

## *Precept Meditation*

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Years back, when Ajaan Suwat was teaching a meditation retreat at IMS, someone asked him a question in a Q&A session toward the end of the retreat: “How do we bring meditation into daily life?” His answer was to focus on the five and the eight precepts—but a lot of people misunderstood his answer. They interpreted it as his being dismissive of laypeople; that laypeople really couldn’t or shouldn’t focus on meditation in daily life; that they should just stick to the lowly practice of the precepts instead. But that wasn’t his point. His point was that following the precepts is an important part of meditation.

The act of taking on the five precepts teaches you very important lessons about skills integral to meditation. To begin with, it focuses your attention on your *intentions*, because you can break a precept only intentionally. This forces you to ask yourself, “What are your intentions? Why do you act? What’s the motive behind your actions and your choices?” When you’re forced to focus on these questions, you realize that one of the few intentions really worth sticking with all the time is the intention to be harmless. This is why you decide that you don’t want to kill, to steal, to have illicit sex, to lie, or to take intoxicants, because all of these actions are harmful by nature.

So you set up that intention and try to stick by it. This requires mindfulness and alertness, which are important factors in training the mind. You have to keep your precepts in mind and be alert in watching over your actions to make sure they don’t go against your original intent. At the same time, you have to develop strategies for fending off any intentions that would go against your intent to be harmless. This requires ingenuity and discernment.

Right here you can begin to see the connections with meditation. Once you’ve set up an intention to stay with the breath, you have to be mindful and alert to make sure you actually do stay with the breath and don’t go wandering off. You also have to use your discernment and ingenuity to fend off any contrary intentions that would lure you away from your original intent.

The precepts also teach you to be scrupulous. It’s easy to think of being harmless to all beings in a general way, but when you really try to act on that intention, you discover all sorts of ramifications you didn’t expect. You have to pay attention to animals you may have otherwise overlooked: ants and termites, for instance. You’ve got to take their survival into account. This forces you to be very scrupulous in your behavior, very careful in what you will and will not do. This habit, too, is very helpful in the course of meditation, helping you to pay attention to little details, little movements in the mind that are easy to overlook but can have important consequences.

In this way you can see how the precepts are a form of meditation in daily life. They take your actions as your objects of meditation and they force you to develop many of the mental skills and attitudes you need in formal meditation: mindfulness, alertness, ingenuity, strategic discernment, and a scrupulous attention to detail.

The precepts also teach you the power of your intentions. As you stick with a skillful intention, you'll find it really does change your life. It creates a better atmosphere for your meditating. If you stick with the intention not to be harmful, then when the time comes to sit down and meditate or to try to be mindful in other ways throughout the day, it's a lot easier. You're not burdened with remorse over any harmful things you might have done or said. You don't have to go into denial about might have done or said. This creates a much better atmosphere, a much better environment for the mind to keep things in mind and to settle down and be at ease with itself.

But the precepts also help induce a sense of *samvega*: dismay over the prospect of continued *samsara*. You'll begin to notice, as you try to maintain the intention not to be harmful, how really difficult it is to be totally harmless, because life maintains itself by feeding. This is one of the best arguments against intelligent design, or at least *compassionate* intelligent design: Why do we have to feed off one another all the time? Wouldn't it be better if we could feed off inanimate objects or energies? If we could eat rocks or soil, if we could live off light waves or sound vibrations, nothing would be harmed. Like the harmoniums in *The Sirens of Titan*: We could just feed on vibrations and take pleasure in one another's happiness. But that's not how the world works. Worldly happiness is limited by the fact that one person's happiness often requires feeding on someone else's suffering and pain.

So there are limitations to the range of the precepts. When you decide to adopt the precept against killing, for example, you decide basically that you yourself are not going to kill and you're not going to give the explicit order to anybody else—or even an indirect hint to anyone else—that they should kill. But even then, it's still difficult to go around without somebody's getting killed. When you walk along a sidewalk, you don't know how many living things you step on. Or eating: Even if you decide to be a strict vegetarian, a lot of insects get killed in the process of farming vegetables. Gophers and other animals get killed when farmers clear the fields. So as you reflect on your precepts and on your desire to be harmless, it creates a good strong sense of *samvega*—which is an important element of discernment to remind you that it would really be good to get out of this whole process of *samsara*-ing, to find a happiness that doesn't need to feed. Maybe there is something to this *nibbana* business after all. It really would be something good, something worth trying to attain. So the precepts not only help develop the skills you need for concentration but also provide a context and motivation for gaining discernment and insight.

As for the eight precepts, those move into another area of training for the mind. Again, Ajaan Suwat: "The eight precepts add the element of restraint of the senses." Each of the added precepts places restraints on the types of pleasures we might try to get through the sense doors. The precept against illicit sex turns into a precept against sex, period. That covers all of the sense doors right there. Then there's the precept against eating after noon or before dawn. That covers pleasures of taste. The precept against watching shows, listening to music, using perfumes and scents covers pleasures of sight, hearing, and smell. And then the precept against high and luxurious beds and seats covers the sense of touch. As you go down the list, you can see that each of the five senses is covered. This adds a higher level of restraint and places some barriers on our typical ways of indulging our desire for pleasure: evening munchies; the desire

for a nice, thick mattress to lie on; wanting to smell nice; liking to listen to music. By taking on these precepts, you learn to put some barriers around your self-indulgence.

These barriers serve several purposes. One, they focus you on the meditation: If you're going to find any pleasure in the course of the day, you have to look more intently at developing pleasure in the meditation to make up for the restrictions you've placed on your foraging for pleasure outside. In addition, you learn important lessons about indulgence. If you tend to be indulgent in your daily life, you're going to be very self-indulgent when you meditate. If you can't say No to your daily desires, it's going to be hard to say No to them while you're sitting here meditating. The mind-states that want to go off and think about pleasant sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations are very easy to indulge in if you don't have the habit of saying No to your impulse to look for pleasure in those things throughout the day. As you develop this habit of saying No to sensual indulgence in the course of the day, it's a lot easier to say No to sensual thoughts in the course of the meditation.

You've also developed the habit of learning when to say "enough," which will hold you in good stead as you begin to develop the sense of non-sensual pleasure and rapture that come with concentration. You'll be more likely to realize when you've indulged enough in those kinds of pleasure so that you can turn to the further work you need to do in terms of insight and discernment. You can't just stay wallowing in the pleasure of concentration. You've got to learn how to understand what's going on in the mind, why it creates mental worlds to begin with—the worlds that pull you away from the present moment and lead to suffering and stress.

So the precepts are a crucial part of meditation. They help you develop good habits and foster insight. In particular, they help you see into your habits of self-indulgence. A lot of the pleasures we indulge in really do get in the way of deeper pleasure, deeper happiness. We all want to have our cake and eat it too. When we play chess, we want to keep all our pieces and yet win at the same time. But an important lesson in life is that certain pleasures really do get in the way of higher happiness. You've got to learn how to say No to them. And to develop a sense of moderation: how much pleasure is enough for you to do the real work at hand. Ultimately, you see that even the most harmless pleasures in this world are not absolutely harmless. This realization leads to the sense of samvega that motivates you to look for an even higher pleasure: the absolutely blameless bliss of nibbana.

So learn to look at the precepts as an important part of the meditation. They're not Sunday school rules or "conventional truths" that someone who hits the more "ultimate truths" can eventually put aside and discard with impunity. They're an important part of training the mind in the skills and attitudes it'll need in concentration, in developing discernment, and ultimately leading to release.

So when Ajaan Suwat was asked about how to bring the meditation into daily life, his answer didn't dismiss lay life at all. It pointed to an important fact. This is how you meditate in daily life: by being very careful about your precepts, respecting them, and being alive to the lessons they teach.