

## *The Four Precepts*

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Years back, when Ajaan Suwat taught a meditation retreat at IMS, one of the questions he was given toward the end of the retreat was on how to bring meditation into daily life. So he talked about the precepts. Afterwards, one of the people who'd organized the retreat was very upset, feeling that Ajaan Suwat was talking down to the laypeople, assuming that all they could handle was the precepts, and they couldn't handle "real meditation" in daily life.

Which was not his purpose at all. His purpose was to point out that the precepts form a very important part of the meditation. Remember, the word "meditation" in Pali, *bhavana*, means developing the mind. And you don't develop the mind solely when you sit here with your eyes closed, not doing anything. You also have to develop it while you're doing things—while you're acting, while you're moving, while you're speaking. It's like learning how to chew gum and to walk at the same time. You act and develop the mind at the same time. You speak and develop the mind at the same time. In that way, you create a lot of the skills that you need as a meditator, because the precepts basically are teaching restraint.

And this applies to all four of what they call the precepts—or principles—of purity. Sometimes the ajaans in Thailand like to shock people by saying, "Lay people have five precepts, but monks have only four." They're referring to these four classes of precepts, or *sīla*. The first class contains the the 227 precepts of the *Patimokkha*. On top of that the monks have to practice restraint of the senses, purity of livelihood, and contemplation of the requisites. All of these things are precepts or habits—that's another meaning of the word, *sīla*—that help you to exercise restraint in what you do and what you consume.

"Doing," here, includes not only moving your body, but also moving your attention: deciding what you want to look at or listen to, what you don't want to look at or listen to, *how* you're going to look at or listen to things; what you're going to listen for; what you're going to look for. And so on through the senses.

The basic list of precepts is to remind you not to act in ways that are harmful,

either to yourself or to other people. These precepts make you stop and think, realizing that what you do has an impact on others.

And of course, the basic list of precepts are aimed at your intentional actions. They're aimed at getting you to observe your intentions. When you speak, when you act, when you do anything, what's the reason? What's the purpose for what you're doing?

So many of us are oblivious to these things. And when you're oblivious to the intentions behind these blatant actions, how are you going to catch the more subtle intentions in the mind?

Furthermore, if your intentions are to harm other people, then when you sit down to meditate, the thought of that harm is going to loom large in the mind. And your reaction is either going to be regret, a sense of guilt, or else denial. None of those attitudes are helpful in the meditation, where you need to look at the mind as it's acting and moving.

It's a lot easier to let go of the past when you can look at the past and truthfully say, "There's really nothing I've intended that's harmful, either for myself or for other people." There's a lot less entanglement as you allow the mind to settle down.

So the basic list of precepts is a beginning instruction in meditation. And the gets more refined when you start bringing in restraint of the senses.

Ajaan Suwat once pointed out that, as you practice the eight precepts, it's basically adding restraint of the senses to the five precepts. The precept against eating after noon places some restraints on your tongue. The precept against singing, dancing, going to shows places restraints on your ears and your eyes. The precept against lying on high and luxurious beds places a restraint on the body. The precept against wearing perfumes places restraint on your nose. The precept against sexual intercourse places restraints on all your senses.

In other words, these precepts remind you that if you're looking for pleasure in things outside, you're really abandoning the mind. It's a good principle to place some restraints on yourself in a way that forces you to look for pleasure inside.

As the Buddha said, the main reason we go for outside sensual pleasures is because we see no other escape from pain or displeasure. When you're constantly hungering after pleasures of the senses, the potential for finding a different kind of

pleasure inside gets starved.

So you want to place some restraints on yourself and the types of pleasures you look for outside. That gets you more and more focused inside, which is where the real issue lies. If you're going to find a pleasure that's true, lasting, and reliable, you've got to look inside. The restraints you place on the way you look for pleasures outside help maintain that focus.

Purity of livelihood reminds you that you've got to consider the consequences of how you go about trying to maintain this body. For again, if there's any dishonesty in the way you maintain your livelihood, or if there's any harm in the way you do it, it's going to lead to a dishonesty in the mind itself.

But if you reflect on the way you've led your livelihood, and there's a sense of harmlessness, it really does help with the meditation. It gives you more strength, more confidence. It's the same principle as when you look at your precepts. When you look back and you don't see you've harmed anybody, it's a lot easier for the mind to settle down with clarity and honesty. And no self-deception.

The same principle goes into reflection on the requisites. On the one hand, that reflection is designed to make you realize that you don't want to spend too much energy in keeping yourself fed, keeping yourself clothed, looking for shelter, looking for medicine.

You eat just enough to keep the body going and healthy. Have just enough clothing to keep it warm in the winter, cool in the summer, to keep it covered in a way that's not offensive to other people. That's all you really need.

You think of all these people with closets full of clothing and what a waste it is, how the money used for that kind of thing could be used for so many better things: things that are more helpful, both to the individual and to society at large.

So that's one aspect of the reflection on the requisites.

The other is to remind you that we're living in this body that's just full of needs. The fact that you're born here means that you have to find food, clothing, shelter, medicine. Otherwise, the body can't keep going. And even when you eat with restraint, clothe yourself with restraint, show restraint in your shelter and your medicine, there's still a burden that's placed on yourself—in having to keep finding more and more of these things to keep the body going—and on other people, other beings. That's to remind you of why we're meditating here, which is

to get out of this cycle of feeding entirely.

So the precepts aren't just elementary Sunday school rules for keeping people neat and orderly. They're also an integral part of the practice for training the mind, for developing good qualities of mind. And they spur you on to look deeper and deeper inside for a happiness that causes no harm for anyone at all, that places no burden on anyone at all.

This is one of the Buddha's most radical discoveries: that your gain doesn't have to mean other people's loss. In the ordinary way of the world, that's the way it is, especially with regard to material things: If you get something, other people have to be deprived of it. That's the basic pattern of so many people's way of finding happiness. But the Buddha discovered that there's a way that ultimately gives you the truest happiness of all and at the same time causes no harm to anyone. It actually benefits them.

You can begin to see that in the practice. There's that famous simile of the acrobats. One acrobat is standing on the shoulders of the other. And as the Buddha said, each acrobat has to look after him- or herself, and in looking after him- or herself, each helps the other. In other words, if you maintain your balance, it makes it a lot easier for other people to maintain theirs as well.

So as the Buddha pointed out, as you're practicing, when you're developing thoughts of goodwill and acting on goodwill toward other people, they benefit; so do you. When you're kind and generous, other people benefit; so do you. At the same time, when you're working in a purely internal way on the mind, trying to develop mindfulness, alertness, concentration, and discernment, you're not the only one who benefits. When you show more restraint in your actions, other people are freed from a lot of harm that could otherwise come from you. When you don't act on greed, anger, and delusion, other people are not subject to your greed, anger, and delusion. So they benefit as well.

As you work on the practice, you find that your ability to develop a happiness inside that places less and less and less of a burden on other people gets more and more refined. So ultimately you find the happiness that's totally harmless in every way. i.e., free from any dependence on any conditions. So the precepts point toward the unconditioned.

Along the way there, in the course of maintaining the precepts, you're

developing good qualities of mind that are going to be helpful in the meditation. And they provide an orientation. They keep reminding you: If you're going to look for happiness, you've got to look within, because that's where the only happiness that's truly satisfying can be found.

So it's good to take the precepts seriously, because they're essential to the training. As the Buddha said, the arising of a virtuous state of mind is a precursor to the path, in the same way that dawn is a precursor to the sun. This is the direction they point to, so don't take them lightly. They're essential to bringing meditation into daily life, and making your daily life a good place to meditate.