

The Five Precepts for the Mind

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Back in 1990, Ajaan Suwat was invited to teach meditation in Massachusetts. And he had me as his interpreter. At the end of the retreat, one of the questions on the very last night was, “How do we carry this practice into our daily lives?” And so he focused on the five precepts: against killing, stealing, illicit sex, lying, taking intoxicants.

Some of the people were upset. They thought that he was looking down on them, thinking that they, as lay people, were not ready for high level Dhamma, and that he was teaching them only low level Dhamma. But they misunderstood.

One, they misunderstood the fact that the precepts are not low level practices: It’s not easy to maintain the five precepts. It requires a lot of alertness, a lot of mindfulness. It trains you in concentration and discernment. You have to be mindful to keep the precept in mind. You have to be alert, watching your behavior to make sure that it’s not straying from the precept. And it requires a lot of discernment. There are times when you’re tempted to get past a difficult situation with a little white lie. But it’s still a lie. The precept says no lies at all. So how do you get past those situations without misrepresenting the truth and at the same time without divulging information you don’t want to tell? That takes discernment. All the precepts require discernment. That’s one of the reasons why the precepts are not a low level Dhamma.

The second reason is that you have precepts for the body and speech and you also have precepts for the mind. There are five precepts for body and speech, and there are the same five precepts for the mind. You’ve probably heard enough about the ones on body and speech, so I’d like to talk about the ones concerning the mind.

The first one is the precept against killing. In this case, what this means is: Don’t kill the good mood you put the mind in by meditating. Once you’ve got that good mood for meditation, you try to keep it going. Don’t just throw it away. It’s like a child. You have to look after it. You don’t feed it only when you feel like it or only when you happen to remember. You have to make yourself remember every day to feed the child. In the same way, you have to remember all the time that once the mind has settled down and is calm, you want to be able to maintain that. You stay with the breath. Try to keep in touch with the breath as best you can.

If you can't stay with the in-and-out breath, at least be in touch with the quality of the breath energy in the body. Does it feel tight? Does it feel open? Does it feel soothing? Does it feel constricted? If it feels tight and constricted, think of opening it up a bit. Stop whatever you're doing and get it back into good shape. It doesn't have to take long. And then try to maintain that quality of being present with a sense of well-being. Avoid doing anything that would destroy it.

Now, you find that to do this, there are some things in the world outside that you have to start letting go. Well, you're going to have to let them go someday anyhow. So this is a good practice. Get your priorities straight, realizing that your true treasure here is the quality of your mind. As for things outside, if they destroy the quality of your mind, you're throwing away your true treasure, killing your true treasure, for the sake of make-believe treasure.

So that's the first precept. Don't kill the good state of mind that you've been able to develop through the meditation. Try to keep it alive all day long.

The second precept is against stealing: This refers to stealing other people's bad qualities and thinking about them all the time, without asking their permission to take their bad qualities to think about. You just take them. And that's a kind of stealing. What happens is that you clutter up your mind with all kinds of garbage. As long as you're going to steal other people's habits or behavior, steal their good ones. See what other people are doing that sets a good example. Take that as a lesson for yourself. If you're going to look at their mistakes or their bad habits, reflect back on yourself. You see their bad habits. This is what those habits look like from the outside. If you have the same habits, that's what they look like. Use their bad habits as a mirror. Check and see if you have any of those yourself. But if you don't have those habits, you don't have to take them from them. You'd just be cluttering up your mind with garbage.

The third precept is the precept against illicit sexuality. In this case, it means going for pleasures that are bad for the mind. The Buddha didn't say that all pleasures are bad. He says you have to be careful to notice when you go for a particular pleasure—and here he was talking about sensual pleasures, such as sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations—if you find that it has a bad effect on the mind, then it's not right for you. You can't just say you like it and go for it. You have to see: What is it doing to the state of your mind? You have to see it as part of a pattern of cause and effect.

Some pleasures, as the Buddha said, are perfectly innocent. Some are not. And they're going to be different for different people, so you have to be careful to notice your own mind and how it's reacting to certain pleasures. The ones where you get really greedy, really obsessed: Okay, those are bad for you. The ones where

enjoying the pleasure makes you oblivious to what you're doing are bad for you. The ones that make it hard to get the mind into concentration, they're bad for you, too. These are things you've got to avoid.

And try to develop instead the pleasure of concentration. The Buddha calls this the pleasure of form. It's a pleasure of a higher level. Just being able to be inside your body and inhabit it from the inside with a sense of ease and well-being is a pleasure with no drawbacks. In fact, when the Buddha-to-be realized that, that was what got him on the path to the end of suffering. He had been afraid of sensual pleasures to the extent that he was afraid of all pleasures, so he subjected himself to all kinds of torments for six years. When he realized that that wasn't working, he had to ask, "Is there another possibility?"

That's when he realized: There is this pleasure, the pleasure of a mind that's settled with a sense of ease and well-being inside the body, inhabiting the form of the body from within, and secluded from unskillful thoughts. That pleasure has no drawbacks. It doesn't harm anybody. Instead of making the mind cloudy, it actually makes the mind clear. So that's a pleasure you can pursue as much as you want.

But remember: This is a precept against sensual misconduct. It doesn't forbid all sensual pleasures, just the ones that are bad for the mind.

The precept against lying: Once you've told yourself you're going to do something good, stick with that promise you've made to yourself. Don't become a traitor to your own well-being. If you plan to meditate, make sure you meditate. If you plan to be generous, make sure you're generous. If you plan to hold by the precepts, make sure that you hold by that promise to yourself.

At the same time, if unskillful things come up in the mind, admit to yourself that they're there. Don't deny that they're unskillful. If you feel tempted to break the precepts and you can come up with all kinds of excuses, that's lying to yourself. It's not good for your true well-being to go around breaking the precepts. You say, "Well, it's a little bit difficult." Or, "Just this once." Well, "just this once" turns into just this once many, many times. So you have to learn to recognize that when something unskillful comes into the mind, it really is unskillful, and you really do want to get rid of it. That's how you remain true to your own true self interest. You don't cheat yourself out of your own true well-being.

Finally, the fifth precept against intoxicants: As the Buddha said, we tend to be intoxicated with our youth, with our life, with our health. When we're healthy, we think we're not going to be diseased any time soon. So we get lax in the practice. We say we're not old. Even when we're old, we say, "Well, we're not that old. I still have lots of time before I really have to get serious about the practice."

You think that. And as for your life, you say, "I could keep on living, who knows how long? The body doesn't show any immediate signs of dying." That's called being heedless. And that's the problem with intoxication. It makes you heedless. You squander your time. You squander your opportunities. None of us knows how much more time we have. The world is in very strange shape right now. Who knows where it's going to go? So we've got to get our act together.

We've got this moment. We've got this breath to practice. Make sure you make the most out of each breath as it comes in and goes out. If you do this with a sense of well-being in the present moment, that makes this a good chore to take on. In other words, the Buddha wants you to have a sense of well-being on the path. That's one of the functions of right concentration.

So the work of heedfulness is not onerous. It's not too heavy. It's something you can handle, because you've got the nourishment that comes from the sense of well-being that you've learned not to kill, the sense of well-being you've learned is good for the mind.

So these five precepts for the mind all work together. You've got a good sense of well-being in the mind and you make sure that you maintain it. You don't clutter up the mind with garbage you steal from other people. You don't clutter up your mind with unskillful pleasures. You're true to your own true well-being. A mind that has these five qualities is a mind that can be said to love itself, to be concerned about its own true happiness. And you're a good example for others as well.

This is what's good about the precepts, both the precepts of the body and speech, and the precepts of the mind: They create a kind of goodness that's not just yours. It spreads goodness around. It's this kind of practice that actually creates peace in the world, with a sense that we're all in this together, a sense of cooperation.

So make sure that this is the way you carry the retreat into your daily life.