that reappears over and over again. It behooves us all to be patient with ourselves and to look into what we're holding to.

Some years ago, I went to a talk given by the Dalai Lama at a Mongolian monastery in New Jersey. There were a couple of thousand people there, all sitting on the grass listening to a talk on the practice of the Vajrasatva, including Vajrasatva purification and the use of a special mantra. He explained the practice of visualizing this particular Buddhist deity, and then he gave several different



variations: You could visualize the deity up in the air above your head, or you could visualize it out in front of you. You could visualize it sitting on top of your head. You could visualize it first sitting on top of your head and then entering down into your body, into your heart, followed by a special breathing exercise. You could visualize taking in truth and light, and then breathing out the black smoke of all your impurities, which were then to be sent into the ground somewhere. However, he then explained that if you were practicing a kind of yoga where you were conserving energy, you were not to breathe out these things, but were supposed to imagine a fire inside your very being completely consuming your impurities. Next, they handed out a printed version of the hundred-syllable Vajrasatva mantra, and we all chanted it together. It was quite long! After that, the Dalai Lama thanked everyone for coming and remarked playfully, "You have all purified yourselves with the Vajrasatva mantra, so now you can go out and do some more mischief."

Here, the Dalai Lama has described the actual practice of the precepts. Likewise, even though we have all participated in this ceremony and burnt away our karmic hindrances in an "instant," we still are not always able to live up to our own intentions. Bodhidharma said, "Fall down seven times, get up eight." So, please know when the precepts are open and when they are closed, and when to keep them and when to break them. And also when to forgive yourself. Thank you all very much for taking the precepts. ☸