



Congratulations to the people taking ten precepts who are now dharma teachers in training, and to those who have taken five precepts. Special thanks and congratulations go to those who have finished their dharma teacher training and received long robes and their dharma teacher certificates today.

Taking precepts is the most "religious" activity we do at the Zen Center. Many of us cringe a bit when we hear some of the language that is in the ceremony. But the meaning of this precepts ceremony is very, very deep. When we take precepts we join a family—not only the family of people who have taken these precepts today, but a family of people that stretches back to the time of the Buddha. The fact that we are sitting here today in Providence, Rhode Island doing this precepts ceremony ties us directly back to the sangha practicing at the time of the Buddha.

When we take five precepts we are given this brown kasa. This kasa that we wear is Buddha's robe. Of course, our underwear is also Buddha's robe, but there is room for symbolism in our practice. Each time we put on this kasa to practice, we are asking "What am I, what is it to be alive, and what am I doing here in this world?" By taking these precepts today, you are expressing your commitment to asking these vital questions and sharing that commitment with our community and the world.

It is interesting that the precepts (at least in the

## an impossible task

English version) are written in the negative. The first is to abstain from taking life. Actually, it is impossible not to kill. To live is to kill. From the moment we wake up in the morning until we go to sleep at night, we break this precept. We kill plant or animal life whenever we eat. When we drive in our cars, we kill insect life under our wheels, even when we aren't aware that we are doing it. And then, in the middle of the night, a mosquito is buzzing around our head, and without thinking we wake up and hit it, so again we've broken the precepts. If you take these precepts with an intention never to break them, you have an impossible task. Nevertheless, these precepts that we take have profound meaning. How can we live a life without killing?

How can we really live a life without stealing? It's easy to go into a store and not take something that we didn't buy. But how do we not steal the spotlight from each other? How do we not let our egoic

needs steal energy and attention from those around us? And how do we live so that we bring life to this moment, instead of killing it? When faced with a friend's enthusiasm, can we encourage her rather than find fault and kill her joy? If we state the precepts in the positive, the first precept says, "I vow to protect and nurture life in this world." This first precept asks us to live our lives in a way that is mindful and present, supporting life in each moment.

When we talk about precepts, we often say, "Know when to keep them and when to break them; when they are open and when they are closed." There is nothing absolute in our practice. But how do we know? There is no formula. You can have many preconceived ideas before something happens, but in the moment it is happening, how do you know what to do? If you're confused or unclear, we say keep the precepts. If you keep the precepts, your mind will settle down. With a settled mind you can more clearly perceive the actual moment, rather than being deluded by what you think about it. And with that settled mind you can see what your relationship is to the moment. Then your actions can be clear actions. But, your actions may not be the same as my actions. Your relationship to the moment will be different than mine. Here is a simple story about keeping or not keeping the precepts. You're in the woods and a rabbit runs by. A few moments later a hunter comes along and asks, "Did you see that rabbit?" Well, you're stuck. If you say, "Yeah, the rabbit went that way," then the hunter might kill the rabbit

and you will have broken the precept to abstain from taking life.

So then you may think, well, maybe I'll tell him that the rabbit went the other way. But, if you tell him it went that other way, then you've broken the precept to abstain from lying. You're stuck either way. Usually, faced with a choice like this, we think there is a clear and simple solution because the life of the rabbit is most important. So, lying is better than killing. Theoretically, we may all agree on that. But what if this hunter is followed by three very hungry children? Then the situation becomes much more complicated. To lie or to kill, which is correct? Should the family starve or should the rabbit die? There is no one right answer. Only you can decide in the moment.

It's been said several times this weekend at different ceremonies that today there is much suffering in the world. There is war being waged in the name of the United States, in the name of Iraq, in the name of The Congo, in the name of Palestine and Israel. We're used to war happening all of the time. We've become accustomed to killing, to hatred, and to racism. We've become desensitized and jaded.

Some of us are a little less jaded today because our country is directly involved with this war in Iraq. The suffering in the world has many different faces. Don't try to shield yourself with your practice. "I'll just sit in the dharma room and get nice and calm and let all those problems disappear. It's so beautiful, the incense, the chanting, the serene face of the Buddha. Ah, the world is at peace." With the help of our precepts we can face the suffering directly. From this practice, great love, great compassion and the bodhisattva way is available to all of us. Thank you all very much for taking the precepts. It really gives life and sustenance to the sangha. You've given great benefit to all of us. Thank you very much. ☸

*A precepts ceremony talk by Zen Master Bon Soeng*

