



ORDINARY  
LIFE,  
WONDROUS  
LIFE

Talks on the Ten  
Bodhisattva  
Precepts

by

ELIHU

GENMYO

SMITH

*Edited by Robert Ore*

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This work is dedicated to my teachers  
Soen Nakagawa Roshi, Eido Shimano Roshi,  
Taizan Maezumi Roshi, and Charlotte Joko Beck;  
to my parents Reuben and Bella Smith;  
to my wife, Karen Choon Etheridge and children, Sara and Gabriel,  
and to all who enabled me to encounter and practice the Way.  
Any merit is theirs, and any inadequacy or errors are mine.

Elihu Genmyo Smith

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## EDITOR'S PREFACE

Elihu Genmyo Smith is the resident teacher of the Prairie Zen Center in Champaign, Illinois. He has studied Zen with a number of Japanese and American teachers over a period of more than thirty years. He received Dharma transmission from Charlotte Joko Beck in 1992.

Even before settling in Champaign in 1997, Elihu led a number of sesshin at the Center. The ten talks contained in this volume were given during sesshin in the period 1996-1998.

Elihu and I would like to thank the sangha of the Prairie Zen Center, whose dedication to ongoing practice has established and maintained the PZC in Champaign. We thank in particular those who attended the sesshin from which these talks were taken and those who made it possible for them to participate.

We thank the many individuals who have helped with the taping, the transcription and the editing of the talks.

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Robert Ore

## Verses on the Precepts

In the talks in this series, two sets of verses are quoted and discussed. The first verse for each precept is from the *One-Mind Verses on the Precepts*, attributed to Bodhidharma, the Indian monk who brought Ch'an / Zen to China in the 6<sup>th</sup> century C.E.; the second is from *Teachings on the Precepts*, attributed by Eihei Dogen to his teacher Tiantong Rujing in China in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Although quoted in each talk, these verses are collected here for easy reference.

### **First Precept: Nonkilling**

*Self-nature is inconceivably wondrous.  
In the everlasting Dharma,  
Not giving rise to the notion of extinction is  
Maintaining the precept of nonkilling.*

*Life is nonkilling.  
In refraining from taking life,  
You allow the Buddha seed to grow,  
And thereby inherit the Buddha's wisdom.  
Do not destroy life.*

### **Second Precept: Nonstealing**

*Self-nature is inconceivably wondrous.  
In the Dharma in which nothing can be obtained,  
Not giving rise to the thought of obtaining is  
Maintaining the precept of refraining from stealing.  
When mind and objects are just as thus,  
The Gate of Liberation has opened.*

### **Third Precept: Not being greedy/Not misusing sexuality**

*Self-nature is inconceivably wondrous.  
In the Dharma in which there is nothing to grasp,  
Not giving rise to attachment is maintaining  
The precept of refraining from impure sexuality.*

*When the three wheels are empty,  
There is nothing to desire:  
This is the way of the buddhas.*

### **Fourth Precept: Telling the truth**

*Self-nature is inconceivably wondrous.  
In the Dharma that is beyond expression,  
Not speaking even a single dead word*

*Is called the precept of refraining from telling lies.*

*From the beginning, the Dharma wheel has turned  
With nothing in excess and nothing lacking.  
The sweet dew of perfection saturates all;  
Everything is true, and everything is real.*

**Fifth Precept: Not using intoxicants/not clouding the truth**

*Self-nature is inconceivably wondrous.  
In the intrinsically pure Dharma,  
Not allowing the mind to become dark through ignorance is called  
The precept of refraining from using intoxicants.*

*Do not introduce intoxicants;  
Do not make others defile themselves:  
This is great awareness.*

**Sixth Precept: Not speaking of the faults of others**

*Self-nature is inconceivably wondrous.  
In the faultless Dharma, not speaking of others' faults is called  
The precept of refraining from speaking of others' shortcomings.*

*Within the Buddhadharma,  
It is the same Way, the same Dharma, the same Realization, the same Practice.  
Do not speak of the shortcomings of others;  
Do not corrupt the Way.*

**Seventh Precept: Not praising self and degrading others**

*Self-nature is inconceivably wondrous.  
In the undifferentiated Dharma,  
Not speaking of self and other is called  
The precept of refraining from praising yourself and degrading others.*

*Buddhas and ancestors have realized  
The emptiness of the vast sky and the great earth.  
When they manifest as the great body,  
They are like the sky, without inside or outside.  
When they manifest as the Dharmakaya,  
There is not even an inch of earth on which to lay hold.*

**Eighth Precept: Not begrudging the Dharma Treasure/Being generous**

*Self-nature is inconceivable wondrous.*

*In the all-pervading True Dharma,  
Not clinging to one form is called  
The precept of refraining from begrudging the Dharma treasure.*

*Even one phrase, one gatha, is ten thousand things.  
One Dharma, one realization is all the Buddhas and ancestors.  
From the very beginning, nothing has been withheld.*

**Ninth Precept: Refraining from self-centered anger**

*Self-Nature is inconceivably wondrous.  
In the Dharma of no-self,  
Not postulating a self is called the precept of refraining from anger.*

*Not proceeding, not retreating, not real, not unreal,  
There is an ocean of bright clouds, there is an ocean of sublime clouds  
When there is no anger.*

**Tenth Precept: Refraining from reviling the Three Treasures**

*Self-nature is inconceivably wondrous.  
In the one Dharma,  
Not giving rise to the dualistic view of Sentient Beings and Buddhas,  
Is called the Precept of refraining from reviling the Three Treasures.*

*To expound the Dharma with this body is the refuge of the world.  
Its virtue returns to the ocean of omniscience.  
It is inexpressible.  
Wholeheartedly revere and serve it.*



## The First Precept: Nonkilling

Today, I will begin speaking about the precepts. I will focus on the First Grave Precept: Nonkilling. In our tradition there are ten Grave Bodhisattva Precepts, which are part of the larger set of sixteen Bodhisattva Precepts. The number of precepts vary in different Buddhist traditions, sometimes five, sometimes eight, sometimes hundreds. In the Theravadan tradition, for monks there are several hundred, and for nuns there are even more.

The sixteen Bodhisattva Precepts of the Zen tradition are: The Three Treasures (Buddha, Dharma and Sangha); the Three Pure Precepts (ceasing from harming, doing good, and doing good for others/serving all existence); and the Ten Grave Precepts, the first of which is nonkilling, or, as it is sometimes translated, do not kill. All the precepts are contained in each other; any one can be picked up and seen as containing all the rest; each is truly the whole of our practice, the whole of the Teaching, the whole of our life.

Before taking the precepts, we atone. The Gatha of Atonement is:

*All harmful actions ever committed by me since of old,  
On account of beginningless greed, anger, and ignorance, born of my body, mouth, and thought:  
Now I atone for it all.*

Greed, anger and ignorance are the Three Poisons. They are an aspect of human self-centeredness, a potential of human functioning. It is not a result of being bad or lacking, or because we are trying to do something bad, or even because we were brought up poorly; it is beginningless, beginningless. This aspect of being human, these Three Poisons, do just that - poison our life. So, before the precepts, we first atone for the actions and harm resulting from these poisons.

Atone: what is the word *atone*? In English, *atonement* is really *at-one-ment*: Being one. True atonement is already taking all the precepts. Atonement—being one—is our whole practice; all of our practice can be put in that one word: *at-one-ment*. Practice is in the midst of all the past actions and intentions we bring in this moment. And in this ongoing practice, we discover that Three Poisons of greed, anger and ignorance function only in the narrow distortion of self-centeredness. Living as we truly are, being at-one-ment, our life is unity, diversity and harmony, which is exactly the Three Treasures, Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Self-centeredness distorts our unity into the greed of lacking and inadequacy, it distorts our diversity into the anger at otherness, it distorts the harmony of unity and diversity into an ignorance of life functioning which perpetuates self-centeredness and the poisoning of life. We act based on these distortions, with resulting harm and suffering. Practice, at-one-ment, clarifies and makes transparent this distortion to reveal life as it is. It is to notice emotion-thought and be physically, bodily present. In the fusatsu ceremony of atonement, some chants begin: “Being one with the Buddha,” “being one with the Dharma,” “being one.” We acknowledge our True Nature. This is our practice, being one. It is what we maintain in accepting and maintaining the precepts. At-one-ment is the antidote for the poisons, the body-mind-heart healing of the harm and suffering of our actions. When appropriate, it is asking forgiveness from those we have harmed even when we do not want to admit our actions, or face the anger and upset of others. It is being at-one with what is, and not merely caught up in our self-centeredness. It is accepting the response of others, whether it is their being forgiving or not forgiving, being one. And it is certainly for-giving others, giving our self to what is in the midst of, self-centered reactivity, noticing and being present. Ongoing practice is ongoing atonement

The precept of nonkilling is sometimes translated as *do not kill*. It is valuable to see it as *nonkilling*, rather than *do not kill*. The One-Mind Verse on the First Precept is:

*Self-nature is inconceivably wondrous.  
In the everlasting Dharma,  
Not giving rise to the notion of extinction is  
Maintaining the precept of nonkilling.*

The One-Mind Verses are Bodhidharma's expression of the ten precepts. Each of them begins: *Self-nature is inconceivably wondrous*. Self-nature is who we are, ordinary life. Self-nature is no-nature; self-nature is our nature; self-nature is Buddha-nature. *Self-nature is inconceivably wondrous*—the thoughts we have about it, all the ways we try to express it or explain it, are not it. *In the everlasting Dharma*: In the self-nature that we are, *not born, not destroyed*. Believing and acting on the idea that we are limited, the idea of self and other, of loss and harm, is already allowing the notion of extinction, of separation. It is allowing the precept of nonkilling to be broken. The precept of nonkilling is not only a prohibition of *do not kill*. It is the affirmation of our life of nonkilling. Being life of nonkilling is awareness. Self-centeredness is our fear and unwillingness to experience pain, suffering and even discomfort. Sadly, we are often killing—self-centeredness cannot help but be killing. Being unwilling to experience, to embrace, life when fear, pain or suffering arise results in the actions and reactions which break the precept of nonkilling. Therefore, practice is noticing, experiencing, in the midst of self-centeredness.

In Zen tradition, we have three different perspectives for exploring the precepts. We examine nonkilling from the Hinayana, Mahayana, and Buddhayana viewpoints. The Hinayana sense of the precept is the literal sense: Do not kill. Do not kill another person; do not kill an insect; do not kill any other being; do not kill. Examining the precept from the Mahayana perspective is to ask—“how to maintain compassionate functioning, not kill compassionate functioning?” From the Buddhayana perspective, examining the precept is asking, “Self-nature is inconceivably wondrous—how do we maintain this, this everlasting Dharma, *our* very life of nonkilling, of nonharming? There is no one killed and no one killing. How do we live a life of nonharming, given that self-centeredness is always harming?” This is our practice. We are always harming, harming others. Believing this “others” is already harming this life that we are, this very life that is not harmed, is not killed. Holding, believing and acting on the very idea of self/other, of human/not human results in harming. Harming is pain and suffering. So we practice, clarify and actualize, all three perspectives: The Literal, the Compassionate, and the Absolute.

Remember, *beginningless greed, anger and ignorance, born of my body, mouth, and thought*. There are all sorts of ways in which we are unaware of what we do, what we say and what we think. We say and do things that harm others. This is self-centeredness manifested. We harm vegetables; we harm insects; we harm our environment; we harm other people with words; we harm our self with words, beliefs and attachments. This being so, noticing that we do this, is a basis for making the effort of being nonharming, nonkilling. We value and practice atonement. *All harmful actions*: Sitting—allowing awareness, being this very body-mind as this is—is atonement, in and of itself. In noticing beliefs and reactions, in noticing being caught up, in being body-mind present, pain and suffering as and when this is, we atone harmful actions. In the midst of our practice effort is atonement, is experiencing. Life is nonkilling, is being one; this is awareness, life of the Buddha.

Nonkilling is present in many human traditions. The Jewish and Christian traditions have it in the Ten Commandments. There is a Commandment “Thou shalt not kill,” or “Do not kill.” And it is also in the Commandment, “I am God thy God.” This God is One Nature, is all-inclusive, nonkilling, life.

Tiantong Rujing’s verse on this precept is:

*Life is nonkilling.  
In refraining from taking life,  
You allow the Buddha seed to grow,  
And thereby inherit the Buddha’s wisdom.  
Do not destroy life.*

*Life is nonkilling...do not destroy life.* This is the precept. It is the precept that brings all of our practice together and is reflected in our practice. So precepts are not something extra added onto life or added onto practice; precepts are distillations of practice, perspectives, ways of manifesting, supporting, encouraging, maintaining ordinary life. It always comes down to maintaining awareness, allowing awareness. Being this life in all its manifestations. Embracing even what is painful, hard to be, in the midst of all circumstances. To be this very body-mind as this is as opposed to as the thoughts and emotions of how we want it, is to be the life that is nonharming. Our ongoing practice effort is being present, being this life that is harmonious. Harmony is nonharming, nonkilling. This moment pain, this moment suffering we refuse to embrace, refuse to experience, is exactly what maintains harming, what keeps us from being the harmonious joyful life we are, this inconceivably wondrous.

**Student:** When there is some impediment to leading a vegetarian life, when it is easier to eat meat with people around you, is that necessarily something that gets in the way of the compassionate heart?

**Elihu:** Is being vegetarian nonharming? Vegetables are killed, and all sorts of other beings may be harmed, may be killed, in taking the vegetables from the ground, and in the process of getting any food, even vegetables or fruit, to you. For instance, driving a truck on the road, we kill many insects--look at your windshield and hood after a long summer drive. In a way we are always harming, killing. Now, eating meat: Is that good? Is that bad? In the Theravadan tradition, a monk is not allowed to kill animals and not allowed to eat something that was specifically killed for him, but a monk or nun accepts whatever food is given, and if it is meat, they accept that. At the same time, they cannot specifically ask for any sort of food. One of the Patimokkha (the set of 227 rules for bhikkhus [monks] from the Vinaya Pitaka) practice rules is: not to choose but to accept whatever is given. On the other hand, we may choose how we live. If you do not want to eat meat, fine. Many maintain the precept in this way. If you do not want to eat something that has been killed for you, fine. Very good. That is a Patimokkha precept. Please, also recognize that eating vegetarian style can still be harming, can still perpetuate self-centeredness; eating meat can be nonharming. More significant for practice, see that throughout our life there is harming, killing. So, we must make our choices. There are no simple answers. That is why in depth study of the precepts is especially valuable as our practice matures. Practice is making life choices, ongoing effort of practice choices. Do not get an idea that there are no distinctions; there are certainly distinctions between killing a human and killing an animal, killing an animal and killing a plant, killing a tree and killing time, killing our life, killing our awareness. Unfortunately, we kill time; in fact we even have an expression “I’m just killing time!” The Chinese Ch’an teacher, Zhao Chou (Joshu in Japanese), said, “You are used by all the 24 hours; I use the 24 hours.” We kill time and think nothing of it. Isn’t that killing the life of

the Buddha, killing self-nature? Yes, there are distinctions; it isn't all the same. We need to see deeply into what being alive is—what *our* being alive is, what life is—awareness, self-nature that is inconceivably wondrous that we all are. This is sitting, experiencing. This is being the functioning of compassionate heart.

**Student:** There is a group in Indianapolis—a Korean-based group—and once you've gone through a two-day sesshin down at their place, then you're able to go through the precepts if you want to. Yet, in this style, I've never even heard Joko talk about the precepts except in a sentence such as “Well, don't make a big deal out of it,” or “The precepts will take care of themselves.” Why the difference?

**Elihu:** I don't know why the difference. Joko only occasionally talks specifically about them. If you are truly practicing, the precepts are contained in your practice. It is important not to see the precepts as something external that you add on to your practice. A life of practice can't help but be working with the precepts. This is what I was saying. Talking about the precepts specifically or not does not make a difference, it is merely one of many ways to express and clarify practice.

**Student:** So they're kind of a by-product?

**Elihu:** No! Not a by-product. There are different aspects of practice, and even if you don't formally pick up the precepts, you are still working with them. Practice with expectations, beliefs and reactions is practice with precepts. How you treat others is the precepts! These precepts are exactly the practice of harmonizing being; this is our practice no matter how we describe it. Nevertheless, it is valuable to make specific practice efforts. We need to find what is useful for our practice life, our practice effort. I encourage each of you to practice with particular precepts for a period of time, a week or a month. Use the theme and language of the precept to support being present, to help notice what you are believing and holding to in the midst of daily activities. In practice interviews we often explore this. Whether we are alone or with others, the functioning of our life is the precepts. It is our ongoing practice.

Different forms and different structures make some things appropriate or inappropriate at different times. For instance, I wear my rakusu regularly while sitting. I don't regularly wear my full robes and my kesa. In other centers and zendos, people wear their kesa regularly. In San Diego, at ZCSD, one sits without any robes, kesa or rakusu. What is appropriate in one place is not necessarily appropriate or most skillful in another. This rakusu is a shortened version of a longer monk's, nun's or priest's robe, known as the kesa or O-kesa in Sino-Japanese. The rakusu, like the kesa, is made of patches. Wearing a rakusu is related to the practice of receiving the precepts, called *jukai* (*kai* is “precepts.”) The Verse of the Robe which we recite is the Verse of the Kesa; the kesa is the robe of the Buddha, the robe of the precepts.

It is not necessary to try to remember what I say; just listen, and hear it as a support for your ongoing practice. Hear it and let it resonate.

In Theravadan tradition, there are what seem like degrees of precepts—“degrees” meaning degrees of severity of actions and resulting consequences. You take or receive precepts, and when you break a precept there is a practice to confess it. There are different types of confession. I would rather that we use the word atonement instead of confession. Atonement very directly connects the words we use, the way we practice and what practice truly is. In the Patimokkha of the Theravadan tradition, there is a precept that is “not killing humans.” This is one of the major precepts; its severity is such that if a monk

kills willfully—and there are conditions that determine what constitutes willfulness—then he is expelled from the Sangha, no longer a monk. There are also precepts about nonkilling of animals (for example, one is not supposed to pour water that might contain insects onto the ground, because then one could potentially kill the insects), nonkilling of nonhuman beings, such as spirits, and so on. They are included in the precepts; if you “do them,” there is a confession/atonement and you continue as a monk. Confession/atonement occurs in the Buddhist tradition, sometimes once or twice a month, and often in public. In Theravadan tradition, lay people can take “extra” precepts, often for a period of time—for instance, for a week, or a day a month. They may also join in the uposatha (twice monthly assembly of monks for recitation of the Patimokha and confession). There is a ceremony in Zen monastic practice, called fusatsu in Japanese, during which one atones for ‘breaking’ the precepts, atoning for what we do in being self-centered.

Student: I’ve just been thinking about ants a lot. We’ve got ants at my house, and we’ve got ants in this place. What do we do about ants?

**Elihu:** Good question! Killing ants is killing life, and yet, people do it all the time. In some traditions, you cannot drink water without a filter, because there might be tiny creatures in the water. You filter the water before you drink it; otherwise, you would be breaking the precept. And yet, when we drive, we kill lots of creatures. Should we not drive? When we pull plants out of the ground, because we are landscaping, we kill lots of beings. We don’t even know about the beings that we don’t see—the endless dimension of beings. As I said, in the Patimokkha one specifically distinguishes between killing human beings and killing non-human beings—not animals, but non-human beings. That is considered breaking the precept, though not as severe as killing human beings. It specifically lists these beings. Now, you could say that is superstition, mystery—who knows? Endless dimensions of life, and we do our best. And we need to atone for beginningless greed, anger and ignorance. That is the way we live our life; that is the way we practice, as best we can. It is not just driving the car; even walking down the street. In some traditions, you’ve got to be very careful and sweep the ground before you, or have a stick and bang it—make lots of noise—so any creatures will run away before you come and not be killed or injured. In modern times we have discovered microscopic creatures. Microscopic creatures are inside and outside our body, killing and being killed. And we kill them with all sorts of products, for all sorts of good reasons, health and so forth. Life is killing life; all of life is killing life. And practice is to maintain life of nonkilling. That is why this is not so simple but something we need to work with. Hard and fast rules are of little use. This is the practice of living ordinary life, choosing, a functioning of compassionate awareness. It is *self-nature is inconceivably wondrous. Believing*—having the notion of self and self-that-dies, of extinction—we have already broken the precept of nonkilling. In the everlasting Dharma—now, it is everlasting; now, not giving rise to the *notion* of killing; now, all of us “have” the notion of extinction until we don’t. That is why we all atone. That is what our practice is. In my first zendo, we recited the gatha of atonement every morning, after taking refuge in the Three Treasures (Buddha, Dharma and Sangha). *All harmful actions ever committed by me since of old, on account of beginningless greed, anger and ignorance.* Now, true atonement is true at-one-ment—sitting and being our life. This is our practice, the functioning of ordinary life.

## The Second Precept: Nonstealing

Today I will speak about the second precept of the Bodhisattva Ten Grave Precepts: Nonstealing. First, I want to review the Gatha of Atonement:

*All harmful actions ever committed by me since of old,  
On account of beginningless greed, anger and ignorance, born of my body, mouth, and thought:  
I now atone for it all.*

It is important to hear no blame in this. It is: *All harmful actions*—consequences, suffering, events—*ever committed by me...* This is owning: Being present as, with, in our life. *All harmful actions ever committed by me since of old, on account of beginningless greed, anger and ignorance...* It is not *mine* as opposed to *yours*, but mine in the sense of *ours as humans*. Nevertheless, it is mine, my specific actions, my strongly held beliefs and habits. This *beginningless greed, anger and ignorance*—the Three Poisons—*born of my body, mouth and thought* is self-centered functioning, the very nature of who we believe we are, who we act and react as if we were. *I now atone for it all*. When we atone, that is the taking care of, the “at-one-ment,” being one with it—being one. All that we are, all that we have been and all that is, is what brings us to this moment of at-one.

The Second Precept, Non-stealing, in the literal sense is very obvious: Not to take that which is not given. We take it for granted in our culture, at least as a concept. So there is nothing out of the ordinary about it. And yet, it is *very* out of the ordinary.

Monks and nuns who follow the Vinaya and Theravada tradition do not “take” anything. For example, if food is on the table, he or she would not take that food, unless it were specifically placed in their bowls by someone else; there are rules about when and if a monk or nun would be allowed to pick up and eat a fallen piece of fruit; there are even rules about indicating which food they want. Not to take what is not given. For those following the Theravada vinaya it is simple though not easy. But only if we limit our perspective to the literal. We in America, we in this global economy world, we live a consumer based of life, taking, wanting, buying, owning. In this consumer world, the questions which all of us can reflect upon are: Who receives or takes? Who gives? What is anyone able to give us? What is taken or received? Who owns? What is owned? As we have seen, even holding to an idea of “someone” who is giving us something, being caught by the belief of some separate self, we have already broken the Grave Precept of Nonkilling, believing ideas of Self-and-Other. Yet, our daily functioning, taking, giving and receiving all seem to imply, all seem to be based on, self and other. And this is how life seems to us. Gain and loss seem to be the way life is. Let us clarify this and see what practice is here. The precepts are not rules that we need to learn and add, but rather aspects of our life, aspects of our practice. These ten aspects of self-nature that is our life are like ten fingers: all separate, all one.

The One-Mind verse on this precept is:

*Self-nature is inconceivably wondrous.  
In the Dharma in which nothing can be obtained,  
Not giving rise to the thought of obtaining is  
Maintaining the precept of refraining from stealing.*

*Obtaining:* Becoming sensitive to this, we may notice how much we are trying to obtain; And not just physical things. *Always* we try to obtain: Obtain attention for our self, obtain caring, obtain attention for our work, obtain praise, obtain time... obtain, obtain, obtain. Obtaining is self-centeredness. We try to obtain people to think of us in a certain way, obtain our thoughts to be a certain way, obtain sitting without all those disturbing emotion-thoughts arising.

The One-Mind verses all begin with: *Self-nature is inconceivably wondrous.* It is not something unavailable that we have to go searching for in some mysterious far-away place. *Self-nature is inconceivable wondrous*, right here, right now. When we sit, we become aware of the ways we want to obtain other than what is right here and right now. The ways we are unwilling to be right here, right now. Experiencing this body-mind now.

The Second Noble Truth, the cause of *dukkha*, is *trsnā*, thirsting, craving, wanting to obtain. What don't we have? You see, we have lots of ideas about what we don't have. Believing that there are things that we don't have is the opportunity to reflect on the Precept of Nonstealing. Talking about it from the perspective of non-stealing is another way of expressing the same functioning that we talked about from the perspective of nonkilling. All are aspects of being alive, expressing practice, life. What do we notice when we sit—what do we want to obtain, and what do we want *not* to be? Wanting *not* to have certain states, wanting to be non-attached, or non-whatever: This is another thing we want to obtain. You could want to obtain all sorts of things. The very nature of wanting to obtain them is confronts this precept. What we discover is that we all seem to “break” the precept. That is the way we seem to function. That is why and how we have to practice—to become aware and notice all this, to experience this.

What don't we have enough of? Many of us think we do not have enough money. One of my teachers, Soen Nakagawa Roshi, said, “If you're a Zen student there is always enough money. It is all mine.” The whole universe is all one, all is my life. If we see this truly, then all the money is mine; I go to the bank, and whatever I need is given to me. That's the way it is. If the money is not there—if it does not appear—then it is not what I need. I might *think* that I need it, but whatever comes to me is my life providing what I need. Now, to say that is one thing, but to live it is another. This does not negate effort, intentions or functioning; Earning, asking, saving and so forth. We all have ideas about what we need, how much we are supposed to get, what we need to do to get it, etc. That's fine; nothing wrong with that. Just notice it. And be with what happens when it doesn't come the way we want it, the way we think it should. That is our practice. Please do not hear this as saying that if you have money, are trying to earn money or have preferences, then that is stealing. That is not the point of the precept.

Tiantong Rujing's verse on this precept is:

*When mind and objects are just as thus,  
The Gate of Liberation has opened.*

*When mind and objects...in other words, when the mind and objects of mind, or externals, are just as thus...are not discriminated as more and less, self and others, enough and not enough, the Gate of Liberation has opened.* This is not so different from the One-Mind verse. Again, we can reflect upon this in terms of our sitting practice, our life, being present.

How are we not willing to be what is? What we “have?” How do we want ourselves, the present moment, to be different than it is? How do we want others to be different? That is obtaining. There is something to obtain if I believe that my spouse should be more such-and-such, or less such-and-such; likewise, my parent, my child, my job, my house. My, my, my. Mine and not mine. The problem is not in having these thoughts, but in how much we are attached and caught by them.

*Nothing can be obtained*—do we truly believe that? I would say very rarely. Most of us believe there is a lot we can obtain. Even obtain in terms of practice. So, our practice is to notice and be aware of that belief and of what we want to obtain. It is to be our desire to obtain; not to say, “I shouldn’t want to obtain anything, so that I can refrain from stealing,” which is not effective practice. Notice when the thought of wanting to obtain arises; to notice holding this and be this body-mind moment is practice.

We can also reflect on how nonkilling and nonstealing are similar and how they are different.

**Student:** If you recognize there is something you would like to obtain, is that all you can do? What if you think it’s a good thing?

**Elihu:** To recognize is the first step: To be the desire. To be present might also mean recognizing the unstated thought, “when I get this I’ll finally be OK,” or, “then I’ll be happy,” or “then my life will be complete.” What else is there? You might continue to make the effort to obtain it. Or, being noticed, the desire itself might change. But, the first step is being present, not just noticing the thought and thinking about it but being bodily present. It is not a special state. One can even turn practice into, “I’m going to obtain enlightenment.” *In the Dharma in which nothing can be obtained*, how can you obtain enlightenment? If you can obtain enlightenment, that is not it. Dharma is reality, our life, this *inconceivably wondrous self-nature*, inconceivably wondrous right here, right now. Practice is in realization. Because we are in the midst of practice-realization that we can practice, we must practice.

**Student:** Well, I’m not really thinking about enlightenment, but I’m thinking about, let’s say, something for my child, or something like that.

**Elihu:** Sure. There’s nothing wrong with wanting to get something for your child.

**Student:** Well, how does that fit it with obtaining?

**Elihu:** Good question. How *does* that fit in with obtaining? What do you notice about what you are trying to get? See, the fact that you’re taking something and giving it to your child, what is that? Functioning is preferences, picking up, putting down, holding and letting go. Functioning freely is giving and receiving. This is practice, not some idealized dream. Attachment to ideas and beliefs, to having and not having, keeps us from functioning freely, keeps us caught by obtaining.

**Student:** So, you might find that getting it is the right thing to do.

**Elihu:** Sure. We all take and have for ourselves, but how we take, how we attach, how we hold on to is where practice encourages us to look, to notice. Life is picking and choosing, and yet how do we allow life to live us, so that we are not bound by picking and choosing, so that we notice when and how we are caught up? Breaking the precept occurs in the midst of taking for our self, separating from, excluding



others. Self-centeredness, which arises over and over, is what we are caught in over and over. That is why we atone; that is the nature of beginningless greed, anger, and ignorance—beginningless, these poisons are beginningless. At the same time, this is self-nature, manifesting as our life, a life of nonstealing. Nonstealing is life. If we truly see it, what is in the bank is not other than my own. Getting and giving something is nothing more than taking my own and giving to my own. It is not obtaining. If it is truly mine, if it is truly “not someone else’s,” then, I take it from you, I give you the money for it and give it to my child, and I have not obtained anything from anyone, nor have I given anything to anyone. As soon as we break the world up, as soon as we believe our fictions about the way life is, there is self- and-other, mind-and-objects. Mind and objects are not discriminated. *Mind and objects are just as thus.* But we discriminate and believe our discriminations: Me/not me; mine/not mine. I have enough; I don’t have enough; I need more; she has a lot, much more than I—it’s so terrible! We believe the discriminations. Not caught in discriminations, she and I can hand back and forth freely. That is our life; in fact, it is all we do. Believing those discriminations, we suffer. Noticing and experiencing is the practice here. That is how we practice, why we practice. Practice is in the midst of this. It is not useful to see the precepts as rules that we impose upon ourselves and live by. If we stick to that aspect and don’t see that the precepts are expressions of the functioning of our life as it truly is, we are off.

**Student:** How would somebody who is observing these precepts live?

**Elihu:** Good question. How?

**Student:** Is it simply more awareness? Are you saying that, basically, we are always going to be doing these same things?

**Elihu:** What are you trying to obtain? I’m asking this. You want me to give you a picture. It is not a matter of my picture of how you should be. It is not something you will obtain from someone else. It is discovering life and functioning appropriately. It is not something new that you need to learn. It is seeing our life all the time, seeing what we are doing and believing. This is it. It does not mean a person would not be shopping, working and earning a paycheck. That is not the precepts. One can ask, “Where did these bananas come from? Who do these bananas belong to? Who worked to make the bananas? Whose land was it?...” The conceptual intellectual approach is endless. Given the nature of our interrelation—interbeing—in some ways we are always breaking the literal precepts. Appreciating our interbeing, seeing interbeing with insight and clarity, we decide what we will and won’t do, doing our best. This is observing the precepts. And the nature of this precepts practice is ongoing in the midst of our changing life.

**Student:** I’ve been in the garden for a couple days and I’m killing all day long because I’m weeding the heck out of the garden, big roots and big leaves. I am conscious now of nonkilling and I just would like you to say more about atonement. I am going to go back out there again tomorrow and do the same thing. So, is atonement just a consciousness, a bringing consciousness to what you’re doing, and an appreciation with the plants which you are pulling up and turning into compost so that you can put them back into the garden and grow food?

**Elihu:** It is being present. It is functioning. It is noticing the idea that *these* plants are separate from me. Notice the thoughts that arise, that are believed. Since you do not hear the plants screaming as you pull them out, you may not notice it, whereas if it were a cat that you were weeding in that way, you would notice it. Robert Aitken Roshi quotes someone saying he is vegetarian, because cows yell louder than

carrots and cabbages. Maybe if carrots and cabbages yelled, we would have a hard time eating them. Life is eating life.

**Student:** And what is atonement?

**Elihu:** Atonement is being one; practicing in different ways. Asking forgiveness, offering forgiveness, being forgiveness, giving our self. Much as we do not want to be aware, much as we get caught in *my* way of seeing and doing, our practice is noticing, and atonement is basic. As I said, our whole practice is atonement.

**Student:** I was raised Catholic so, ... I'm going to confession and...when we confess and atone, the confessing part is for ourselves to bring attention to what we weren't really present with before.

**Elihu:** Yes, sometimes confessing means saying, "This is what I am aware that I did." It can mean being willing even to just sit there and allow those thoughts to arise. Often we won't even do that. It can be standing in the garden and saying it to the plants, or just being present with them. Different traditions have different ways of enabling us to do this. I cannot say anything about the Catholic tradition because I do not know much about it. If we get stuck on the form, on a particular form as the correct one, then again we are killing: "This is the form that *is* it and these other forms are not." Bowing is confession and atonement. So is offering incense. So is serving food. So is acknowledging and being the functioning of weeding.

**Student:** So here at sesshin you could say there is a certain absurdity to obtain—seeking to obtain being present.

**Elihu:** Noticing and being seeking to obtain. I like to use the phrase *allowing awareness*. It has a slightly different flavor. It clarifies *being present as who you are*. Being present is not something added on, extra, special. And seeking to obtain—if that is what you are doing—fine. Notice if that is what you are doing. Notice thoughts, be present as emotion-thought, as desire, as the physical body moment. You want to obtain? Fine. We all do. Not one of us, in our "human-being-ness," does not. All of us. See, that is beginningless greed, anger and ignorance. Greed is wanting; anger is pushing away, which is again wanting but wanting *not*; and ignorance is being confused about our life. Each is all the others. Being confused is being able to hurt and be hurt; pushing away is obtaining; pulling, too, is obtaining. So. It is different aspects, different functions, different forms of the same. Take one and break it up into precepts—into ten precepts, eight precepts, three Pure Precepts and Ten Grave Precepts... Getting up here and talking today, yesterday and tomorrow, it is nonsense. To say the same thing in different ways and find different ways to say it. Not the same, and yes, the same. But it is not quite the same. We need to hear it and need to be reminded. There are different aspects. It is One; it is two, separate. If I were trying to drink this stick rather than this tea, I would be in trouble. So, yes, what is appropriate? Don't mix it all up and say, "Oh, it's all the same thing, so I don't need to bother. I've done it once, no need to sit, practice 'again'." It is necessary for each of us, for our self, to see the various aspects of our life, of our practice. One, many; The many in the One and the One in the many.

### The Third Precept: Not Being Greedy/Not Misusing Sexuality

It is a sunny, snowy day out. I have built a figure in the snow: Not just an ordinary snowman, but a beautiful figure sculpted in snow. I am proud of it. But after several hours of intense sun, it starts melting. I am upset: “What is happening to it?” I watch and get more and more upset. You might say: “Look, that is snow; it is going to melt.” “No,” I say, “it’s supposed to stay solid; it’s not supposed to change.”

There are a number of ways the third precept can be stated. I like: *I vow to practice not being greedy.* Another, more traditional way is: *I vow to refrain from impure sexuality.* Sexuality is one manifestation of our greediness—for many, an extreme, immediate and deep one. We explore greed in the meal verse: *As we desire the natural order of mind, to be free from clinging we must be aware of our greed.* Wanting that snow figure to remain as it was is the greed, the clinging. In traditional terms, the melting figure is an example of *interdependent co-origination*: With circumstances there is arising; with circumstances there is passing. When there is lots of snow and it is cold, I can build a snow figure; when the sun is beating down and it warms up, the figure slowly disappears. Obvious with snow, but not so obvious—and not so simple—with the rest of our life, which we think is more solid and substantial, with a separate, independent, even a “permanent,” self.

The One-Mind verse for this precept is:

*Self-nature is inconceivably wondrous.  
In the Dharma in which there is nothing to grasp,  
Not giving rise to attachment is maintaining  
The precept of refraining from impure sexuality.*

*Self-nature is inconceivably wondrous.* This is the first line of all the One-Mind Precept verses. We always start as self-nature inconceivably wondrous: Our life, the life that we are. In the midst of this perfection of life, there is ongoing practice: The precepts grow out of and are a manifestation of this, the self-nature that we *are*, not that we are going to *become*. *In the Dharma in which there is nothing to grasp . . .* This is the world; yet it is so hard for us to live, because we are always looking at the world with an idea that there is something out there that I am going to get. In fact, because I believe that I am *here* separate from all that *there* in life—the self-centered viewpoint—then there are things that I *want* and *need*. We can also say, seeing “things” out there *makes* the “self” in here. Clinging is a natural outcome; in the midst of clinging, the “self” is a natural outcome.

*As we desire the natural order of mind . . .* the natural order of body and mind, the natural order of being alive, of being functioning. . . . *to be free from clinging, we must be aware of our greed.* “Greediness” and “impure sexuality” means our grasping and attachment; it is not sexuality or thirst or hunger or any of the other natural desires, which are nothing more than the functioning of our life. In fact, for some species, their whole life is focused on growing up, getting food, getting energy in order to have one episode of mating and (hopefully) reproduction. It is the whole life force that they are, which is not separate from the life force that we are. In biological terms, the whole genetic coding is geared towards enabling that DNA to reproduce.

This precept is focusing on the clinging, the self-centered grasping in the midst of life, in the midst of the Dharma in which there is nothing to grasp, in the midst of nothing having a fixed, separate self-nature.

Right now this is a whole cup. If I believe that this is its nature, then, when it falls and breaks, I may get very upset. It was *supposed to stay whole*, because I believed my picture about its nature, that there is a way it is supposed to be. I may believe that this whole cup should ‘always’ remain so. Nevertheless, this cup is here now because of circumstances; circumstances may arise resulting in the cup falling and breaking. To see this with a cup is easy, with our life is lifetime practice.

*As we desire the natural order of mind*—the natural order of functioning—*to be free from clinging . . .* The problem arises when we cling. By clinging to things, to persons, to circumstances, we are clinging to our own view of who we are as a separate person and who or what the things, persons or circumstances are; we and they should be a particular way. We believe we *are* this separate person with certain emotion-thought habits. Clinging is self-centeredness. This is a basis of our maintaining the separate person we think we are. Being aware of our greed is not trying to stop our self from “having greed!” That is more of the same: Whether in terms of greedy mouth, greedy sexuality or greedy grasping, that is just saying *I* should not have it. *As we desire the natural order of mind, to be free from clinging we must be aware of our greed.* What we are saying/practicing is being present, noticing: “The . . . the snow figure is melting, it is melting in the sun, I have got to stop the melting!” To be here in the desire “to hold on to it” and be present as this, body-mind present, zazen of being present, even as we do not want the melting to occur. Much as we want it to stay a certain way, being here—to be present—being aware of our greed, being bodily experience, being aware of our idea that this should stay as it is, this is zazen—practice—allowing awareness, being this.

Tiantong Rujing’s verse is:

*When the three wheels are empty,  
There is nothing to desire:  
This is the way of the buddhas.*

*When the three wheels are empty*—i.e., when greed, anger and ignorance are empty, when self, other and activity are empty (empty might be stated as no fixedness, not separate)—*there is nothing to desire: This is the way of the buddhas.* Where does our greed, our clinging, our attachment arise? Attachment to having or not having, to feeling or not feeling, to the world being or not being, arises as *caught in self-centered dream*. The One-Mind verse reminds us of the beliefs we have created to try to solidify the snow figure. It was beautiful, sunny and there was lots of clean snow. And now, I am getting upset, because the snow-life I created is melting, getting dirty, changing shape and disappearing. It is supposed to stay the way I made it; in making and clinging to it, I make my “self.”

*In the Dharma in which there is nothing to grasp . . . yet we believe there are things to grasp.* Our practice is to notice and acknowledge all that we want to grasp; to see the attachment, the greed, the suffering that comes from the clinging, even as what we are clinging to is slowly melting before our eyes, whether we want it to or not. Whether we want this cup to break or not, inherent in it is the possibility of a broken cup right here. Nevertheless, it is just this wonderful cup. It is the grasping and clinging that blinds us to the natural order of mind, the natural order of our wondrous self-nature. This precept reminds us to notice and be with our greediness and exert practice effort. First, to be aware of our greed—*to be free from clinging, we must be aware of our greed.* To see, to differentiate, between wanting something—having a preference, choosing something—and being greedy. Not getting caught in the words; being clear what is what; doing what is appropriate. Refraining from *impure* sexuality has to do with greediness: the

attachment, the clinging, the grasping. In its more extreme forms we can all recognize it. (In the example of the snow figure, you could all recognize the ludicrousness of my upset, but I've seen young children react in just that way—they were upset and agitated about their snow figure melting.) It's much more difficult to recognize in the rest of our life, including in our sexuality.

**Student:** You've emphasized the desire that things remain the same and not change, but I think of greed as acquisitiveness, where we're looking for something that we perceive we are lacking and try to take it from the world around us.

**Elihu:** That is right. That is grasping: Something out there that I can grasp and add to "myself." That's what we're talking about. If we want to explain it, it is a feeling of who I am and what I am lacking; if I can get that it will fill me up. This creates and supports ideas of who I am and what those things or people are. This is all separation. It may be that I want a particular feeling, even the feeling of being loved, cared for. No problem with the desire for this, but how do we manifest this? Is it greedy self-centeredness or something else?

**Student:** I've always heard this precept discussed in terms of sexuality, not in terms of greed.

**Elihu:** You can say the word sexuality, but if you listen to Bodhidharma's One-Mind verse of it, it's very clear: *In the Dharma in which there is nothing to grasp, not giving rise to attachment is maintaining the precept of refraining from impure sexuality.* Yes, the impure sexuality is there, but it speaks to *all* human desires; sexuality is just a particular—and, for some, a deeper, more fundamental—desire. It is all connected. It is important to see this, whether sexuality, or grasping hunger of oralsness of food or speech, as ways of grasping and clinging. In terms of our practice, it is the same point. Our practice is our whole life, this self-centered way of seeing and living.

**Student:** It seems like extreme emotion represents self-clinging or attachment, right?

**Elihu:** What do you mean by emotion?

**Student:** If you're upset that the snowman is melting or the cup is broken, anger, frustration about that. That's attachment to what you thought ought to be, your expectations.

**Elihu:** Yes, you could say that. But there is also appropriate (in a mournful voice) "Oh, the snowman is melting! Oh!" Okay and then done!

**Student:** Okay, that's what I was going to ask. Then, as we're free from self-clinging, are we free from emotion?

**Elihu:** Emotion is another aspect of the natural order of mind, the natural order of being. See, if we try to make an image of how we are supposed to be if we practice, that is not the natural order of mind. That is an idea of how to be, how you are supposed to be. There is a story of a woman who studied with, and was a Dharma successor of, Hakuin Zenji, one of the great Zen teachers in 18<sup>th</sup> century Japan. Later in life, her youngest granddaughter died suddenly at the age of seven. She was grieving. Someone saw her grieving and said, "How come you're mourning? You're supposed to be an enlightened Dharma successor of Hakuin. You're not supposed to grieve when someone dies!" And the woman said, "You are stupid!"

You don't know anything about practice! *This is it!*" So, this idea of what someone is supposed to be like is just another image, another set of ideals; that is not what live practice is. When a young granddaughter dies, that is the time to grieve. Grieving and other emotions are life. It is a matter of what is appropriate now.

**Student:** I might have misunderstood about *impure sexuality*. I mean, surely you're not suggesting that the only *pure* sexuality is to reproduce.

**Elihu:** No. *Impure* has to do with the grasping, the clinging, the attachment, and then it does not make a difference whether you are talking about sexuality or eating food or anything else. So, you could have impure eating in the zendo with the oryoki. See, that's why this is part of the meal verse: *As we desire the natural order of mind, to be free from clinging, we must be aware of our greed.* Being aware is noticing, eating and being eaten. With sexuality, as with all of our other activities, there are all sorts of consequences of what we do. Practice includes noticing, being present and appropriate action. What is making love? What is sexuality? Who is making love?

**Student:** I was thinking about other words besides *pure* and *impure* that helped me to think about this. *Impure* being *static* or *stale*—when I'm repeating something I've done in the past to have a result I've had in the past—and *dynamic* being fresh and present—I may still be operating out of the system, but I'm present and I know that I'm doing that, and there's a different quality to my experiencing. Rather than *me* trying to be fulfilled, there's an umbrella of awareness.

**Elihu:** You mentioned something very important. It is the *me, my*; it is the *I want*. In a way, any desire is natural functioning of Dharma; it cannot be *other* than self-nature. There is no pure or impure; just dreams within dreams. Nevertheless, difficulty and suffering is in *I want* and in *I know* and *I am*. Is it life centered or self-centered? That's why grasping is subtle: We know for ourselves what is and what is not. As in the meal verse, *to be free from clinging, we must be aware of our greed.* Greed, and practicing with it, is being aware. Being aware, we see the next step. We all "have" greed, until we do not act out of greed. Please reflect: *Self-nature is inconceivably wondrous.* In the midst of inconceivably wondrous self-nature, we practice, we cultivate, we are ongoing practice, being aware of our greed, not giving rise to attachment.

## The Fourth Precept: Telling the Truth

We live with a great mystery—words. We often take words for granted and do not realize what a mystery they are.

There are two ways the Fourth Bodhisattva Precept can be stated: *I vow to practice telling the truth, or I vow to refrain from telling lies.* What is “truth?” What is “lies?” Can we ever tell the truth of life? What are we doing when we are telling lies?

The One-Mind verse for this precept is:

*Self-nature is inconceivably wondrous.  
In the Dharma that is beyond expression,  
Not speaking even a single dead word  
Is called the precept of refraining from telling lies.*

*Self-nature is inconceivably wondrous*—right here this moment! Remember: We are talking about truth, lies, this mystery of words. So often we believe that words are reality; that we can know reality if we know the words about reality, about ourselves, about others. We speak the words *self* and *other* as if this what is. *In the Dharma that is beyond expression . . .* It is not something other than our life. Our life is beyond expression. Living this world that is who we are, it is truly beyond expression.

We are sitting in here. It is cool, but not cold as it is outside. Someone could yell, “Cold, cold, cold, cold, cold!” and we would not be cold. We know that. Yet, many times in our life, there are words that we hear, words that we tell ourselves about ourselves or about others, that we believe—we believe that the words are what our life is, what reality is. We believe that the words are the truth. “Oh, it’s so terrible, so terrible; it really is bad.” We believe the word *terrible*. And it seems to be so. Or, sometimes we may have some wonderful high. “Oh, yes! Everything is just magnificent; it’s wonderful.” We think that if we say the words, that is going to be accurate.

What is it not to tell lies? What is truth? In a way, the whole thing is just sitting. Noticing thoughts—the emotion-thought we are caught up in—is noticing the lies that we are telling ourselves about this moment, about life. The lies are what we *believe* life is. If we tell ourselves that the world is a certain way—“There’s her, and her and him, and them,” and “They’re doing these things”—we’ve created a whole host of lies about what life is. Believing the lies, the words we have created, we live out of the belief we resulting harm and suffering. Sitting is being in the midst of life as it is. Life *truly* is beyond expression. And living the life we truly are, manifesting life as it is, out of this life we use this wonderful tool—words. See? Words are our wonderful ability of expressing—expressing with words, speaking without being caught by the words—sharing life.

We are both aspects. It is beyond expression, even on a simple level. I could say “tea” and talk about atoms and molecules, chemical composition, temperature, texture, thirst and drinking, but none of it—*none* of it—is the taste of tea in this cup. Truly, our whole life is beyond expression. And our life is tasting, drinking this tea. Words are then a most wonderful expression, directly sharing of this moment, drinking this tea. How wonderfully perfect, how wonderfully rich our life truly is. That is the wonderful

tool of words. Are we telling stories about what we *think* it is or what it truly is? Are we believing these stories? Are we trapped in what we believe? Words help us, words trap us.

In place of experiencing core belief / pain, we look at our life *through* that core belief / pain, as if through a filter—this fits, this doesn't—and we believe those words as a description of what our reality is, of what, who, we are. We use this filter to cut off our life. Some people might say, "Obviously, you have to just get rid of all the words, and then everything will be fine." No. The precept is to refrain from telling lies, *and* to practice telling the truth. See, we need to make that *positive* effort. In fact, that is exactly what Dharma practice is. Dharma practice is telling the truth, as best we can, as *alive* as we can. The Buddha's teaching is the Four Noble Truths. Our practice is to speak truth, "live words."

Tiantong Rujing's verse is:

*From the beginning, the Dharma wheel has turned  
With nothing in excess and nothing lacking.  
The sweet dew of perfection saturates all;  
Everything is true, and everything is real.*

Taken literally, this seems the reverse of the One-Mind verse, which said the *Dharma ... is beyond expression*. Actually, these verses are two sides of the same thing. *Truly*, our life—our practice—is not any of the words; and our practice is speaking *alive words*—the words we speak to our children, our friends.

How are words, which can so easily be made dead, the perfection that is our life? The words that we use are just that perfection. There is nothing lacking in them; there are no mistakes; there are no inadequacies. See? Don't get caught in something theoretical: "Well, the thoughts are delusion, distractions, misperceptions." If we believe that then we are caught in lies, even though we think the words are *accurate* descriptions of our thoughts, beliefs. When we judge or blame self or others, we are caught in the lies. Doing that, we are turning practice—turning noticing our thoughts—into another set of lies.

We can turn words that we read or hear into dead words—lies—or we can turn them into live words. Make them alive, and the whole world is alive; make them dead, and the whole world is dead. In the midst of all dead, no mistakes. Our precept—our task—is telling the truth, being the truth, living the truth. The first step is to tell the truth. Always, look closely; are the words alive? Are they dead?

**Student:** I notice that I lie sometimes, and I rationalize it: I don't want to hurt this person's feelings, or I'm embarrassed about something. I don't want to do that, but I'm caught in being uncomfortable. On the other hand, it will just sometimes come out. So, I hear the precept and understand the precept, but I find it difficult on many levels.

**Elihu:** At times, it is very hard to even tell our self the truth. We do not know that we are not telling the truth. Sitting sometimes shows us how hard it is to tell the truth of the present moment—not *about* it, but *of* it. Again, no use to make this into a formula: "I need to say everything." *Always*, you must choose and be appropriate about what you say. Remember, *everything is beyond expression*. There is not a single



true word; everything is just this, expressing this wonderful life. Otherwise, our practice becomes trapped in small rules, and those become lies. Words are a great mystery. How is it that someone just makes some noises or makes some marks on paper (i.e., says something or writes something), and you are tremendously hurt? What is it truly? Words are a tremendous mystery of expressing the whole of life. *In this life that is beyond expression*, words are expressing the whole of the Dharma, the whole of life. Just a little “thank you” makes an enormous difference. Notice it for yourself. It is the whole of life expressing itself. It is nothing else—it is not some little thing. Remember: It is always just this moment, our life here—the Dharma wheel is turning and completely revealing this right here. If we do not realize it, if we take it for granted, we use words without appreciating what they truly are. Nations go to war over words; people are killed and tortured over little words, words spoken that have disappeared. Living in the midst of this, we cannot tighten our lips and refuse to say anything; that is to be stuck, believing what keeps us from being alive. Practice is being the natural order of life. How do we function naturally? As the verse says, *the sweet dew of perfection saturates all; everything is true, and everything is real. Nothing is in excess, nothing is lacking*. So, we cannot make it into something that we control—that is all extra. Beyond expression and nothing lacking. That is the way we have to make our effort, ongoing practice; see where we are believing lies, getting trapped in lies—not lies in a sense of bad, but lies in not being accurate. We all do it. Much of the world we live in is lies, is dead; that is why we practice. And yet, all is the wonderful Dharma expressing itself—the wonderful Dharma that is our life.

**Student:** One thing I find very difficult is when someone at school is complaining about somebody else, and I don’t agree. If I say something, I am denying the validity of what they say, but if I don’t say anything I am not being honest about my own feelings.

**Elihu:** So, how do you speak? How do you hear the other person without getting caught in just their words? We speak with more than just the words. And, we speak lots of words without saying a thing. There is an expression: Buddha spoke for forty years and didn’t speak a word; Buddha spoke lie after lie after lie. That is just being Buddha. It is simple. But always, it is a matter of seeing what *we* are doing. All the words we tell our self—what would it be to tell the truth? How do we practice telling the truth—practice telling our self the truth—or practice noticing how we don’t tell the truth?

## The Fifth Precept: Not Using Intoxicants/Not Clouding the Truth

The Fifth Grave Precept is usually translated as *refraining from using intoxicants*. Another way of expressing it is *I vow to be more aware of my way of clouding the truth by my ignorance*. I think *intoxicant* is a very nice word, because it points not only to alcohol and drugs but to the clouding of the truth. *Toxic* is something that poisons, that injures, that kills our aliveness. We are not just talking about physical things but all of the ways that habits kill aliveness. This is what the precept is. What are *my* ways? Each of us has our ways of clouding the truth. Clouding the truth is clouding our life.

In Zen tradition—and in Buddhist tradition in general—we talk about the three poisons (greed, anger, and ignorance) that poison life, poison awareness. So this precept is about all the ways that we poison our life. Refraining from using intoxicants is refraining from—or becoming aware of—the ways that we do this. This is not something that is a matter of *oh, you shouldn't do it because you are doing something bad*; because we are human, all of us cloud the truth with our ignorance, and being caught up in the reactions of three poisons, we live with the consequences, the suffering.

The One-Mind Precept verse for this precept is:

*Self-nature is inconceivably wondrous.  
In the intrinsically pure Dharma,  
Not allowing the mind to become dark through ignorance is called  
The precept of refraining from using intoxicants.*

The One-Mind verse begins *Self-nature is inconceivably wondrous*, reminding us of this very basic aspect of our life. This *self-nature* is who we are, which we so easily forget. Self-nature is not something that you need to hear someone else say; it is something that is true, whether you discover it or not. Our practice is to be—and in being, to discover—self-nature that is inconceivably wondrous. *In the intrinsically pure Dharma....* Where is there anything that can intoxicate us? Where is there anything that can cloud, darken or kill this awareness that is our life? Nevertheless, not allowing the mind to become dark through ignorance is our effort, our practice; to keep on discovering, to keep on working with all the ways that we allow our life, our mind, to become dark. *Not allowing the mind to become dark through ignorance is called the precept of refraining from using intoxicants*. In a narrow sense, the precept is about using intoxicants, not because there is something “wrong” with the intoxicants, but because the very nature of intoxicating oneself is about killing life, about killing the intrinsically pure Dharma—the awareness—so that is what we are doing. This is creating and maintaining suffering. And we do it in all sorts of ways. And we *can't* kill our self: Even the pain, even the suffering we create, truly embracing this, truly embracing ignorance, even *this* is nothing but the intrinsically pure. We need not do anything to become pure. It is important to know that our sitting is not about doing something to *become pure*, to *become better*, and it is not even doing something to push away what is “bad.” It is to be—and in being, to notice—the ways we allow mind, emotion-thought—being—to become darkened through ignorance. In the midst of being and noticing is transformation to living the life we always are, a life of compassion and wisdom.

Tiantong Rujing's verse is:

*Do not introduce intoxicants;  
Do not make others defile themselves:*

*This is great awareness.*

It points both to the side where we intoxicate ourselves—cloud our own awareness, cloud our own life—and to the side where we allow others—enable others—to become intoxicated, to become poisoned. So our practice is not just about *me*. Our practice is both aspects: Seeing and working with clouding our own ignorance and the ways we cloud the ignorance of others, the ways in which we make others defile themselves. *This is great awareness.* This is wisdom and compassion.

This is terribly difficult. As humans, we struggle with the ways that we cloud the truth with our ignorance, which grows out of the self-and-other perspective of life: dualism. It is important to see it, in the way we are in the world, our functioning, and not merely as some theory or abstraction. Practice is to be present, to discover how we are clouding the truth—how we are being caught up in separating, caught up in the ignorance. The precepts help make this alive and useful for us in our practice, rather than just something that we hear, and think, “Oh, that sounds interesting,” or “Oh, that is a rule I need to apply.” How can I be more aware of *my* way of clouding the truth? How do I cloud my life, life with all whom I live? How do I practice with this?

**Student:** I sometimes get into arguments with somebody; they say something, and I react to it. It makes me upset, but instead of acknowledging that, I blame it on them. It’s clear that I’m trying to take the suffering off myself and put it squarely on their shoulders; oftentimes, they’ll do the same thing, which is to react to my making them feel bad by yelling.

**Elihu:** And what is it you are not wanting to do?

**Student:** I’m not wanting to look at my own pain.

**Elihu:** Look at?

**Student:** Experience. Just be it.

**Elihu:** Clouding the truth often is being unwilling or unable (unable because of our habits of being, because of the way we are as a person in the world and the way we believe we should be) to hear someone say a certain thing to us. We do not want to embrace the truth of this moment. We cloud it by saying, *this* isn’t the truth of the moment; rather, it is *that*, or it is *them*.

**Student:** What about the long history of drunks in Zen, especially in Japan?

**Elihu:** If we have a habit such as drinking, then our practice is being aware and working with it as best we can. We may drink because we find it hard to be the pain of the moment of our life. Pain is emotional, is physical, is being beliefs. So we use all sorts of things, whether we cloud with ignorance, or cover up, or intoxicate. The word intoxicate has an interesting dictionary definition: “to excite or stupefy by alcohol or drugs to the point where physical and mental control is markedly diminished.” We want something to be more exciting, so we do all sorts of things for that. We want to be stupefied, to cut life down because it’s too much for us. We use drugs, alcohol, and all sorts of other means for a reason: It feels good or enables us not to feel something else. Cultures encourage different kinds of intoxications. That is fine. It’s not a matter of taking this as some sort of absolute commandment, even though there is that too: It

definitely is that in many Buddhist traditions. But commandments are there because people behave in ways that lead to suffering; they break commandments. Each of us is people. We work with that. It is much more valuable to look at our life than to worry about what other people do. Then, if you have to drink, how do you drink in a way that is becoming more aware of what you are doing? How do you do it in a way that has less poisonous consequences for others? less poisonous for yourself?

**Student:** I can't figure out whether you agree that you can drink.

**Elihu:** Do not take this as my telling you to drink! What is drinking? Who is drunk? If you ask, I say, do not drink!

But, you see, it is much broader. We drink in all sorts of ways; we drink with all sorts of things. It's not just the alcohol that is the issue; it is the clouding of the truth that is the issue. We do that: All of us cloud the truth. Some do it with alcohol, some in other ways: That is the point of the precept. Some ways are more insidious than others and have more ramifications.

**Student:** There are some ways that excite and stupefy at the same time, like television. I've gone through periods in my life where it was really easy to escape into just turning it on, not thinking, not feeling.

**Elihu:** Yes. It is not these things that are *inherently wrong*. Remember, we start with: *In the intrinsically pure Dharma* . . . there is no alcohol, there is no poison, there is no ignorance—it is self-nature, inherently wondrous. That is always hard to hear, always hard for us to acknowledge: Life is inherently wondrous; being this is our practice. It is not about becoming something different, going to some special place or some special mental state. Please remember that.

**Student:** You just said that practice is not about going to a special place of mind or escaping to a special state of mind, but if you are used to your habits and then you sit for the first time and you start to become aware for the first time, that is a kind of special state of mind.

**Elihu:** Yes.

**Student:** It could lend itself to habit, being special, being a special state of mind.

**Elihu:** And therefore you will hear over and over that it is not about being special, even though that is what it may seem like at times. Our practice is seeing that this is not a special state of mind. It is sitting here, plain and ordinary, being the taste of water that is just as it is, nothing special. And everything *special* is in a sense about that clouding of the truth; that is self-centeredness. See, even if it is a special state of mind that is wonderfully intoxicating, it is still an intoxicant. In fact, when someone “has” an opening and then makes a big deal about it, then they are intoxicated with emptiness, intoxicated with enlightenment; that is a poison as well—sometimes it is called a “golden chain”, “gold dust in the eye” or “golden poison.” Of course, when we sit, sometimes we discover that life is different from our usual self-centered habit of being. It truly is not a matter of a different state or an ordinary state; it is life as it is, self-nature. Self-centeredness is the distortion. Practice is being aware, being this. What do I see? What do I notice when being caught up? What is my way of clouding the truth in my ignorance? Just like in the meal verse, *being aware of my greed*. It's being aware of what we are doing; in being aware there is transformation of intoxicants.

**Student:** A metaphor has come to my mind on this precept. It's around the phrase "hitting bottom". Alcoholics and addicts often hit bottom, and somehow an awareness comes to them that they are in trouble, they are in pain. Coming to sesshin—in a smaller way, sitting daily—is a way of hitting bottom, being with the physical stuff that comes from my poisons of choice—and there are many! I think that's why sesshin is intimidating, because you sit and feel the consequences of the last three months of intoxicating, and hit bottom in a sense.

**Elihu:** Yet, it is not the last three months, it is just this moment; we carry all of a lifetime in this moment. It is all right here, our whole lifetime—lifetimes—all of the lives that we are. It is just this moment, sitting, being just here.

**Student:** One of my favorite intoxicants in sesshin has been to do it perfectly and look real good, and I can spend all my energy maintaining this good Zen image.

**Elihu:** What is the intoxicant for you of "looking good"?

**Student:** I think it's the exact opposite direction of what's really going on. It's the antidote to some deep belief that I'm real fucked up.

**Elihu:** And if you look good, do you think that everyone else is noticing how good you look?

**Student:** Sure, they're impressed.

**Elihu:** It is interesting that you think that, given that no one is looking around.

**Student:** Yeah, that occurs to me sometimes: they are not a very good audience. Sometimes in my mind it has been that way: I'm the only one looking at a wall; everyone else is sneaking glances.

**Elihu:** At you! (Laughter) Yes, we are often looking at our self. That is self-centeredness.

**Student:** I'm unclear about basic decisions. Is a basic decision a form of intoxicant?

**Elihu:** What do you mean by a "basic decision"?

**Student:** I'm unclear about what you mean by it, because something yesterday that I thought was a basic decision turned out to be a strategy, and that's fine, I'll buy that.

**Elihu:** In a sense being caught up in what I have called a strategy and reacting out of that is an intoxicant. A strategy is the way I am in the world, to get what I believe is needed to be OK; for example, always doing things to impress people, discovering that no one is impressed by it, and reacting by being upset or saddened or thinking, "I didn't do it well enough." The emotional reaction—the believed thoughts and the bodily experience of that—would be an intoxicant, a way of clouding the present moment. The truth for all of us is self-nature, wondrous. Yet it is so hard to allow our self to be. We cannot see it in the midst of the pain that we believe life is, that we experience life as when our strategies do not "work." That is a hard part of sitting—being able to be this, in the midst of the seeming pain of being present. And

sometimes when we are that *a little bit*, then all of a sudden sitting seems so much different from the rest of our life, because in the rest of our life we are running from it. Sitting is being present. There may be a release, discovering that the believed pain—the pain of self-centeredness—is not so. The release is being who we truly are, what our life is.

**Student:** So how come sitting is different from the rest of our life?

**Elihu:** I don't know. How come?

Brushing teeth is self-nature; drinking water is self-nature; going to sleep is self-nature; sitting is self-nature. Life is self-nature; death is self-nature. Life is life of the Buddha; death is life of the Buddha. As long as that is just words it may be helpful, but not satisfactory: It is not enough. That is why we have to make this real for our self, real in our life. That is what zazen offers. Being zazen is being our self, here, now, as we are, as life is. That is why practice is ongoing, practice is continuous, practice is just what we do, whether sitting, talking with our children, or being at a funeral. *Inconceivably wondrous*. Sometimes, we want to figure it out, but we are trapping our self, because we are using instruments that are inherently limited and inadequate—I mean the instruments of our thinking process. Thinking or analyzing is not enough to be who we are, to realize and manifest our life. We have to do it for our self, in our life. This is zazen.

**Student:** Can the will be an intoxicant?

**Elihu:** Yes, the will can be intoxicating. All sorts of psychological states can be intoxicating, a way self-centered vision clouds the truth, just this. We cloud the truth by wanting it to be a certain way, by the habits of mind.

**Student:** If there's a situation that's just as it is and quite wonderful and I can't do anything about it, I'd rather believe that I have not figured out how to intend properly than to believe that there isn't anything I can do.

**Elihu:** Yes, "*you—I—would rather*": It is the "caught in the self-centered dream"; that this has to be the way *I* want it to be. Unfortunately, the results are suffering and havoc for us and for others; sometimes war—killing and suffering on a large scale. How can I work with this, being aware? It is not doing anything else. The start of our practice is just being, noticing the ways in which we cloud life; for instance, being seemingly a little more aware of what we are doing; what is happening as we poison—as we intoxicate—our self; to practice with it—not in a heavy sense, but in a light and joyful sense—in the midst of clouding this wonderful jewel that is always our life, that is always here. How can we do this? How can we practice in the midst of clouding what is never clouded? It is not a matter of saying, "Oh I'm clouding the truth by my ignorance," but rather being this inconceivably wondrous self-nature, this ordinary, nothing special life. See, that is our practice: Being the present moment, even the present moment of our clouding: Being *this*.

## The Sixth Precept: Not Speaking of the Faults of Others

All directions is inconceivably wondrous self-nature. The sixth precept is: *I vow to abstain from talking of the errors and faults of others.* The One-Mind verse is:

*Self-nature is inconceivably wondrous.*

*In the faultless Dharma, not speaking of others' faults is called  
The precept of refraining from speaking of others' shortcomings.*

*In the faultless Dharma . . .* faultless universe. That is our life, our practice; we start and end here. Our life is inconceivably wondrous self-nature; this is the entire universe, not something separate. We are the faultless universe; the faultless universe is us; where do we find faults? And yet, we do. We notice and believe in errors and faults. This is separating. How do we be—practice—in the midst of noticing faults in the faultless?

Sometimes, our habit or tendency is to notice errors and faults of others. Can we see that those “others” are not other than myself? Am I treating myself in the way I am treating others? Another tendency is to be very self-critical: Not to say anything to anyone else but to constantly judge and be critical of our self, treating our self—what we *think* is our self—in ways that we would never dare treat anyone else; berating, being judgmental and critical of our self, beating up on our self in ways that we would never beat up on the worst of other people. That, too, is important to notice. Do we believe that we do not deserve the courtesy, generosity and compassion that we would give anyone else? *In the faultless Dharma*—in the faultless universe—do we believe the faults we notice? What ideas and expectations are we holding? How is it to “not believe faults” and yet respond appropriately to this moment, “faults” and all? This is the precept.

As soon as we see and believe faults (those of others or of our self: it does not make a difference) we have already broken this precept. Breaking up this wondrous self-nature that is who we are. This is what all of our suffering, in this faultless, inconceivable self-nature, grows out of. *Not speaking of others' faults . . .* there *are* no faults, and yet, it seems to us there *are*. Our practice has to be in what seems true to us. It is what we work with; not just hearing some ideal phrase, because if that phrase is not true for us, then it is not worth anything. It might sound good; it might sound noble and benevolent (“yes, it is faultless”); but then what are we seeing as faults and shortcomings? Where is the noble phrase? Stated differently, what keeps us from appreciating, being and functioning as this inconceivably wondrous universe that is our life? What are the beliefs that we are holding? Do we notice them? Is it so?

Tiantong Rujing's verse is:

*Within the Buddhadharma,  
It is the same Way, the same Dharma, the same Realization, the same Practice.  
Do not speak of the shortcomings of others;  
Do not corrupt the Way.*

*Within the Buddhadharma . . . you could say, within the Awakened Way, which is the way of our life, the way of the whole universe. It is the same Way, the same Dharma—Dharma teaching, Dharma nature of being—the same Realization, the same Practice. Do not speak of the shortcomings of others . . . In order to speak of errors, faults or shortcomings of others, we must be holding to our beliefs and thoughts. We have seen the world in terms of shortcomings of others and separation; seeing the world that way, we have already deluded what is true. Do not corrupt the Way.*

**Student:** I've noticed in my own practice that thought-labeling becomes a way of fault-finding.

**Elihu:** So you criticize yourself; you add a judgment to the labeling and do not notice it. Our practice is to label the judgment, to notice that we are adding the judgment, to notice we are turning sitting—noticing our thoughts, noticing our strategies, noticing—into an evaluation. We do it in lots of areas in our life, and it sneaks into sitting as well. Practice is not to say, “Don't do it!” but to notice what we are doing, what we are believing, and to be this inconceivably wondrous self-nature. This is zazen. In the midst of this inconceivably wondrous self-nature, practice is acting appropriately--correcting, making judgments and decisions—all in the midst of the faultlessness. This is difficult practice, because it takes truly trusting life and being present; embracing life, in spite of the seeming solidity of beliefs and habits of self-centeredness.

**Student:** So how is this a faultless world?

**Elihu:** How *isn't* it a faultless world?

**Student:** War, killing, murder . . .

**Elihu:** What is the fault there?

**Student:** So killing somebody is not a fault?

**Elihu:** No, I do not say that. Killing grows out of believing that this is a fault world and therefore, he, she or they are at fault: the self-centered world of separation, delusion and attachment. Believing that, we give our self permission to do all sorts of things. We could say that the paradoxical aspect of it is, in the midst of this faultlessness that is life, we can and do break it up and turn it into faults everywhere, and the very act of being able to do that is the start of . . .

**Student:** Dropping out of the Garden of Eden?

**Elihu:** See, you are *not* dropping out! Even in the midst of war, this is the faultless self-nature, inconceivably wondrous. Even in the midst of being with someone who has just murdered and is psychopathic, this is Buddha-nature, right here shining. It may be a hard thing to see, to be, to realize, to live. It is not just a matter of glibly covering things over: It is acting appropriately. That person is behind bars, and yet it is this. Yes, there are all sorts of cause and effect—the unceasing turning of the Wheel of Life—but if we are just on the level of blame, then it is hopeless, because it just continues endlessly: fault and fault. They are at fault, and we do something about that, and that leads to someone else doing something about us being at fault: the endless cycle. See, practice is not “Pollyanna.” How do we notice and speak of the shortcomings, errors and faults of others and of our self? How do we work with this to clarify our practice,



clarify our life, being inconceivably wondrous self-nature? Otherwise, there is no point in talking about this. This is very difficult, because we are all “correcting” in many ways: here in the zendo (people with certain positions, in giving instructions and sometimes correcting), as parents, or in other positions in our life where we correct, notice and judge.

**Student:** So how would you discipline a child? On what basis?

**Elihu:** Be appropriate. How do we act appropriately? That is hard, because of how we live our life, the bundle of expectations and strategies, behavior that fits what “I” think; this is what leads to pointing out the errors and shortcomings of others. It is not a matter of formulating a new rule, but finding ways to discover what strategies or habits or expectations we are believing, and what core belief pain we want to avoid by blaming, by pointing out the shortcomings and errors of others. If we were to take this precept as the vow: *I vow to abstain from speaking of the errors and shortcomings of others*—and include in the others myself—even for one day a week, we would see how quickly we do not abstain . . . (*general laughter*) . . . I do not have to say any more!

**Student:** Twenty microseconds.

**Elihu:** The point is noticing what we are doing, believing, because in that we are breaking up this faultless, inconceivably wondrous universe that is our life. That is why this is important. You could see it in reverse: Working with the errors and shortcomings, little by little, allows us to realize for our self this inconceivably wondrous universe that we all live, that is always right here.

**Student:** It seems to me that it is one thing to look at somebody from a distance and not make those judgments; when you are involved and you have to do something, if you don’t have a working mental map of what brings life, you are going to be hurting yourself and other people. Like, it is not bad if a kid sticks something in a light socket, but he might get electrocuted.

**Elihu:** No, it is terrible, and you might shout, “Stop!!”

**Student:** It is not like he is being morally wrong, but he’s just about to get electrocuted.

**Elihu:** And you have to act appropriately and quickly. But it is very easy to go from there to being loud—and not realizing how loud an adult is to a child—when they are only doing something minor. And that is something we all have to work with, with children, with animals and with others.

**Student:** There are things people do that are emotional and mental that are about the same as sticking something in a light socket, and if you don’t know that’s what that is, you can’t say “stop” or refuse to be part of it, so it seems like a certain amount of conversation has to go on, so that we know.

**Elihu:** Yes. It is seeing how to act appropriately. A willingness to make mistakes—what we think of as mistakes—over and over and over. If anyone here is not willing to make mistakes, forget about being here, forget about practicing, because practice means being willing to notice “mistakes.” Now, remember, all those “mistakes” are this faultless, mistakeless universe; nevertheless, if they seem like mistakes, then that is what we have to deal with. We have to be willing to make mistakes, to *be* mistakes, because otherwise we are not willing to practice. Practice means taking a step in a direction that might not be as

safe as the seeming solid world of expectations and beliefs that we have created, are now creating in our mind. We often live in and therefore suffer in these beliefs. Children are a very good test: There was a time when I raised my voice too much to my daughter because my expectations did not fit her actions. The practice point is my expectations and reactions, failing to see the expectations as mine and instead focusing on and blaming her actions. I reacted without noticing what I was holding to, what beliefs I made solid truths. Practice is noticing, is being the bodily fear, pain, the unmet expectation, if possible before reacting from them. Self-centeredness is avoiding as much as possible bodily fear, pain, and unmet expectations without regard for the consequences.

**Student:** But it is not clear when you are with another person—an adult, say. I mean it's no good to cash in your strategies for theirs; their strategies aren't any better. But it's not clear when you're doing that and when it's just that they are different.

**Elihu:** That is why we, for our self, must practice; we have to make the ongoing effort to practice and notice what is going on: a live practice. Little by little, we do our best.

**Student:** One of the things you are saying here is that learning to discriminate is not the same as criticizing.

**Elihu:** Yes. How do we take “not speaking of errors and faults of others”? Clearly, if I'm going to talk to Jill about Joe's errors and faults, there is no question I need to see this and “abstain,” because it is talking about the shortcomings of others. The word *shortcomings* assumes the other person does not come up to where they are supposed to be; yet that person is inconceivably wondrous Buddha-nature—nothing but this.

**Student:** I was just wondering about “venting”: Something that happens quite a bit in my community. That's where you're gossiping about someone else, but it's not particularly to bash that person; it's to get some heat off your chest. Someone listens to you and helps you do that. I'm just wondering, because that applies to what you've just been talking about.

**Elihu:** What is going on in this “venting”? Is it about clarifying something, or is it speaking about the other person, getting some “heat off your chest”? In Buddhist monastic communities, there is a tradition of monthly or semimonthly confession or atonement, and at these times, as a community, people speak to others about things they themselves did that were a problem. Now, how to do that appropriately, compassionately, in a way that serves rather than faults, takes skill and sensitivity. Sometimes what people call “venting” really just perpetuates their own anger, self-righteousness and blaming others; that is certainly not helpful.

**Student:** I'm kind of a fan of venting, for the purpose of clarifying things for myself, but the problem I run into, even when my intentions are that way, is that I can't control how other people take what I say. So my meaning might be one thing, but once it's out there people can make something else of it; they could anyway, but at least I wouldn't be contributing so much if I were making better choices of who I talk to.

**Elihu:** How do you find that venting works in your community?

**Student:** It can go both ways. It can be a very good thing, but there's a subtle line that can often be crossed, where there is more damage done than not. I run into the same problem you were just speaking about, with people not understanding where you're coming from. The reason I think it's important is that what I have noticed from my own practice otherwise in the last year or so is a lot of repressed anger, where I thought that I was dealing with a certain situation well, but I was actually just forcing that anger down. Eventually it came back up again, even stronger than before. So I think it's important to get it out somehow—appropriately if possible—but I have definitely failed in certain circumstances.

**Elihu:** We may assume that the errors and faults are with others. Are we believing our expectations, our strategy, our habits about the way the world ought to be? Practice is clearly examining this, not taking it for granted. We often take for granted that our expectations and decisions are the correct and appropriate ones for other people. We may not see the world except from that narrow, self-centered point of view.

**Student:** But you haven't answered the question of how to deal with that anger, or that energy, whatever you want to call it, that can be self-destructive if it's not expressed.

**Elihu:** Noticing our expectations and being willing to experience the bodily-sensory present moment, the "anger." That is practice. What is important is experiencing; our self-centeredness turns that into "expressing": Expressing it to and directing it at others. It becomes more attachment and beliefs. Anger is our strategies being frustrated, our expectations not happening. Anger is that core-belief pain that is exposed when our strategy bumps up against something. To reside as this, bodily-sensory anger—or fear, which may underlie it—is our practice opportunity. Noticing the thoughts is often necessary in order to allow this experiencing.

**Student:** A note from the science front: Recently cardiologists have been very concerned about venting anger, because there has long been the assumption that it is good for you, but from a cardiological point of view it is not. Research has shown that when one acts out the anger it causes more cardiological problems for the person, especially within a few hours after the anger episode. They can often have a heart attack. It turns out that just holding the anger in—and not acting it out—is healthier.

**Elihu:** There is a subtle place between repressing it—pushing it down, denying it—and acting it out. That subtle place is experiencing without acting it out. Acting out often perpetuates, makes it more and makes us "right" about it, which perpetuates the whole process that keeps anger ongoing.

**Student:** Joko told me once that that's what she thought the "middle way" was: Between doing it and not doing it.

**Student:** I work in a restaurant. Restaurants are really high-stress places, and there's a major amount of venting in there, especially people venting against the customers, because you have to go out there and smile, so you come back and call them every name in the book, because there's nothing you can do out there. My experience is that, when it gets to that point, you're nine steps past where you could really intervene. At that point, all you can do is watch and try to disentangle the whole cluster that got to that point, and that's the problem with venting: It's too late; that's not the point where something can be different. I'd have to take apart an actual situation to explain it further, but I think that you've made a whole chain of decisions that have gotten you there, and you have to work back and work with each one of those, and then you don't need to.

**Elihu:** I know most of you have seen how hard this is; even just sitting here, without speaking to anyone else, anger/blaming/faulting arising. It is easy to get tangled up in it. And this is a relatively safe environment; there is very little external stimulus going on. And you are in the midst of sitting, being present, and yet . . . .

**Student:** I think that physical pain brings out that anger that is right there. When I'm in a lot of pain, I'm mad! Staying in that is the last thing I want to do. But I don't have to go anywhere or do anything when I'm feeling physical pain; I do think that's the same core belief pain.

**Elihu:** "Mad" is emotional pain: mad *at*, mad *about* . . . Physical pain is often another side of unnoticed emotional pain, expectations and fear. From the perspective of *emotional* pain, you imagine that there *is* someone to blame; that is what this precept is pointing to. When there is physical pain, then what?

**Student:** When your system or strategy isn't working, that's when you get mad. I don't like to be in so much pain.

**Elihu:** "I don't like," so who or what do you want ?

**Student:** I want the situation to *change*, which is what that feeling of anger is. The blame is one way. With *physical* pain—the beauty of it, and I think that's why pain itself is a great teacher—there's no one to blame.

**Elihu:** If we truly see that, it is just pain, being this, life as it is.

## The Seventh Precept: Not Praising Self and Degrading Others

The Seventh Grave Precept is refraining from praising yourself and degrading (putting down) others. Another way is: I vow not to elevate myself or put down others.

The One-Mind verse for this precept is:

*Self-nature is inconceivably wondrous.  
In the undifferentiated Dharma,  
Not speaking of self and other is called  
The precept of refraining from praising yourself and degrading others.*

*Not speaking of self and other*, in the midst of *self-nature is inconceivably wondrous*. It is important to see that self-nature is the entire universe, the self that is no-self. It is because self is no-self that we can say self is the entire universe. As soon as we hold onto our self as being something solid, separate, and fixed, we are praising our self, upraising our self: We are breaking this precept. The importance of the precept is that not maintaining it results in consequences; suffering grows out of the breaking-up of this undifferentiated Dharma—this life that we are.

There are ways that we put our self down by thinking about “how” we should be, about how we are not doing what we think is right. By subtly putting our self down, we are both praising and degrading our self. Self and other are not different. It is all self; it is all other. Whatever I meet, whomever I meet, I am just meeting myself. This self and other are the self and other of no-self; self-nature which is inconceivably wondrous. The point is not the words. We can get trapped by words. What are we believing, what are we clinging to? Sometimes we see and treat our self as another. That is making self into something solid and fixed. There are ways that we imply—speak of—self and other, without even realizing it. It is not a matter of *speaking* of it, but of making it *solid and fixed*, what we believe we are and how we are holding. When you praise yourself or put down someone else, stop for a moment and ask: What am I doing? When we criticize someone else, we are automatically raising our self: *I am not like that; I would not do that sort of thing*. We are breaking up this life that we are. Even when we just feel the need to praise our self, we are saying, “My life is not OK, unless I add this something to it; being ordinary is not OK.” It is as if whatever we see as ordinary—as life without extra—is not OK. Believing that, we are not seeing inconceivably wondrous, just as it is, wondrous, amazing, miraculous. If we *need* the praise, praising *this* and degrading *that*, we are breaking up this undifferentiated Dharma, this nature we are. It is assuming that the rest (of me) is lacking something. It is the “something lacking” that is the breaking of this precept; *believing* something is lacking results in suffering, sorrows, and grief.

Tiantong Rujing’s verse is:

*Buddhas and ancestors have realized  
The emptiness of the vast sky and the great earth.  
When they manifest as the great body,  
They are like the sky, without inside or outside.  
When they manifest as the Dharmakaya,  
There is not even an inch of earth on which to lay hold.*

*Dharmakaya* is “Dharma body,” the nature of the universe, our life. In the Zen tradition, there is a phrase said to have been uttered by the Buddha just after his birth: “Above the heaven, below the earth, I alone am the World-Honored One.” And we have the expression attributed to Bodhidharma: “Vast emptiness; no holiness.” In the Jewish tradition, there was a Hassidic master who said he had two things: In one pocket he had an expression “Because of me, the world is created”; in the other pocket he had “I am dust and ashes.” (“Dust and ashes” is Job’s expression, in the Hebrew Bible, after he encounters the Absolute in the whirlwind). You cannot get stuck in either: Self-nature is no-nature! It is the vast sky; there is not any place to hold.

Whether we are praising or criticizing our self, we are breaking this precept. Our practice is seeing, experiencing, the need to praise or criticize our self. Practice is *not* to say, “OK I need to stop doing this,” but rather to be present, to notice what we are doing, what we are believing about self, about others, about life. Do we treat our self as another? Are we thinking that the way we are is not OK? Are we making a solid self?

**Student:** Are you talking about others or our self?

**Elihu:** I am talking about life, no-self, “vast emptiness,” the “undifferentiated Dharma.” As soon as we have self, we have other. As soon as we have self and other, praising, degrading, commenting goes on. Now, “no-self” is not fixed and solid—what we think is a separate self. It is the self of no-self of the Heart Sutra. But be careful if these are just words. We need to see this. As we practice, being/seeing life arising, we discover that because we make it something solid and try to hold on to it, consequences result. It is obvious that there is a problem when we are putting down others. It is not so obvious when we feel the need to praise our self. In either case, what we do not notice are the assumptions and habits of mind that they grow out of, which we hold and live as truths.

**Student:** So are the verses and precepts different? The second one sounds really different from the first.

**Elihu:** No, it is another way of expressing the precept, another perspective. In Zen tradition, often a case or set of verses has another set of verses appended by someone else. At times, there are more “capping phrases” appended to that, as another way of expressing and at the same time clarifying. So the *Teachings on the Precepts* are often used for testing understanding. If you were working on this with a teacher, you would go through the lines and would be asked how *you* express this, how *you* understand it, what *you* would do with it. Both sets of verses—the One-Mind verses and the *Teachings on the Precepts*—are traditionally used in some lineages as testing points, as ways of working with these precepts as koan, usually at the end of formal study. For example, you might be given the phrase from the *Teachings on the Precepts*: *Buddhas and ancestors have realized the emptiness of the vast sky and the great earth.* How do you see it in terms of Hinayana perspective, Mahayana perspective, or Buddhayana perspective? Then, compose your own set of verses. This grows out of a tradition of using these verses to clarify understanding and practice. Words are one thing; practice is being intimate with this. It is a guide for us: How do we work with *our* praising, *our* putting down, with words, with looks and in our mind? Are we judging? We drive by someone on the street; do we praise our self and put that person down? So how do we live this undifferentiated Dharma? *Not speaking of self and other...* and, “Good morning, Bob.” That is all self, all other, all no-self. That is self and other of no-self. The oneness of self and other is not different from not speaking of self and other. How do you function? Being intimate is not intellectual: You don’t

need any of these words; you don't have to remember anything I say. Be intimate, be alive. When we are caught up in beliefs and thoughts, do we notice? What are we believing? How do we function?

**Student:** How do I express what I have done as an expression of all of life?

**Elihu:** Do what you are doing! That is life. "I alone." Don't get caught in the words. Notice believing the words. Do you get caught up in praising yourself and putting down others? How can you offer your work, your expression and yet not get caught in this elevating self/putting down others? That is the second set of verses: *When they manifest the great body, they are like the vast sky.* Manifest the great body. See, it is the expression of practice, your life. The calligraphy today in the interview room, is "MU." Some people get caught up in the meaning of the particular word - MU is often translated as emptiness, as Dharmakaya. Do not be caught by such interpretations. This calligraphy is by one of my teachers, Soen Nakagawa Roshi. Soen Roshi's work often has a particular style, which is evident in this work. MU. It is This. No-self self. Each of you is the unique *this moment* expression of your life. Your expression is different from Sue's expression, and Sue's expression is different from Valjean's. Do not get caught in elevating self and degrading others.

**Student:** What if others are praising and blaming?

**Elihu:** Practice is not about other people. It is not that others have any particular belief. This *undifferentiated Dharma* is not dependent on everyone sitting together, practicing together; it is not dependent on everyone else doing; it is not dependent on any such thing. The *undifferentiated Dharma* is not dependent! Because of all the ways we are used to functioning, this is a good question. Even when we praise our self, we are implying a putting-down of our self. We don't see that, or we don't *want* to see it.

**Student:** So, if it is this "one thing," what about dying?

**Elihu:** Die! It is not this one thing! I am getting older. I am sick sometimes. One day, I will die. In the Heart Sutra, "no old age and death, and no end to old age and death." What is that? It is not a matter of anything that I am going to say to you. Clarify this! Otherwise, any words—no-self, True Nature—are just dead words. How do you face sickness, old age and death? Be sickness, old age, death. It is not separate from any of that. That is exactly what our practice is. This moment.

**Student:** Sometimes I feel I can never live up to the precepts.

**Elihu:** Notice the belief, the expectation that precepts are about your living up to them. Is there putting down? We are not going to be able to maintain the precepts; yet, over and over, we make the effort. The reason we have precepts is because it is so easy for us not to maintain them. Vowing not to elevate myself, or refrain from praising and putting down. In all sorts of ways, we break the precepts. And we make the best effort. Break the precepts. Atone. Make the best effort. At-one-ment. Being one with what is here. What does "I vow not elevate myself or put down others" mean? How do we notice over and over that we cannot maintain what we vow to do? The first aspect is to be aware, to notice what it is we are doing over and over. Do we put ourselves down about not maintaining the vow of not putting our self down? That is not the way we practice. What are we believing? It is a matter of what we are noticing. Otherwise, people make their practice into judging themselves: "This was a seventy sitting, this was an eighty sitting, a B+..." If this occurs, it is the opportunity to notice the habit of mind. The *undifferentiated Dharma* is

including “more” as our self, to include what we think of as other. Our self is not fixed/solid. Sometimes we treat our self in ways that we would not treat another person. And sometimes when we speak to another we treat them as if they are not our self. Both are significant; both are to notice. How would I speak differently if they were myself? How am I speaking? Am I treating myself in a way that I would never dare treat someone else?

**Student:** So this is like “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.”

**Elihu:** That is an aspect, yes. And treat yourself as you would want to be treated. But it is also to realize that the self that you are treating is the self of the whole universe. The self of the whole universe is nothing but your self. Sometimes it is turned around as “do not do to others what you would not want done to yourself.” That is another form. There are more active, more passive, more “positive,” more “negative” ways of expressing it. But the underlying aspect comes out of *Self-nature is inconceivably wondrous*, no-self which is our life.

**Student:** Praising your self and putting down others seems natural.

**Elihu:** That’s right. It is “natural” in a world of self and other. “Self” could be me, my group, my tribe, my pack, my gang, my nation, my whatever. So we have to have the precepts, the practice.

**Student:** It seems natural for animals, too.

**Elihu:** Primates do this; other animal groups do it, too. Animals epitomize being “animal nature.” And animals seem not to be as caught up in this thinking/feeling self-centeredness, self-centeredness which seems to be highly developed by humans, with the highly developed suffering it generates. Animals seem to have less “extra” added on to the functioning of animal nature, as far as we can tell. The differences seem to be of degrees. Yes, we all partake of animal nature, with the impermanence and pain of life. Animals, and many other beings, all share this life. Many animals certainly seem to suffer. Right now, we are fortunate to be human because human nature is an opportunity to choose to make the effort to practice, to not be caught in self-centeredness. Unfortunately, human nature is also the opportunity to use the many faculties and abilities of being human to be extremely self-centered, with very serious consequences. The consequences are serious in our intimate relations, with close friends, with family; the consequences are serious in our cities, between groups; the consequences are serious in the world, wars within nations and between nations. In the midst of these consequences of suffering and harm, we all have the wonderful opportunity of practice, of allowing the compassion of the precepts to live us, of choosing life-centered instead of self-centered.



## The Eighth Precept: Not Begrudging the Dharma Treasure/Being Generous

The eighth Grave Precept is *Refrain from begrudging the Dharma treasure*, or, stated in another way, *I vow to be generous*. Notice the difference between these two ways of saying it. The former is more “passive,” the latter more “active.” And yet, they are not so different. Seeing what begrudging is, if we refrain from begrudging, the generosity that is who we are manifests naturally.

There are wonderful Dharma books called dictionaries that state all this plainly; you do not need to use a Zen text. The dictionary definition of *begrudge* is *be reluctant to allow to give*. *Grudge* is *submit to unwillingly or give with reluctance, or be discontented at seeing something*. So, if we refrain from being reluctant to allow, refrain from being discontented at seeing something, then the seeming other side, generosity, contentment, is naturally there. Again, the dictionary defines *generous* as *unselfish, free from smallness of mind*. “Free from smallness of mind” is not from a Zen text; it is right here in an ordinary dictionary. *Generous* is also given as *bountiful, rich, strong, fertile*. See, it is clear: Free from smallness of mind. If we do not add that smallness of being caught by thoughts, then generosity is our natural functioning. It is natural, just allowing the life that we are.

The One-Mind verse for this precept is:

*Self-nature is inconceivable wondrous.  
In the all-pervading True Dharma,  
Not clinging to one form is called  
The precept of refraining from begrudging the Dharma treasure.*

Tiantong Rujing’s verse is:

*Even one phrase, one gatha, is ten thousand things.  
One Dharma, one realization is all the Buddhas and ancestors.  
From the very beginning, nothing has been withheld.*

There is active/passive in the first two ways of expressing this precept—two sides of giving/receiving—and yet, nothing has been withheld; no one is withholding. *Not clinging to one form...* On the side of being able to receive—being able to accept: If we are attached to our idea about the way things should be, the way people we relate to should be, the way the world we are in the midst of should be, what we are willing to accept, then we are limiting our self, clinging to one form. That much we have killed our life; that much we have killed the life of all-pervading True Dharma. When we deny what we do not like, we are denying the Dharma Treasure; we are denying this, our life. We even deny when we think such and such is not included in the True Dharma, the True Treasure, the True Buddha, the True Life.

One of my teachers, Soen Nakagawa Roshi, would lead us in morning stretching exercises accompanied by the verse: “All is revealed; all is realized; all is actualized.” It is not something hidden or mysterious. *All* is revealed. This is always the basic point of our practice: It is not something new that we need to get. All is revealed, as it is. From morning till night, we are constantly meeting the Dharma, meeting our True Face. We get on the bus and pay our fare, and there, we have had True Dharmic transaction: The Treasure, right here; the Teaching, right here; our life... except that we cling to certain forms and cling to the ways

we want certain things to be, so we miss what is here. Our practice is to enable us not to miss what is always here; to appreciate what is always here, nurturing, supporting; to embody the generosity of life.

Appreciate the many different ways of expressing life—the wonder that is life—that with which we resonate, forms of teaching, forms of practice, of being functioning right here. Does it have to be a certain way before we participate in it, before we appreciate it, before we share ourselves? (I am using “it” is a broad sense of person, event, circumstances, or even just the cup we drink from.) When we wash ourselves in the morning, rubbing the soap, washing our face, right here, life is offering—here is the Dharma being expressed. *In the all-pervading True Dharma, not clinging to one form...* Notice where we are clinging, where we are believing our clinging—our conditions of what we will accept. ... *is called the precept of refraining from begrudging*—refraining from, being reluctant to allow—the *Dharma Treasure*. So many interesting ways. Think of what you consider important/not important, what you consider your practice/not your practice. All day, phrase after phrase, moment after moment, action after action, our life is being shared. It is not necessary for the person who is sharing Dharma with us to “know” it—in fact “knowing” may be a hindrance. There is no one who is giving and no one who is receiving. If we truly share life, we are just here. Of course, we all get caught, so that is our practice effort, our opportunity. *From the very beginning, nothing has been withheld.* This is basic: This is our life, our practice, our session: To appreciate all that is being offered; to offer ourselves to all that we come in contact with.

**Student:** Do we have to do it all the time? How about with money?

**Elihu:** None of us do it all the time. For instance, it is very hard to be able to truly see that all the money in the world is mine, that I get whatever I need—not what I *think* I need—but what I truly need. *In the all-pervading True Dharma—nothing has been withheld*—how could it be anything other than that? We are all far from that in many ways, and therefore our practice is to notice what and how we are believing. That does not mean that we do not make choices; at the same time, notice what we believe, what we assume. For some, money is especially difficult. This precept doesn’t necessarily have anything to do with money; it is *refrain from begrudging the Dharma Treasure*. *Dharma Treasure* means all sorts of things: teaching, our self, our life; being present is the Dharma Treasure. So there is *one phrase, one gatha is ten thousand things*—ten thousand things meaning all of life—*one Dharma, one realization...* but at the same time *I vow to be generous. Nothing has been withheld*; withholding is saying that the only way I am going to do such and such is if these conditions are met. We all set conditions—fine—but if we get trapped by our conditions, then that much our conditions cut off this *all-pervading True Dharma* that is our life; that much, we have cut ourselves off from our life.

**Student:** So we do not have to figure it out?

**Elihu:** That is right. We do not have to figure it out. Some of us make it a basic condition in our life that we have to figure out many things, and things have to make sense, before we are willing to live, be present, participate. The way I will participate—be present—is by figuring it out. Unfortunately, it doesn’t work. We begrudge ourselves; we are reluctant to allow ourselves. It is nice to see it in the dictionary. Unselfish is generous; not clinging, free from the smallness of mind.

**Student:** What do we have to do?

**Elihu:** It is fully participating—fully functioning—and fully accepting. That may be hard, if we want to go to one side or the other. It is not being inactive. We tend to think it out on one side or the other; that—one or the other—is the dichotomy of dualistic thinking that in and of itself cuts us off, makes it impossible to live. Experience this moment, body-mind. Being bodily present, notice emotion-thought.

**Student:** What is the difference between experiencing and accepting?

**Elihu:** If you do not accept, you are not going to allow experience. Are you willing to experience not accepting? Experience bodily not accepting.

**Student:** What if I don't like it?

**Elihu:** Liking or disliking is irrelevant. Liking is thought-about; disliking is thought-about. That is “making conditions,” clinging to one form. This I like; that I don't like; this is O.K.; that is not O.K. What aspects of ourselves are we not willing to appreciate—not even share—because they do not fit what we have determined they should? Notice not liking “thought”, experience bodily not liking. Notice liking, experience liking.

**Student:** So if someone practices, they will no longer be stingy?

**Elihu:** What are you calling “stingy”? Notice your thoughts. We often assume things about how others are, or how we are. There are a number of French people at my daughter's school, and I have noticed that they greet each other by kissing on both cheeks. It struck me, because it is not something I expect, and yet, for them, it is the common form. One form I might think is O.K.; the other one, someone might say, “Well, that's not an O.K. form.” One of the things I was told when I came to Illinois is that Midwesterners don't touch each other. What is O.K.? Our whole life is just moment by moment. It is the Dharma—the Truth, the Teaching, the Truth of what *life* is—being expressed. All is revealed as it is; all is realized as it is. It is just that we are caught up in our delusions and attachments, and unfortunately we do not see this, and we suffer. That is our practice: To notice our beliefs, emotion-thoughts, our habits of reacting; and be bodily present as the beliefs, as the reaction. It is practice to make the effort; to know how to make the effort, which is what we are all doing here together.

**Student:** Who said that about money?

**Elihu:** Soen Nakagawa Roshi said, to paraphrase, “All the money in the world is mine; when I go to the bank, I get whatever I need.” There is a preface to that statement. If you are a Zen student, you talk about such words as “oneness.” If all is “one,” then all the money is yours! It is nothing but “all one.” Whatever you get is what you need right now. What does that mean? What do you need? And what do you need to do? Making the effort does not take away from accepting as it is this moment; accepting does not take away from saying, “Yes, there are things that need to be done.” Yes, go out to get a job if you don't have money, or help hungry people. At the same time, what is it that I don't have enough of? What is it that is not enough, that is withheld? If “all the money in the world is mine,” who is this “I”? Be careful not to be caught on only one side of “everything is O.K.—I don't have to do anything” and “I am going to do something to change that.” Yes, “all is one”; yes, we have to do what is called for right now. It is not, “The poor are supposed to be poor!” Not anything like that! What is our own sharing and our own accepting? If we begrudge, we begrudge our willingness to see what is being shared with us. Being

generous is being willing to accept life. It is important to see this. Otherwise we tend to focus on the literal. Throughout these talks, I have been encouraging you to see the precepts not as literal rules about how one should be, but as our *practice, our life*. How does this precept shine a spotlight, how does it clarify a facet of practice? They are different facets, different aspects, different perspectives on our practice. How does this remind us to notice what we are doing, what we are believing, what is getting in the way of this “all is revealed”?

**Student:** And then what do we do?

**Elihu:** Find what is appropriate. There is the rule that we do not talk during sesshin. During samu—in work—we speak what is necessary, what is appropriate. The speaking is in the midst of maintaining non-speaking. How do we maintain non-speaking and yet, when it is appropriate and necessary, speak? Being generous is even being generous to our food, which means accepting our food’s expressing the Dharma in our mouth. Being generous is not begrudging the Dharma treasure of being present, being alive, not clinging to one form. The food that we are chewing up is expressing the Dharma, its life, right here, sharing with us, if we are present. No formula. Apart from ongoing effort, ongoing presence, ongoing practice, there is no formula. Exactly what we need to do, moment by moment, is to be here, to see the “smallness of mind.” Sometimes the smallness of mind would make us feel, “Well, I have to give to them, because if I do not, they are going to think badly of me, and I can’t have anyone think badly of me.” What is true may be that we should not give to them. To be trapped by words is to say, “Well, I heard the precepts, and the way I am thinking is the same word, so it means the same thing.” No. Our practice is being present, seeing what is called for now.

**Student:** What if what we give is not accepted?

**Elihu:** We notice our fear, the basic difficulty of being fear, bodily fear and pain, in giving and not being accepted. I call and invite them, and they say “No, thank you, I’m busy,” or just “I can’t do that.” Or “I do not want to – do not call again!” Painful! Do we set conditions that the only way I can do this is when the answer is yes? Are the only experiences I am willing to accept those that fit? Our practice is here, our life. How do we be this? This is the Dharma being expressed—our life expressed. This does not mean being masochistic or not making choices. In the midst of making choices, in the midst of preferences, there is only the Dharma, every moment, being shared. And the Dharma is being shared as we say, “No, thank you, I won’t have any of that.”

## The Ninth Precept: Refraining from Self-Centered Anger

Sitting, we discover a secret that we may not want to admit to ourselves, much less to anyone else. The secret is: *I like to be angry*. I do not mean just the rush or the energy of anger. *I*, whoever I think *I* am, likes to be angry. Anger makes *I* all the more *I*. The ninth Bodhisattva precept is *refraining from anger*—or, to put it another way—*vowing to practice with self-centered anger*. The phrase “self-centered anger” is the key: Anger is by its very nature self-centered; being self-centered by its very nature makes anger.

The One-Mind verse for this precept is:

*Self-Nature is inconceivably wondrous.  
In the Dharma of no-self,  
Not postulating a self is called the precept of refraining from anger.*

Tiantong Rujing’s verse is:

*Not proceeding, not retreating, not real, not unreal,  
There is an ocean of bright clouds, there is an ocean of sublime clouds  
When there is no anger.*

The life that we live is subtle. Saying, “Oh, there is no self and therefore there is no one to get angry” or “There is no arising self” is of little use. It is just theory. The practice of this precept is being with self-centered anger, noticing anger arising, noticing thoughts and being bodily experiencing. It is noticing self created as anger arises, self and not self: There is no self *in here*, and there is no not self *out there*; that is all a fiction that we create. But, because we live in it, because so much of the world we live assumes those beliefs are valid, our practice is, little by little, to notice what, how, we are believing this and to rest in this body-mind-world moment. This is self-nature that is inconceivably wondrous, that is not dependent upon what we think of it, that is not dependent upon our thoughts of self and not self, not dependent upon self and other. To express the ninth precept in this way, talking about anger, is straightforward. Because anger is so quick, as we all know, sometimes so automatic, it is necessary to work with it as it arises or as we notice we are in the midst of it, seemingly over and over. Please notice if you make a new rule about “not becoming angry.” Can you do that? If anger is really gone, wonderful. I do not mean hiding anger, denying anger. If during a circumstance you do not live up to some ideal, even the ideal of “not becoming angry,” do you become angry about being angry? That is just self, making the anger into something real, making a *self* that is angry. So how do we work with this? It is to see *I like* to get angry. You may say, “No, I don’t *like* to get angry—I *hate* it!” But yet “*I*” like getting angry, because getting angry is based on the way I think the world should be, the way I think it shouldn’t be; what I am willing to accept and what I am not willing to accept. What I require of “others and myself” can’t help but lead to anger, as long as we are attached to the requirement, as long as we believe the separation, the duality. And we do! Practice is not setting up a new way to be, “you have to get rid of that; no, you should not believe that; you should believe this alternative instead.” That is not very helpful or effective practice.

*In the Dharma of no-self* . . . *Dharma* means the teaching, but also “in the universe where there has never been a self”—there is not a self; there cannot be a self: There is no-self; there is *only* no-self. This no-self of self-nature is inconceivably wondrous. This is always true. *Not postulating a self is called the precept of refraining from anger*. Of course, if we truly do not postulate a self, anger would never be a

problem; and not only anger, but also the results of anger: Rage and vengeance. In a sutra, this precept is phrased as *Refrain from anger and do not reject apologies*. Not only do we *get* angry; sometimes we like to *stay* angry. The result of that we see between individuals, between families and groups—even nations. All because we believe we are a fixed self, others are fixed selves, other things have self. “So if I can get that, it is good; if she gets it and I don’t get it, it is bad; if she is getting more than I am getting, I should get angry at her or whoever is giving it to her.” So how do we work with that? It doesn’t help to just say *refrain from anger*. It doesn’t help, because anger is so insidious and poisonous. It poisons by making the self all the more self. That is how we get poisoned. It is almost funny that making the self *more* is what is actually making our life *less*. How can we work with anger? How do we practice with self-centered anger? The first step has to be to see it, acknowledge it, not necessarily to anyone else, but at least for our self. To notice what we accept or believe or expect. Notice it in thought and in being bodily present, in this physical-sensory tension as the upset that “she got it and I didn’t get it,” “I got passed over and she got promoted,” “they’ve got that and I don’t have that,” and “he said that to me.” To notice and be “he said that to *me!* How could he say that to *me?* After all that I have done for him, how could he say that to me?”

Anger is one of the three poisons. Anger is a form of pushing away: I want to push *that* away. Whether it is “that” experience or “that” event, I am angry because I don’t want it to be. *Not proceeding, not retreating, not real, not unreal*. Not proceeding, not making progress, not gaining, not retreating, not losing: That is what we are saying. Let us see if we can explore this further together, because this is a very important aspect of the practice. It is one of the three poisons which poison our life. What do you have to say . . . or have none of you discovered any anger? (*Laughter*)

**Student:** What about feeling vulnerable?

**Elihu:** That is it: *I* don’t want to feel vulnerability. Just as anger makes *I* all the more “solid,” there is also the fear of *I* feeling “less solid,” vulnerable. Sometimes this arises in accepting apologies, sometimes in apologizing. Practice is being vulnerable to life—discovering that being life is being completely vulnerable, which is being invulnerable—being life which can include, accept, embrace all of life-death.

**Student:** Sometimes when I hear the news on the radio, I find that I am angry and upset. All I want to do is turn it off.

**Elihu:** Wanting to turn the radio off, there is grief and hurt from what you are hearing. Be willing to feel that hurt, but also be willing to say “OK, I don’t need any more of this right now” and turn it off. It is *not* a matter of masochism; the radio is here. To turn it off can be acknowledging being vulnerable. Being angry is running away from that grief rather than experiencing it. Because I don’t want to be that vulnerability, I want to smash the radio, or smash someone. Being with someone venting their anger, at times practice is to be bodily present, experiencing. Again, this does not mean being masochistic; we need to choose when it is appropriate to accept verbal venting. This does *not* mean, once someone is spewing anger at me, that I need to continue to allow that; it might be best to say, “Excuse me” and leave. In rare cases choosing to accept physical violence is a very special practice—there are examples of civil disobedience, working with violence and torture; for most of us it is best to remove our self from such circumstances if possible.

**Student:** So it is finding what is appropriate?

**Elihu:** Right, it is our practice to find what is appropriate. There are no fixed rules. At times, anger from someone else results in my responding with anger. It does not even have to be anger from others: Sometimes it is just a slight, the tiniest thing, and yet to me it is a major insult; or vice versa. It is no use saying, “I (or she) shouldn't feel it, because there is no real self, so there is nothing that can harm.” That is nonsense.

**Student:** My anger is a form of violence?

**Elihu:** Yes. Sometimes it is very hard to acknowledge or even notice that because we take for granted that it is valid—it is me! It is the way the world is supposed to be, the way I *think* it should be. This precept is a vital aspect of practice in the midst of self-centeredness. Sometimes we might not even perceive that we are being loud or yelling, whereas for the other person it might seem that way. And to begin to notice how it is for others, we have to let go of our own self-centered view—our self-centered way of being in the world. That is often difficult.

**Student:** What about when others do not accept an apology?

**Elihu:** Are you indignant that she wasn't accepting of your apology? Are you not going to be accepting of her not being accepting of your apology?

**Student:** Yes.

**Elihu:** That is the opportunity to be our non-acceptance; to sit in the midst of our anger; to sit in that boiling stew. We say that hell is fire, the hellfire of anger is a boiling stew that we sit in. We don't have to go any place else for hell. Right here! When we sit in the midst of anger, we are in hell, literally and figuratively. It is being here and including this; then see what to do next. We may decide that we do not have to protect our self so much. Because we can include this moment we do not have to protect our self from certain verbal/situational slights. It does not mean getting our self shot or stabbed or beaten—that isn't what we are talking about—or even being spewed on verbally. It is including an insult or a slight and responding appropriately, rather than out of the self-centered barrier that is always fighting and pushing away anything that doesn't fit *my* view, the way *I* want it, that doesn't respect me. When I *need* to be respected because I am *separate* from everything else, that is me *proceeding, gaining* as opposed to *retreating, losing*. “No proceeding, no retreating, no gain, no loss.” That is the Heart Sutra: “Without loss, without gain.” No gain, no loss; saying the words is not much use—being the practice is our effort. If I don't get the promotion and he does, what happens, truthfully? Saying, “Oh, I am so happy for you, Bob, you got that, and you know you really deserve it” while thinking, “That S.O.B! He hasn't done anything,” and so on. First, our work is with what is true. That is one of the aspects of sitting. Over and over, we face what we have not wanted to face.

**Student:** You talked about how we get angry, and then we can work with it, and then we feel vulnerable often and work with it. It seems like, for me, that the vulnerability happens not after but before the anger. I feel vulnerable, and then I get ticked, and then I don't feel vulnerable anymore.

**Elihu:** So when you get ticked, you do not feel vulnerable; not feeling vulnerable, you get to avoid this moment of life, of your life. We do not like to feel vulnerable; sitting is feeling vulnerable. Opening to the present moment means *vulnerable*, because we are allowing what arises. Instead of saying, “I only take things that fit through this little hole, only fit into the limits of these ideas and beliefs,” in sitting you say “I am this moment.” All of this, as it is.

**Student:** What about past incidents?

**Elihu:** Remembering what happened back then right now is being right now. And right now includes remembering. Remembering is the act of right now. There is no “back then”: It is remembering right now. And it is the way it is right now, as you remember. When you think it is him or her or that thing, right now they are just here, and it is not him, her, that, but right now, your life. Noticing being caught up in thoughts, opening to being bodily present, body-mind present.



## The Tenth Precept: Refraining from Reviling the Three Treasures

The tenth and last Grave Precept of the sixteen Bodhisattva Precepts is to refrain from reviling the Three Treasures: Not to speak ill of the truth, the teachings, or those who practice the teachings, no matter what the form of these teachings might be. This is realizing and actualizing True Nature; it is not different. The Three Treasures traditionally are Buddha (Truth/unity), Dharma (Teaching/diversity), Sangha (those who practice the Teaching/harmony of unity and diversity.) It can be expressed in many ways.

The One-Mind Verse for this precept is:

*Self-nature is inconceivably wondrous.  
In the one Dharma,  
Not giving rise to the dualistic view of Sentient Beings and Buddhas,  
Is called the Precept of refraining from reviling the Three Treasures.*

When we hold to the belief of a fixed, separate “me”—some sentient being, some deluded being, some Buddha, some “self,” someone I have a problem with—we have separated. Separating is reviling; separating is killing life; no difference if it is the life of our self or of others. If we give rise to—but more than give rise to: maintain, make solid—the notion of separate sentient beings and Buddha, the notion that there is something “sacred” and something else “not sacred,” something perfect and something else not perfect, not good enough; or we are caught up in reacting and rejecting—once we have made solid that way of seeing, we have reviled the Three Treasures. We have reviled, spoken ill of, who we truly are: Buddha. There are no sentient beings apart from Buddha, no Buddha apart from sentient beings.

The “Song of Zazen” by Hakuin Zenji begins

*Sentient beings are primarily all Buddhas.  
It is like ice and water.  
Apart from water, where can we find ice?  
Outside sentient beings, where are there Buddhas?*

Even the self-centered dream is nothing but *inconceivably wondrous self-nature*. Just because we believe it, it is a self-centered dream; because we revile with a self-centered dream we give rise to the notion of sentient beings. That is where our practice has to be: To see how we are constantly giving rise to this notion of here or there, separating our self from—pushing away from—our self, refusing to embrace this, our life as it is. In the midst of embracing we make choices; making choices in the midst of embracing is ongoing practice. True-nature is no-nature; no-nature is self-nature, inconceivably wondrous. Because it is fundamentally who we are that we can practice. That is why we can notice “caught in the self-centered dream, holding to self-centered thoughts.”

Two of my teachers—Soen Nakagawa Roshi and Charlotte Joko Beck—have spoken about a practice of *Namu Dai Bosa*: “Being one with the Great Bodhisattva.” Our practice is being able to bow down to—be one with—whatever is here, whatever is encountered, whatever comes into our life, even whatever we think is separate and difficult to be with. Practice is *Namu Dai Bosa*, recognizing that we are One with *this*, this which is the Great Bodhisattva, the Great Buddha; being *this*—even this angry person, even this

terrible situation, even this tremendous mess that is convoluted, complicated, hurtful, painful. It is easy to say *Namu Dai Bosa* with a wonderful sunset, with a beautiful sky or even a cold, snowy morning. Later, when it is slushy, muddy, dirty, gray, sticky, chilly, how do we say *Namu Dai Bosa*? Saying *Namu Dai Bosa*, being *Namu Dai Bosa*. The practice of being *Namu Dai Bosa* is a practice of including, being, what we do not want to be, what we *think* is not part of us; being in the midst of reactions, in the midst of thoughts “this is not me; I am angry about this, sad about this, upset about this”; “they can’t do that to me.” *In the one Dharma, not giving rise to the dualistic view of Sentient Beings and Buddhas . . .* Even the rise of the dualistic view of Sentient Beings and Buddhas is nothing but the one Dharma. How do we not give rise to the view that has arisen? This is practice: Not giving rise to the views that have arisen, that are indeed here. Having views of Sentient Beings and Buddhas, not giving rise to them.

This is the tenth Grave Precept. It brings us back full-circle to the beginning of the Precepts. The sixteen Bodhisattva Precepts begin with the Three Treasures: Buddha, Dharma, Sangha; then the Three Pure Precepts: Refraining from Harming, Doing Good, Doing Good for Others; finally, the ten Grave Precepts. The tenth brings us back to the beginning. All the precepts are contained in each; it is all just a circle, all just a spiral, many in the midst of one. It is always this, *self-nature is inconceivably wondrous*, which is our life. So how do we practice in the midst of this inconceivably wondrous life? Practice is being who we are. Practice is not that there is something wrong with us, that we are damaged, and if we only do it better, we finally make it better or get to what is good. That is exactly the dualistic view. No—there never was such a thing.

Tiantong Rujing’s verse is:

*To expound the Dharma with this body is the refuge of the world.  
Its virtue returns to the ocean of omniscience.  
It is inexpressible.  
Wholeheartedly revere and serve it.*

It is interesting to use the word *revere*. Traditionally, revering may be an activity of bowing, offering such as incense, or food offering like rice. It is giving reverence to our life, which is this incense, this piece of rice, this bow. The form of “not speaking ill of the truth, the teachings and those who practice the teachings” means not speaking ill of anyone, because everyone is nothing but the truth. We are not meeting anything but the truth all day. Everyone is practicing the teaching as best they can. Sometimes, it seems they are doing it very clumsily; they don’t know that they are doing it; they wouldn’t even like to hear any such thing, but we are all together, practicing, sometimes seeming to “struggle,” in this mystery of being alive. How do I live, and what is living? We don’t know what we are doing; we are just doing it. Can we clarify our practice? Saying it clumsily, how do I be who I am? All the ten thousand dharmas are just *I am*. On a more ordinary level, *How can I take care of this suffering? How can I avoid what I don’t want? How can I have what I do want—what will be joyful?* Joy is exactly our life. Unfortunately, we often think that the joyfulness of this inexpressibly wondrous life that we are will only come from something outside, only when I have certain things, or attain certain things. Lots of people think that is the only way. There is struggle and strife. But in the midst of that, all of them are doing nothing but practicing. Can we revere that aspect, that practice, in the midst of doing what needs to be done, seeing that they are struggling in the midst of *self-nature is inconceivably wondrous*, somehow attempting to be where they are? It is because we *are* this self-nature that is inconceivably wondrous that we are able to struggle, attain, realize, be this.

“No matter what the form of these teachings might be”—is the hardest, because we get so easily trapped by form. This is in essence what we have to work with. Because we know form as form, we may not know that the only way form is form is because form is no-form; form is no-nature. This is our practice. Not reviling, not getting caught in separating sacred and secular, special and ordinary: This is this precept. Lots of interesting words; but putting the words aside, we have to make this alive for our self—manifest our life. This is practice.

**Student:** What is “not giving rise?”

**Elihu:** “Not giving rise” means, when it arises, not making it solid, not holding on to it, not believing it, not being caught by it. Often, we do not want to see that we are creating the world of others and self. We are saying, “This is not me; this is not Buddha; this is not good; this is not part of the truth.” Not giving rise means if it arises we do not give it rise. It is not a matter of the words; it is seeing what and how to practice. Even giving rise is the one Dharma—it can’t be but the one Dharma. There is no blame unless we add it; blame is what we add. Blame is giving rise. Criticizing our self—saying I am not OK, saying that that verse is telling me I am not OK—is making our self not OK. Words are nothing but words, and yet, they are much more, much too much.

**Student:** Can you talk some more about the One-Mind verse?

**Elihu:** (*Rereads verse.*) Even that is just added on. There is an expression: “We use mud to clean off mud.” This is all mud, but the mud is nothing but this one Dharma. Practice effort is mud: It was truly never needed. And it is nothing but the Great Bodhisattva; it is not mud at all, and it is very necessary. It is our ongoing continuous practice, our ongoing continuous life, the ongoing continuous Dharma; ongoing continuous has nothing to do with such things as enlightened or not enlightened, being awakened or not.

**Student:** What good are precepts?

**Elihu:** Precepts are expressions and manifestations of our life. Unfortunately, we forget who we are. As a way of supporting ongoing practice, clarifying aspects of life, helping us to notice what we are doing—what gets in the way of our being who we are—we have precepts. Because we are “breaking” them, we are separating, rejecting. All the precepts—nonkilling, nonstealing, ... not being angry—are our life. Being caught in the self-centered dream, being caught in sentient beings and Buddhas, being in the midst of that is our life—that is why we have the precepts.

**Student:** The precepts as you discuss them seem to be stated in terms of refraining. It’s not this, not that.

**Elihu:** I say “nonkilling” instead of “not killing.” And yet, we kill. We kill our self; we kill our life. And yet, who we are is “nonkilling.” The precepts are descriptions of our life, facets of the inconceivably wondrous self-nature jewel, aspects of who we are. This can be turned into dualism, criticism and judgment, refraining or acting. Most of us humans make a lot of judgments and criticisms. It is separation, dualism. Sacred/not sacred; ordinary/special; sentient being/Buddha; ordinary person/saint; saved/not saved; heathen/true believer—it doesn’t make a difference what tradition. That is what we humans do. *In the one Dharma . . .* It doesn’t say in the one *Buddhist* Dharma as opposed to non-Buddhist. This is the

One-Mind precept. We are nothing but inconceivably wondrous self-nature. Unfortunately, lots of people get their “sacredness” by making other people “not sacred.”

The verses of One-Mind precept all begin with the line *Self-nature is inconceivably wondrous. Not giving rise...* is about seeing ourselves giving rise, and seeing how we work with giving rise. When one takes ordination in the Zen tradition—lay or clerical—one receives the precepts. As I said, some practitioners take one precept at a time and work with it for a day, a week, a month. For example, what is nonkilling? The first thing we see is that we cannot go even one day, maybe not even one hour, without in some ways so-called breaking the precept. One hour—sometimes it is even hard to go five minutes. Working with and formally practicing with the precepts is lifetime practice.

**Student:** What is a sentient being?

**Elihu:** Literally, it means any being who is sentient, who is aware. Humans are sentient beings. Who else? Many would say all animal life is sentient. Who else? “Sentient being” is a phrase in Buddhist tradition. There are four great vows of the Zen tradition. The first—*Shujo mu hen sei gan do*—is often translated as “sentient beings are numberless—I vow to save them.” Numberless sentient beings is our life. All that we meet from morning to night is our life—notice if you are caught up in ideas of human, animal, tree, rock, natural, artificial, human construct. This is sentient beings in endless forms, this endless dimension universal life revealed right here now. So I vow to save what is always this inconceivably wondrous self-nature; nevertheless, this requires my exertion of ongoing practice. Being one practice, being present, being ordinary, experience and appreciate our wonderful life.