

The Final Two Grave Precepts

During the past several weeks, we have been discussing the Jukai ceremony where a lay person formally enters the Buddhist path. The taking and receiving of the Sixteen Bodhisattva vows is a central part of the ceremony.

We have discussed the first three precepts which are known as the Triple Treasure: taking refuge in the Buddha, taking refuge in the Dharma, taking refuge in the Sangha. The next set of vows is called the Three Pure Precepts and here the practitioner vows to practice the wholesome, to refrain from the unwholesome, and to save all sentient beings.

The remaining precepts are called the Ten Grave Precepts. So far, we have discussed the precept not to kill, not to steal which includes not owning anything that ought to belong to others and not taking that which is not freely given. We also discussed the precepts that address right speech: not speaking falsehoods, not discussing the faults of others, not praising self or slandering others. We then discussed the precepts in which a disciple of the Buddha vows not to indulge in sexual greed or in intoxicants. Last week we discussed the vow not to indulge in anger. This evening I would like to examine the last two of the Ten Grave precepts: Not begrudging the bestowal of Dharma to anyone and not disparaging the Triple Treasure.

Let's begin by looking at the vow not to begrudge the bestowal of Dharma to anyone. Initially, this vow may seem to be telling us that we should not restrict the teaching of the Dharma to anyone. It is, of course, saying that, but this vow has broader implications. Its intention is to direct us toward the cultivation of a generous heart, free from

possessiveness. There are different versions of this vow. Sometimes it is stated as: “A disciple of the Buddha is not possessive of anything,” or “a disciple of Buddha is not possessive of anything, even the dharma.”

Another version is: “A disciple of Buddha abstains from being avaricious in the bestowal of teachings or materials.” The word “avaricious” means “immoderately fond of accumulating wealth.”

About this precept, Reb Anderson, a student of Shunryu Suzuki Rochi and senior Dharma teacher at the San Francisco Zen Center, says:

As bodhisattvas, our giving is free from the desire to accumulate wealth. This precept points to a disease and a wonder: the disease is stinginess; the wonder is giving. Stinginess is a tightness, a constriction of the heart. It is born out of ignorance of interdependence: not realizing how our lives are embraced and sustained by the kindness of all beings. Stinginess is turning away from relatedness toward isolation...”

Although this precept is phrased negatively, as a prohibition to not begrudge the bestowal of Dharma to anyone, it is not only about turning away from stinginess but about the active expression of giving. We can offer our time, our concern, our labor, a kind word, our material wealth any moment in which it is needed. And we give not because we wish to receive something in return, or because we wish to be recognized as a generous person. We give because we live and move from relatedness, not isolation. If I live with the understanding that I am an individual contained inside this skin, perhaps even just inside this head, I have the sense, the experience, that there is a great chasm between my interior world and your interior world. This makes giving difficult. We see it as a sacrifice, perhaps as a loss, and we are inclined to calculate its cost. If, however, I have a sense, and experience, that

I live in intimate relationship with all of universe, that life is arising as an ever changing offering moment to moment, then giving and receiving is the most natural response. Life is an exchange of intention, energy and gifts.

The poem “Birdfoot’s Grandpa” by Joseph Bruchac is I believe and expression of this sense of universe. It goes:

The old man

Must have stopped our car

Two dozen times to climb out and gather into his hands

The small toads blinded

by or lights and leaping,

live drops of rain.

The rain was falling,

A mist about his white hair

And I kept saying

“You can’t save them all,

Accept it, get back in

We’ve go places to go.”

But leathery hands full

Of wet brown life,

Knee deep in the summer

He just smiled and said

“They have places to go to, too.”

When lay practitioners receives this Bodhisattva precept, they are accepting the responsibility to practice giving and receiving beyond all dualities. This is what it means to not begrudge the bestowal of Dharma to anyone. We are directed in this precept to offer the appropriate service to each being that we meet. This is the Dharma.

Reb Anderson summarizes this precept as:

In all your relationships, in each moment, ask the question, What is being asked of me? What is the most precious thing that I can give right now? This is the dharma treasure.

The Sixteen Bodhisattva Precepts begin and end with the Triple Treasure. Remember that the first three precepts were taking refuge.

Taking refuge in the Buddha directs us toward realization.

Taking refuge in the Dharma directs us toward truth.

Taking refuge in the Sangha directs us toward harmony.

We might be inclined to think of the Buddha only as an historical figure, a person born into a wealthy family, who witnessed suffering for the first time as a young man, who left home seeking to find the end of suffering, who found enlightenment, taught for many years, died at the age of eighty and disappeared from the world. But in the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni Buddha says that although he appeared in this way, his life span was actually without end. The Buddha is always available to us. If

we practice all virtues, live upright, gentle and kind lives, then we encounter and meet the Buddhas, all buddhas and ancestors, in the everyday matters of life.

The Dharma is the teaching, but it is not contained in books, it is only contained in lived practice. Study is part of practice, part of everydayness. Each moment that we greet wholeheartedly is a moment of practicing Dharma; it is a moment of refuge.

And the Sangha is the third leg of the stool that supports us. It is the community of practitioners whose intention is to realize the Dharma and the precepts. The Sangha is something of a nursery, a training ground for our wider practice in the wider world. We are responsible for the Sangha we create, to live in harmony, where we seek to avoid introducing discord.

While writing these talks on the precepts, I was torn between using the words “taking” and “receiving” in regard to the precepts. Do you take the precepts, or do you receive the precepts? The two words have a distinctively different feel to them. I leaned toward the word “take” at the beginning of our talks, and settled on using both words, take and receive, in the introduction to this talk. John Daido Looi used the word “invoke” in regard to the precepts. At first, I thought this word was awkward, not very inviting or engaging. So I looked it up and invoke is defined as: to call for with earnest desire; to declare to be binding or in effect, or to appeal to, as for confirmation. I have come to like this word because it combines a sense of taking and receiving, a calling for and a declaration, an appeal and a confirmation.

So in the end, I invite all of us who wish to engage our lives in the Buddha Way to invoke the precepts, to take them, to realize them, give

them life and presence in the world, to follow the Buddha Way, to study the Dharma and live and support the Sangha.

Resources:

Anderson, Reb, *Being Upright: Zen Meditation and the Bodhisattva Precepts*, Rodmell Press, 2001.

Loori, John Daido, *The Heart of Being, Moral and Ethical Teachings of Zen Buddhism*, Dharma Communications, 1996.