

# The Precepts.

Rev. Koshin Schomberg

The Precepts embrace both the goal and the method of spiritual training. The Precepts are seen to be the method of training when we recognize our need for a refuge and an anchor in the midst of the changing conditions of daily life. The effort to keep the Precepts enables us to find this refuge and this anchor. The Precepts are seen to be the goal of training when we have so cleansed body and mind of selfish desire, ill-will and egotism that we live the Precepts naturally without feeling that we are restrained by them. To live thus is to manifest Enlightenment in the midst of daily life. The Precepts are active throughout our training in both of these aspects.

We can only truly keep any Precept when we want to do so. The best way to stop someone from keeping the Precepts is to try to force him to keep them. Education, rather than force, leads people to keep the Precepts, for one can only want to discipline oneself when one has had some insight into the benefit of self-discipline. When we begin to realize that by refraining from certain old patterns of behavior we move in a beneficial direction, we begin our true spiritual education. Training begins with the Precept “Cease from evil”. And each day training continues as we renew our effort to fulfill this resolve.

Any action done out of a pure intention has great spiritual merit. Here there are no “great” and no “trivial” acts, for the important consideration, from a spiritual point

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of view, is not how much we have accomplished but whether we have acted with a pure heart. This pure intention is described by the Three Pure Precepts, which are the lodestone and essential teaching of Buddhist practice. The first Pure Precept, “Cease from evil”, embodies the intention to do as little harm—to cause as little suffering—as possible. The second Pure Precept, “Do good”, embodies the intention to act with compassion, respecting and cherishing all life. The third Pure Precept, “Do good for others”, is also sometimes stated as “Purify your own heart” and this latter formulation must be understood to be implicit in the former. For without the effort to cleanse the heart of greed, hate and delusion, we cannot truly do anything to benefit others. We all know the old saying that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. I often wish that this were just a smart quip, but in fact, it is literally true. For when good intentions are acted upon without the devotion of careful attention to the purification of those intentions, terrible suffering often results.

Human history is one great tapestry of suffering woven by such “good” intentions. There can be no doubt that Hitler, for example, truly believed that the whole root of human suffering was the existence of “inferior” races of people. So he went out with the good intention of eradicating the cause of suffering (for everyone who mattered in his mind) and ended by causing a terrible human catastrophe. How much suffering is caused by people who simply cannot tolerate injustice and who end by making someone else the scapegoat who must bear the burden of their frustration? What is the problem of these good intentions which cause so much misery? To the Buddhist, the problem is that people rush into action before they have *purified* those “good” intentions. This purification is the process of removing the selfish discrimination, or ignorance, which tinges the unpurified intention and through which it becomes the cause of suffering. Before he went out to save the world, Hitler

should have spent some time dealing with the delusion of racism which he and so many other people inherited from a barbaric past and a sick present. Before outraged vigilantes tar and feather the local bully, they should decide whether their desire for justice has become a desire for revenge.

The wonderful fact in all this is that those good intentions which cause so much trouble really *are* good. They have just become warped, or saddened, by delusion. The purpose of spiritual training is to remove the element of delusion while acting upon, and developing faith in, the compassion which underlies all good intentions.

We too often concern ourselves with the most superficial and external aspects of life. It is good that the Eternal is not so shallow. In our efforts to train in the Precepts, we may easily become discouraged because of seeming lack of progress. It is important to have the faith that a Good beyond our very limited powers of comprehension is being served through our training. In reality, while we worry about externals, the Eternal sees clearly into the intention underlying our acts. Our seeming failures and successes along the way do not necessarily have the meaning which we often attribute to them. For example, individuals who have a karmic history of compulsively committing some violent crime, and who manage to stop doing it, may continue to have many character traits and do many things which both they and others find very unpleasant. If the individual's personality is viewed only from the perspective of immediate appearances, most people will only tend to see a rather crude personality. Yet someone who knows the karmic history might be impressed by his or her sincerity and courage. A person's purity of heart is seen only by one who sympathetically understands them.

If we would understand the real significance of the Precepts in the spiritual life, we must come to see ourselves

and others with this sympathetic wisdom. To try to be thus is to try to become like the infinitely kind, infinitely understanding Eternal. As we train ourselves and gain confidence in the purity of our purpose, we come to see what a great thing it is to act with simple purity of heart. Such action does not usually look particularly holy. More often than not, it is only recognized by the fruits which it bears over an extended period of time. The fruits of action coming from greed and vengeance may, for a short time, seem to satisfy those burning urges, but in the end such action only intensifies the fires which gave it birth. The short-term fruits of refraining from evil may sometimes be bitter, for they offer little satisfaction to the selfish self. But in the end, such restraint leads to the cessation of suffering—that cooling of the fires of greed, hate and delusion which is called “Nirvana”. “Nirvana” literally means “extinction of craving”.

Many people have expended a great deal of mental energy on the question of whether the end for which an act is done can justify the use of seemingly evil means to accomplish that end. From the point of view of the Precepts, bearing in mind the central importance of acting out of a purified intent, we can see that before one gets too involved in deciding about either end or means, it is best to examine one’s intent through meditation. Regardless of the worthiness of our end, if we act out of an unpurified intent (an intent tinged with greed, hate or delusion) the wheel of karma will roll inevitably in the direction of suffering. Similarly, if the intent has been truly purified, then even if the creation of some suffering cannot be avoided, the wheel will still roll in the direction of the cessation of suffering.

It is for this reason that the Buddhist who would truly keep the Precepts must often take refuge in the stillness of meditation, there asking with an open heart, “Please show me what I must do. Please help me to do that which is right.” This is to take Refuge in the Buddha. It is the keeping of the

highest Precept. We may also often feel the need to consult with others who share our wish to keep the Precepts. This is taking Refuge in the Sangha. And we may study the particular Precepts which apply to the actions being considered, and to the attitude of mind which we are seeking to purify through our meditation. This is part of the meaning of taking Refuge in the Dharma.

The Precepts are called “the Blood of the Buddhas”. Just as one cannot live without the circulation of healthy blood in his veins, so Buddhism cannot live without the practice of the Precepts. Thus we share in the Life of Buddha, a life which has neither beginning nor end. Through the purification of our intent we experience and live within the Immaculacy of Buddha, the great Eternal, and know the Blood of the Buddhas as our own.

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