The Third of the Ten Grave Prohibitory Precepts: Not Stealing

Several of our members here at the Decorah Zen Center are preparing to participate in the Jukai, or lay ordination ceremony at Ryumonji in November. During the ceremony, ordainees receive the sixteen Bodhisattva vows, which include the Ten Grave Precepts. So far, we have discussed the precept not to kill and the four precepts regarding right speech. This evening, I would like to focus our discussion on the precept not to steal.

First, let's look at what the Buddha had to say about our relationship with the material world which is the focus of this precept.

Most of us do not consider ourselves to be thieves. If someone were to accuse us of theft, we would be shocked, offended, and probably defensive. We think that we have this precept easily covered, and do not give it much consideration.

But there are more subtle implications to this precept than that of simple gross theft. Within this precept, we are instructed not to possess anything that ought to belong to others. Additionally, we are not to take anything that is not freely given. These two additional instructions penetrate more deeply into our relationship with our world and its resources.

This precept addresses our relationship and interaction with the material world, the stuff that passed through our hands and bodies every day. The function of the precepts is not merely to dictate how we are to act, not a list of forbidden actions. The precepts are a guide for our liberation. The precepts are there to free us from all that has the potential to separate us from an intimate relationship with the moment, and how we relate to the stuff of our lives has a very grave

potential to introduce such separation when we begin to place labels on our world such as “mine,” “ours,” “yours” and “theirs.”

While we are the descendants of the Buddha and the living generation of a linage that traces itself back to six generations before the Buddha himself, we are also the descendants of the industrial revolution which has made the energy of the earth available to us in ways that were not even imaginable in the time of the Buddha.

Bill McKibben notes in the book Eaarth” that in the early eighteenth century, cheap fossil fuel suddenly became available to us. One barrel of oil yields as much energy as twenty-five thousand hours of human manual labor – more than a decade of human labor per barrel. The average American uses twenty-five barrels of oil each year, which is like finding three hundred years of free labor annually. And that’s just oil; there’s coal and gas, too. We have at our disposal machines that make us hundreds of times more powerful than our forebears

This is a description of our moment:

- Americans consume their average body weight (120 pounds) every day in materials extracted and processed from farms, mines, rangelands and forests.
- Americans have used up more resources than everyone who ever lived on the earth before. In an average lifetime, each American consumes a reservoir of water (43 million gallons, including personal, industrial, and agricultural uses) and a small tanker full of oil (2,500 barrels).
- The 102 million households of the United States currently contain and consume more stuff than all other households throughout history put together.

- If we divide the Earth's biologically productive land and sea by the number of people on the planet, the average use is five and a half acres per person, with nothing set aside for all other species. Five years ago, the average world citizen used seven acres as his or her ecological footprint. That is over 30% more than what nature can generate. In other words, it would take 1.3 years to generate what humanity uses in one year. The average America has a thirty acre footprint. If all people lived like this, we would need five more planets to supply our energy and material usage.

Given that we have access to this one planet, can we say that we are not taking that which is not freely given? That we do not own that which should belong to others? So how are we to honor the precept not to steal?

I would like to turn to the writings of David Loy to help us lay the foundation of a Buddhist perspective of our current relationship with the earth and its resources.

According to Shakyamuni, the cause of our individual dukkha is tanha, usually translated as "craving", but more literally as "thirst." Nothing we drink can ever assuage our tanha, because that thirst is due to emptiness at the core of our being. Our thirst to establish a self or an ego is bottomless because our sense of self is an ungroundable construct. Notice, however, that the second noble truth does not identify our problem as groundlessness. The problem is "thirst" - not the emptiness at the core of our being but our incessant efforts to fill that hole up, because we experience it as a sense of lack that must be

filled up. The problem is not that I am unreal but that I keep trying to make myself real in ways that never work.

The specific ways we try to make ourselves feel more real are culturally conditioned. Traditionally, religion fulfilled the role by telling us what our lack is and how to resolve it. In the modern world, we are inclined to seek this-worldly solutions to our sense of lack. Some of those solutions are individualistic (fame, romance, personal power and wealth), other more collective (political party affiliation, nationalism and others ideologies).

But the Buddha's teachings offer a radically different approach to solving the problem of this thirst. Happiness cannot be gained by satisfying desire, for our thirst means there is no end to it. Happiness can be achieved only by transforming desire. There is a basic level of human need for food, shelter and medical care that should be met for everyone, but the Buddhist perspective is that we are otherwise mistaken to strive for an economic solution to human unhappiness.

The Four Noble Truths can be read as a medical diagnosis. There is suffering caused by desire or craving. Liberation for oppressive and deluded consumerism is possible. One can choose to remain sick with the disease or one can choose liberation and healing.

We are going to remain consumers; it is a question of what type of consumers we choose to be. Are we going to consume goods and resources in an effort to attempt to fill the emptiness, the sense of lack we experience, or are we going to consume in such a way that allows other humans as well as other species to live and share this planet?

Ethically acceptable choices for liberation from consumerism are those that bring personal and environmental healing. Ethically unacceptable actions are those that perpetuate the socially and environmentally destructive activities of consumerism.

The Buddha has provided us with a prescription, a set of skillful means, to cure us of our thirst to fill our sense of lack with more material goods.

- First is the precept not to steal, not to possess anything that ought to belong to others, not to take that which is not freely given.
- Secondly, the Buddha encourages us to cultivate a sense of contentment. In the Buddha's final teaching, he listed the eight awarenesses of great people. The second of these awarenesses is contentment. The Buddha said, "Monks, if you want to be free from suffering, you should contemplate knowing how much is enough. By knowing it, you are in the place of enjoyment and peacefulness. If you know how much is enough you are content even when you sleep on the ground. If you don't know, you are discontent even when you are in heaven. You can feel rich even if you are poor. You can feel poor even if you have much wealth. You may be constantly compelled by the five sense desires and pitied by those who know how much is enough. This is called 'to know how much is enough."
- Thirdly, we are instructed to cultivate a sense of gratitude. Gratitude comes from a place of contentment. Gratitude is the simple and profound feeling of being thankful. We can cultivate a deep sense of gratitude by recognizing the countless ways in which we have benefited from others. Our being here is a

testimony to the kindness of our parents, families, teachers and communities. Our lives depend on the imagination, intelligence and skill of countless beings to provide the food, clothing, shelter and energy of our daily use. In recognizing that we could not make it through the day without the overwhelming support from the sentient beings around us, we plant the seeds of gratitude in our thoughts. To practice in this way is to train in the profound realization of emptiness, our interdependent nature. It is to cultivate every day the sense of gratitude, the happiest of all attitudes. Unhappiness and gratitude simply cannot exist in the same moment.

- Finally, the Buddha instructs us to cultivate generosity. Just as gratitude is founded on our sense of contentment, generosity is grounded in our sense of gratitude. I am generous when I believe that right now, right here, in this form and this place, I am myself being given what I need. Generosity requires that we relinquish something, and this is impossible if we do not feel gratitude for what we have.

These teaching are all quite beneficial in guiding us toward a healthy relationship with the material world on the relative level. Ultimately, what the Buddha's teachings put into question is our concept of ownership, that anything, any entity, any thought or idea can really be said to be mine.

Over 35 years ago, my husband and I bought twenty acres of land. We signed the deed with the usual sense that we now owned this property. It was ours. But as I have lived on the land, I have come to appreciate that this is an illusion of my own making. The deed to the

land does give me certain rights as well as certain responsibilities for the period of time during which I hold the deed. But in a broader perspective, the land is not ownable. This land had a history of its own, quite independent of my having anything to do with it. At times it was under water, part of an ocean. This is clear from the fossils we have found in the streambed. At times it was covered in glacial ice. During my lifetime, it has been a mix of pasture and woods. We have changed the land during our stay. We have added buildings, a well, an orchard, a garden, a flock of sheep. Things useful to our stay here, but ultimately, we are only guests, only passersby. There is no real sense that we have truly owned this land. It is only hubris and shortsightedness that lead us to think that this land is ours.

Over the past 37 years, I have also raised children, and as a parent, I would say that I "have" a daughter and a son. But just like the land, children are not ownable. As Kahlil Gibran says in the first stanza of his poem entitled: *On Children*.

Your Children are not your children.

They are sons and daughters of Life longing for itself.

They come through you but are not from you.

And though they are with you, yet they belong not to you.

As it is with land and as it is with children, so it ultimately is with everything in our universe. We are privileged to witness and partake of what life longing for itself at this moment is presenting to us, but it is never ours ultimately because there is no real entity we can identify as a self. In the earliest records of the Buddha's teaching he says that

thinking that anything is you, yours or yourself causes suffering through attachment. We are encouraged to practice saying: “This body is not me, this body is not mine, this body is not myself. This feeling is not me, this feeling is not mine, this feeling is not myself. This thought is not me, this thought is not mine, this thought is not myself.” The Buddha does not try to prove in some fundamental way the truth of nonself, he just points us to a practical means to investigate this for ourselves.

In his book “Unlimiting Mind,” Andrew Olendzki says:

Among the things he (the Buddha) noticed is that while some of our best qualities, such as caring, nurturing and protecting, are directed to the things we feel we possess or own, it is also the case that our worst tendencies, rooted in greed, hatred and delusion, also organize around whatever is taken to be “mine” or possessed by “me.” It can be a useful point of view in the short term or from a narrow perspective, but in the end the self is the source of more harm than good.

The Buddha offers another perspective: Dependent origination provides a model for understanding the profound interrelationship between all things, but it is a model that does not allow for a self. Nothing belongs to anybody; nobody has any self to protect; we all just co-arise with one another…

Real transformation comes from uprooting the deeply embedded reflex of projecting ownership upon experience (“this is me, this is mine, this is what I am”) and seeing instead as an impermanent, impersonal interdependent arising of phenomena.

So on the relative level, the Buddha gives us the precept not to steal, not to own anything that ought to belong to others and not to take anything that is not freely given. We are encouraged to cultivate the

qualities of contentment, gratitude and generosity, all of which move us further along the path toward realizing our true interdependent nature. But on the ultimate level, the Buddha calls us to investigate the very concept of ownership. This results in a subtle shift toward our relationship with the world. With the profound realization of nonself, we are able to see that all the tools that pass through our hands during our lifetime, the homes we live in, the children we parent, are an opportunity for us to share afresh each moment in the unfolding of universe, as a guest of universe and also an impermanent participant and steward of its gifts as life arises longing for itself.

Resources:

Loy, David, *The Great Awakening, a Buddhist Social Theory,* Wisdom Publications, 2003.

McKibben, Bill, *Eaarth*, Times Books, 2010.

Olendzki, Andrew, *Unlimiting Mind*, Wisdom Publications, 2010.