

Motivation for Practice: Why I'm Taking 10 Precepts

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Since I took five precepts, my practice has gone well. I meditate daily, respond to chanting requests, show up for group practice, do one-day retreats, work on kong-ans and read what is recommended by the Kwan Um School. There seems to be “no problem.” So, why would I want to complicate things and make more work for myself by embarking on dharma-teacher training?

On reflection, I have two basic reasons for taking 10 precepts. First, I want to make my teachers happy. Second, I want our local Zen center (and the Kwan Um School as a whole) to be available for anyone who wants to use it. I'll elaborate a little on those reasons.

When I say “happy,” I don't mean getting teachers' approval. I don't think that approval and disapproval are issues for them, and I don't think it would be helpful for me to get hung up on the idea of being a good student. What I mean is that those teachers have shared something that has brought deep happiness to my life, and I'd like to show my appreciation and respect by widening that circle of sharing. I know my teachers would enjoy that.

On the whole, I've lived a fairly selfish and in some ways solitary life. Until recently, aside from a few close relationships, I haven't given much attention to other people's happiness or suffering. That attitude has some basis in my early experience, and I won't apologize or make myself wrong about it, but it has become unsustainable as an approach to living.

As a child of eight, I became suddenly and profoundly aware that I would one day die, along with everyone and everything else, and that this personal extinction would be for keeps. That realization, among other things, led me to search for anything that would seem to fill up or hide the emptiness that I felt and feared. “Anything” came to include more intoxicants, more books, more philosophy and religion, more money, more sex, more status and recognition—on and on and on. However, even before starting Zen practice, I always had the nagging sense that all this striving was actually leading me down a rat hole to nowhere. I began to question the nature and purpose of this “me” that was trying so hard to escape—and failing so badly.

Zen practice—other than on the occasions when it has exasperated me—has helped me to calm down. I've stopped worrying so much about the fate of this “me” thing (whatever it is) that I've been lugging around all my life. I appreciate the natural world far more. I find that I'm more effective with other people because I'm less attached to my opinions about them or what I imagine they think about me. What a wonderful relief! How could I not be grateful?


As my awareness clears a bit, however, I'm also more acutely aware of how much other people are striving and struggling in the same way that I have. Being less self-involved and more open to other people seems to result in caring more about their experience of life, even if I disagree with them about specific issues or find their behavior off-putting or unpleasant. Maybe that's just a natural consequence of Zen practice and of getting older.

In any event, it hurts more to see the suffering in the world, and I can't seem to ignore it as easily as I once did. Even if I *could* ignore it, what would be left of my own practice? Would I wind up attaining some kind of personal enlightenment and hanging out in a private nirvana where everything is just fine? To me, that sounds suspiciously like another kind of dream world, but even if it really was possible to live that way, what would be the point? These kinds of questions bring me to my second reason for taking 10 precepts.

I don't know how Zen practice or the teaching of it really works. I don't know how chanting for someone who is sick or in trouble will help them. I know that *something* happens during kong-an interviews, but I don't know how to define or explain it. A lot of the readings and teachers' comments sound good and feel good, but when I try to repeat or explain them to family or friends I feel as if I'm missing something essential, so I don't do that often, and usually only if I'm asked. In short, I don't know how much use I'd be as a dharma teacher.

What I do know is that there is a building in South Yarmouth, Massachusetts, called the Cape Cod Zen Center, and another, larger building in Rhode Island called the Providence Zen Center. Inside are cushions, interview rooms, altars, calligraphies, robes and other objects. All these forms originate in teachings passed down over centuries by human beings like me, and without that human chain neither the physical forms nor the opportunity for liberation they represent would exist.

I also know from experience that without regular access to the Zen center and participation in what goes on there, my solo spiritual practice would disintegrate pretty quickly. What is true for me is almost certainly true for other students. Besides, there are many other struggling, curious individuals out there who want and would benefit from practice if they only knew that there was a Zen center nearby.

My childhood self was right: Everything *does* change and pass away. I can't forever count on others to do the work. In order for the opportunity for Zen practice to continue, somebody will need to learn the forms, internalize the teachings and be ready to step up when it's time to facilitate a retreat, lead group practice or give a dharma talk. Ignorant and lazy and fearful though I may be, I've run out of plausible excuses for not being that someone. 

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