

## *Respect for the Precepts*

*January 29, 2015*

Several years ago I was taking part in a discussion on the precepts, and a large part of the discussion concerned how to deal with ants in your house. How do you keep them out of the kitchen, how do you keep them out of the house without killing them? We went over all the ways in which you can deter ants with things like talcum powder, cinnamon, and paprika. And at the end of the discussion one of the participants, who hadn't been participating all that much, commented sarcastically, "Well, tonight we've had a very deep discussion on the issue of ants." And the thing was that his sarcasm was so dead wrong.

One of the purposes of the precepts is to force you to look more carefully at what you're doing. After all, if you're going to be mindful and alert, you have to be very attentive to your actions and their results. Holding strictly to the precepts is a very good way of getting practice in that kind of mindfulness and alertness. In fact, as the Buddha said, one of the bases for establishing mindfulness is that your precepts are pure. You've learned how to look carefully at what you're doing, you think carefully about the consequences, and you learn how to do things more carefully as well.

For a lot of us, "deep issues" have to do with abstractions. But all too often, abstractions are just curtains, films over what's actually going on. Years back, the same group of people had met and one of the women had just come back from a retreat where the theme of the retreat was the absolute and the relative and how to see your daily life as an interplay of the two. Someone mentioned the old joke about how the relative in the absolute is your uncle in the liquor cabinet, and the absolute in the relative is when he's drunk all your vodka. At any rate, as the woman was talking about the absolute and the relative and trying to apply those concepts to her life, you could see she was getting more and more confused.

So it's good to strip things down to actual, concrete details. And the precepts are a very good way of doing that. At the same time, meditating on your precepts is an important part of the practice. When you can look at your actions and realize that you haven't harmed anybody, that you've held to your principles, it gives you the self-esteem and confidence needed to get the mind into the type of concentration that will lead to discernment. Then concentration and discernment will help make your practice of the precepts even more solid and perceptive.

One of the distinctive principles of the forest tradition is its understanding of the interplay among virtue, concentration, and discernment. Usually, outside of the forest tradition, they're taught three-in-a-row like that: You start with virtue and then, when that's good, you learn concentration, and then when that's good you work on your discernment. But from the beginning of his practice, Ajaan Mun realized that you can't do it that way. You have to use all three simultaneously so that they strengthen one another. You use the concentration to firm up your virtue; you use your discernment to firm up your virtue and your concentration.

Thinking about the precepts is an important part of the meditation. It comes under right effort and generating desire to avoid unskillful qualities. Look at your precepts to ask yourself, "Are there times when I want to break them and I feel that it's okay to break them?" If you don't hold thoroughly to the precepts, you get sloppy about avoiding unskillful qualities in daily life, and as a result, your meditation breaks down. So what is this feeling that says it's okay to break them?

A lot of people say that the precepts don't have to be followed all that carefully. One argument that's offered is that the precepts are not divine commandments—as if only divine commandments had to be followed carefully. After all, the precepts are training rules. You can't train in them if you have some assumptions of your own to which you give priority. You may say, "In this case, the precepts have to be put aside because something else is more important." But this denies you the opportunity to look into what you think is more important and to start questioning it.

Another argument I saw recently is that the precepts aren't even as serious as civil law. Civil law has exemptions, they said, so therefore the precepts must

have exemptions. Again, the civil law's not there to train us for the purpose of true happiness. It's just there to keep us from killing one another or running into one another on the road.

The precepts, though, are for you to look at your actions and to figure out where you're causing unnecessary stress and suffering. They're elemental to the practice. If you hold to them carefully, you have to start looking at your whole life a lot more carefully, too. That way, you can detect attachments you wouldn't have seen otherwise. And only when you can detect these things can you undo the unskillful behavior based on them. This is why it's important to ask yourself those questions: Where *would* you be tempted to break a precept? Where would you be tempted to kill, where would you be tempted to steal, to have illicit sex, to lie, take intoxicants? The two big ones tend to be killing and lying: Where would you be tempted to do these things?

You ask yourself and then, when you get an answer, you ask yourself further, "Well, why would you be tempted? Why do you think that that being's life is not worth leaving unharmed?" You can't go around protecting all beings, but you can know that your behavior has not harmed that being. That's something you *can* be responsible for—and you can also be responsible for not trying to get other people to do the harm for you. Those are the two areas where you really are responsible.

So look at your behavior: Where have you been killing in the past? Where have you been lying in the past? Can you deal with those sorts of situations in such a way that you *don't* kill, you *don't* lie? What would be required of you? How many extra pains would it take? What attitudes would you have to abandon? How much more careful would you have to be?

Say, about your speech, areas where you might lie casually because you thought you could gain an advantage or avoid problems: Can you still gain an advantage, can you still avoid problems *without* lying? What would that require of you? The Buddha doesn't define lying as not telling the whole truth. This is an important distinction. There are situations where you can say to yourself, "If I actually told the whole truth in this situation, it would cause a lot of harm. How can I get around that without misrepresenting the truth?" As the Buddha said, if telling the whole truth would lead to the arising of greed, aversion, and delusion, either in yourself or in the person listening, you don't

say it. Now that doesn't mean you lie. In other words, what you do say is not a misrepresentation of the facts. You find something else to talk about, you find a way to express yourself that is technically true. But you don't misrepresent the truth of the things you *do* mention.

Now some people say this is just splitting hairs, but that's not necessarily the case. Take the case that people are constantly using to argue that there are times when you have to lie: the case of Nazis at the door and Jews in the attic. What are you going to do? First you have to realize there are Nazis and there are Nazis. With some of them, all they need is an excuse not to have to go through your house. They don't want to bother, so you say something that indicates to them that it's not worth their bother to go in. There are other Nazis, though, who, regardless of what you say, are going to check the house. All too often it's assumed that when you lie to Nazis they'll believe you and then go away. But that covers only some of the cases. But there are other cases where, if the Nazis sense that you're lying, they'll be even more interested in searching your house.

So first you've got to realize that you're dealing with different kinds of situations here: one, in which no matter what you say there's going to be trouble, and the other, in which you can deflect harm but without lying. So if they ask if you're hiding Jews in the attic, you say, "I'm hiding nothing shameful in this house."

This has two advantages. One, you can say it looking them straight in the eye. Some Nazis, like some policemen, can read your face. If they're convinced you're telling the truth—and you *are* telling the truth—they'll leave you alone. The second advantage is this: Suppose you say, "I've got no Jews in the attic," but they say, "We're going to check anyhow," and they find the Jews. When they come back out, they can give you a lecture on ethics: "Not only do you hide Jews but you also lie." Imagine what it'd be like to be lectured by a Nazi. And, of course, they won't stop with a lecture. They'll take you away and torture you—and with your lie you've given them ammunition to torture you psychologically.

But if you tell them you're hiding nothing shameful and yet they find the Jews, they'll take the Jews out and say, "We thought you said you weren't hiding anything," and you say, "I said I was hiding nothing shameful; there's

nothing shameful about what I did.” Now, they may decide to arrest you then, too, but at least you have your honor and that’s something important. Our culture deprecates honor. But being able to maintain your honor is important. It’s part of your self-worth. If they decide to torture you, they won’t be able to use a lie against you.

This means that you’re not holding the precept just for the sake of following the letter. There are actually advantages to following the letter.

So that’s one thing to look at: the implications of your actions and how they will bear fruit down the line.

The other is if you feel you have higher moral standards that lie above the precepts, you have to question them. Are they really higher? Are they really practical? Recently someone has argued that there are times when, to protect innocent people, you’re duty-bound to kill other people. But can you ever really know for sure that, in killing one person, it will really protect another person? What you do know is that you’ve chosen to kill. You’ve chosen to do something unskillful. At the same time, what is this requirement to protect innocent people? Is it something you could practically carry out—to protect all the innocent people in the world? How can you do that? People have their kamma. You do your best to protect the innocent, but if it would require that you do something unskillful, you have to realize that their kamma lies beyond your help. Two wrongs don’t make a right.

The purpose of protecting your precepts in this way is to ferret out and question the views you’re attached to. Are they really worthy of attachment, especially if they get you to end up doing something really unskillful? You decide you’re going to protect this person by killing that person, but what are the consequences down the line? Those things begin to snowball. You set a bad example for others. You set a bad example for yourself. But if you make sure that your actions don’t break the precepts and you’re not getting anybody else to break the precepts, you’ve covered what you are responsible for and what you can know. You’ve set an honorable example, and you haven’t let high-sounding abstractions get in the way.

So these are two of the important reflections that the precepts force on you if you take them really seriously. One, are there other ways you could behave so you don’t have to lose what you value and at the same time you don’t break a

precept? As in the case of small animals, pests in the house, this requires you to be a lot more careful about how clean you keep things, how you design your house if you have the option of building a new house. It requires you to think like an ant, to watch the behavior of ants, and that's a good exercise in putting yourself in other people's shoes. In Thailand, they've perfected ways of making sure, with moats and other things, that ants don't invade the monks' huts. It takes a little extra time, a little extra care, but it's time and care well spent—because you're thinking about your actions, you're thinking about their consequences, so you're more careful.

And then there's the second reflection: You learn to question some of the notions to which you hold very strongly, that would act as excuses for breaking the precepts. You learn how to see how some very noble-sounding ideals are actually a cover-up for unskillful behavior.

This is why holding to the precepts across the board is a really important training for the mind. You become alert, you become more mindful, more sensitive to things, and that's pretty deep—a lot deeper than throwing abstractions around. It takes a certain amount of humility to submit yourself to a precept like this, to say, "I'm going to put my preconceived notions on hold and see what it's like to really try to live by the precepts."

This falls in line with another principle of the forest tradition, which is what Ajaan Mun—following the Buddha—called practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. In other words, you adjust yourself, your attitudes, and your actions to fit in with the Dhamma, not the other way around. All too many of us say, "Well, let's change the Dhamma here, change the Dhamma there; after all, we're Westerners, we need a Western Dhamma"—that kind of attitude. How about putting that attitude aside, to say, "What would it be like if I really did train by these things, if I gave them more respect than I give to my own opinions?" It's only then that you learn to detect things in yourself that otherwise you wouldn't see.

So this reflection on the precepts is good for your mindfulness—and as a result, it's going to be good for your concentration. It's also a good exercise in discernment, to expose corners of your mind that otherwise stay hidden, and to uproot some really firmly entrenched ideas that would otherwise keep you suffering for a long time.