

## Lecture on the Precepts Part 1

Clifton Hill Meditation Retreat, November 2019

Taking the precepts in a formal ceremony is an important step on the road of traditional Buddhist practice. In Buddhism's journey to America and Europe, though, they've sometimes not been put into as prominent a place. Sometimes they're not discussed at all. Perhaps this comes from an allergy we've acquired due to some of our Western religions' emphasis on guilt and sin; we've seen many examples of principles preached but not practiced until we feel distrustful of sanctimonious scoldings. But the Buddhist precepts are not moral commandments which must be obeyed if we don't want to be punished by divine wrath. The precepts are gateways to enlightenment, ease, and joy.

They aren't always presented that way. To take one example: there's so much emphasis on being mindful these days it can shade into a sense that when your mindfulness lapses you're failing in something you "should" be doing. But there's no "should" to mindfulness, no special honor to it. Right practice isn't a virtue in the sense of "right" as the opposite of "wrong." The "right" in "right practice" is the kind you find when you're righting a ship, trueing a board. It's balancing, aligning so that you function harmoniously along with everything and everyone else.

A friend of mine - not a Buddhist - told me she loves Zen aesthetics, but feels Zen practitioners have such intense superegos they are hard to be around. I think she has a point. The strict forms of Zen often trap people into judgments of "you (or I) am not doing the form 'right.'" Paradoxically, when you practice with this long enough it usually leads to a softening into liberation. At a certain point you discover there's no way to do the forms "right" and there's no way to do the forms "wrong." There is a way to practice "just so." It's called whole-heartedness. But it's easy to get off track.

I encountered this at one point when I offered to help some Soto Zen priest friends offer precepts to sangha members. They were upset with me. They felt I hadn't been around long enough in the community, and they had a point. But then one of them asked me how I could presume to know who was "worthy" of taking the precepts. I replied that nobody is "worthy" of taking the precepts - the precepts are not a matter of being worthy or pure or holy. If we had to be worthy of taking the precepts nobody could take them. Certainly I couldn't. Taking the precepts doesn't signify you're a good person. But because you're an ordinary person, you are enlightened. Your goodness leads to take the precepts as a way of realizing them in everyday life, stumbling along, making errors, straying this way and that. It's like driving a car, you keep your direction by turning your wheel slightly off one direction, then the other in order to maintain your course on the road. The precepts are the road. They're our reference point, even when we don't know where the road is taking us, even when it's dark and we can't see where we're going.

Ordinary Mind Zen sees everyday life as the venue for our practice. We learn how to express the precepts in our workplace, our home, our intimate relationships and our community. We recognize the value of forms and ceremonies but don't attach any special "holiness" to officiants. I'll offer Ordinary Mind Zen in Sacramento for anyone who wants to have a place to sit daily meditation. I'm in no way rejecting my Soto heritage, which I love, respect and feel gratitude for. There are many Soto practitioners (including priests) who are fully open to lay practice, but there is a split in this issue which has never been resolved and sometimes leads to excluding folks. I'm hoping everyone will feel welcome to come to a Sacramento group where they can sit in silence with others, whether they are practicing Rinzai Zen or Soto Zen, Vipassana-Insight or following Tibetan methods. I've been inspired by how you here at Clifton Hill have been able to maintain an open door and a coherent sangha over many years.

Getting back to the precepts: as people prepare to take the precepts in Ordinary Mind Zen, we ask them to re-write the precepts in their own words. Diane Rizzetto describes this process in *Waking Up to What You Do*. So I've been doing this myself along with my students, and as part of the study I've compiled several versions of the precepts to contrast and compare them. I sent you a chart with the

versions from Berkeley Zen Center, Dharma Rain, Ordinary Mind Lammi, Zen Peacemakers, and Thich Nhat Hanh.

It's important to put the precepts into your own words because otherwise they remain as abstract ideals. We need to look at each one and say "what does this mean to me?" How does it affect the way I go about my everyday activities? What can I do, what am I willing to do, what seems impossible?

Precepts are not rules for becoming holy or worthy of enlightenment. You, and all beings, are already enlightened. The question is, how do you put that enlightenment into play in everything you do?

Precepts are not commandments. Historically, they mostly arose when some follower of Buddha did something which upset the laypeople who provided them with alms. The laypeople would complain to the Buddha and Shakyamuni would tell his monks: "don't do that, or you won't get anything to eat!" The precepts are very practical responses to how to live in the world. They help us discover a way of living which in the long run is the easiest and most harmonious.

Precepts are percepts. We experience the world through our percepts, and inevitably filter the information coming in. When we adopt precepts, they become our lenses on the world: they help us see the world in ways which open up some avenues of engagement while fencing off others but are never absolute: they always arise in response to circumstances.

The dictionary definition of "precept" is: "a general rule intended to regulate behavior or thought." The words comes from the Latin *praeceptum* and *praecipere*: to 'warn, instruct', from *prae* 'before' + *capere* 'take'. So a precept is what arises before we take action, and offers us some instruction, or at least some hints on which way to turn, what compass direction to orient in. Reb Anderson, in discussing the three pure precepts, call them "the shape of Buddha's mind." Which means they're the shape of your true mind. By exploring them you grope for this underlying shape, and put the specifics into forms which shape you.

I find the three pure precepts the most difficult. The other precepts all address specifics, but the three pure precepts are daunting in their all-inclusiveness. A traditional translation of the three pure precepts is: refrain from unwholesome actions; do wholesome actions; purify your mind." Zen Peacemakers' version is "do no harm, do good, free all beings." Lammi is similar but instead of "free all beings" says "serve all existence." Dharma Rain is Cease from Evil – Release all Self- Attachment; Do only Good – Take Selfless Action; Do Good for Others – Embrace All Things and Conditions. At Berkeley Zen Center during the Bodhisattva ceremony we recite:

I vow to refrain from evil

*It is the abode of the law of all Buddhas; it is the source of the law of all Buddhas.*

I vow to make every effort to live in enlightenment

*It is the teaching of anuttara samyaksambodhi and the path of the one who practices and that which is practiced.*

I vow to live and be lived for all beings

*It is transcending profane and holy and taking self and others across.*

I like the echo after each vow; it puts the personal commitment, with all its contingencies and conditioning, in the context of the wide field of unconditioned, limitless practice-enlightenment.

When I grapple with the three pure precepts, I find I re-write them each time a little differently. I have the least difficulty with the first one, to avoid creating harm. I phrase it as: "I vow to not create suffering for myself or others." This is very much in keeping with Taoist practice, which stresses we need to be careful about doing too much, and instead "do less, and do less, until you reach non-doing, but nothing's left undone." This is to let things be, to not meddle, to make room for the course of events to unfold naturally.

It's familiar to us in the Hippocratic oath physicians take: "first, do no harm." I wish medical professionals would pay more attention to it. In my experience, medical professionals are so eager to help and so allergic to feeling helpless that they rush to offer something, anything - even if it won't be effective and may have harmful side effects. I used to see patients along with a lovely neurologist. Most neurological illnesses don't have cures, and often are progressively debilitating. When a patient came to my neurologist friend describing some symptom he'd almost immediately reach for his prescription pad. Afterwards I'd ask him - "will that actually help?" He'd reply, "no, but you have to do *something*." I'd ask "but doesn't that medication have its own problematical side effects?" He'd agree, but he felt uncomfortable stating the bare fact to a patient that there was little he could do. Gradually, though, he began to realize what most patients wanted wasn't a prescription, but compassion: the more he could "just" listen and be with them, the better they would feel.

So this gets us into the problem with the second pure precept, which is sometimes translated as "do all that is good." So often our best intentions turn out to have negative consequences. Not just in medicine, when the cure is worse than the disease. One example: villagers in Bangladesh had to travel a long ways to get water from a stream. Well-meaning foreigners came in and build wells. Ten years later it turned out the aquifer they'd tapped into was full of arsenic, and over the last ten years the villagers had been poisoned. Another example: Alfred Nobel invented dynamite to excavate mines and tunnels: he thought that as a safer form of blasting powder (which often exploded unexpectedly) he'd be saving lives. He never imagined its adoption for use in warfare, and the slaughter that followed. The Nobel Peace Prize was his was of atoning, but it couldn't bring back anyone who had died.

The problem is, once you do something it can't be undone. You can try to make amends, you can avoid making the mistake in the future. But you can't erase the past. When I was five years old I sneaked some candy from the little store around the corner from our house. My parents made me bring it back, but that doesn't alter the fact: I am a thief. Or maybe better said: I'm a recovering thief.

One area where we want desperately to do good is in raising our children. We don't have control, though, over the world they must deal with. When my daughters were in their twenties and, faced with the difficulties of adulthood they'd sometimes call me for advice and I'd try to be a good father and offer suggestions. These never worked - in part because I was infringing on their autonomy, but also because the world has moved on since I was in my twenties and the circumstances they face are different from what I dealt with. I gradually learned, when they called, to simply hear them out, and then say something like: "I don't know what you should do. I do know that I trust you. Whatever you do, I know you'll be able to deal with the consequences. If it's a mistake you'll learn from it, and if it worked out well, you'll go forward with it."

We want to *do* something because we don't trust how things will work out. The fact is, things will work out. Often not the way we want, but something else will follow. Having trust in this process despite not knowing and not understanding is a crucial aspect of finding liberation from suffering. Offering your trust to another is a gift, it helps people to blossom as themselves. So I borrow some wording from the Tao Te Ching in my version of the second pure precept. I vow to assist the self-becoming of all being.

What, then, of the third pure precept?

The notion of purifying the mind makes me nervous - lots of people have been killed in the pursuit of ideological purity whether political or religious. I like Aitken Roshi's *gatha*:

When showering the morning  
I vow with all beings  
To wash away all thoughts  
Of ever being pure.

The first three precepts are called the three pure precepts, but "pure" doesn't mean "virtuous" as opposed to "immoral" or "saintly" as opposed to "sinful." That would be a very dualistic

understanding. To avoid falling into this trap, in Zen we have sayings like “no delusion, no enlightenment;” “clouds make a mountain;” or - as I noticed one day during walking meditation when, having just brushed the mat clean, I saw thousand of motes dancing in a sliver of the sun: no dust, no beam of light.

Enlightened vision is non-dual. So I think Berkeley Zen Center’s version of the third pure precept - to make every effort to live in enlightenment - is on the right track. The phrasing, though, can be misleading. Enlightenment can seem far away in time or distance - even though it’s not other than ourselves. We need to live our enlightenment, but making every effort can be a strain if you mistake right effort for *more* effort rather than “just right” effort, the effort which fits what is needed, no more, no less. This is called *wu-wei*, sometimes translated as “doing not-doing,” sometimes as “effortless effort.” “Effortless effort,” though, needs to be completely heartfelt. How can we find this kind of natural effort as we find our way with the precepts?

Lately, I’ve been finding it helpful to remind myself of a verse from the Tao Te Ching:

No holding on,  
No letting go.  
No merit and  
No fault.

This may seem a little shocking to Zen students. We know not to hold on, but aren’t we encouraged to let go of everything? Letting go, though, shades easily into pushing away. Both holding on and letting go are slightly off from the dimension we need: *letting be*.

I sometimes use this as a mantra, a continue meditation instruction to myself: whatever comes up, “not holding on, not letting go, no merit and no fault.” It feels like it creates an opening which encompasses self and others, many and one, doing and not-doing.

As for how I translate this into the third pure precept for myself, I try to keep it simple. I’m a faulty, erring human who makes lots of mistakes. No holding on to this, and no letting go of this. From that space I can still commit myself to my version of the third precept: I vow to practice faithfully, sincerely, and wholeheartedly.

## Lecture on the Precepts Part 2

Clifton Hill Meditation Retreat, November 2019

Homage to the Prajnaparamita, the lovely, the Holy.  
The perfection of wisdom gives light.  
Unstained, the world cannot stain her.  
She is a source of light and removes the gloom and darkness of delusion.  
The perfection of wisdom gives rise to the turning of the wheel of the Dharma...

Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva while practicing deeply the Prajnaparamita, perceived that all five skandhas in their own being are empty and was saved from all suffering.....

So I wanted to begin this section of this teisho on the precepts with the chant used at Berkeley Zen center, the homage to Prajnaparamita, which we chant just before we recite the Heart Sutra in English. And the reason I wanted to do that is, yesterday I talked a little bit about the three pure precepts and today I want to start going into the ten grave precepts.,

As a reminder, the three pure precepts: don't do harmful actions; do good; and purify the mind to use one translation. They're pretty broad, but then when we get into the grave precepts, such as do not kill, do not lie, do not steal things and so forth, that gets more into the realm of concrete choices. And once we get into the realm of concrete choices, we've got a big problem.

If you read the Hsin Shin Ming, "Faith in Mind," it says, the way is basically easy so long as you avoid picking and choosing. As soon as you discriminate and made even the slightest discrimination you're lost. And so Zazen and meditation instruction is, basically, a letting go of discrimination, not pushing away discriminating thoughts, but not being caught in discriminating thought. Another form of meditation instruction is: "at all times, don't create thoughts, do not destroy thoughts. The same could be said for feelings, perceptions, formations, consciousness. Just get out of creating and destroying.

But our life is one of creating and destroying constantly. Most of us, like the idea of avoiding destroying, but the idea of avoiding creating, that's a bigger problem. We kind of like creating things. Lots of you here in sesshin are artists. You know we have to violate the blankness of a canvas to create a painting, and we have to step into the silence to speak or make music.

Meditation and practice are arts. The problem is not creation and destruction per se, the problems is that while we're doing that, we make a big deal of it. We stir things up because we like a lot of drama in our lives. Pleasure! Suffering! That's what art is all about!

We like creating things but to do this with a whole heart, we need to get beyond discriminating thought, beyond creation and destruction. But by definition Samsara *is* the cycle of creation-and-destruction, right? Birth and death. How can you possibly get beyond that?

Do you know Tilarepa's six words of advice to Naropa? They're another form of meditation and practice instruction. Tilarepa says, don't think about the past. Don't think about the future. Don't think about the present. Don't try to figure things out. Don't try to control anything. *Just relax.*

Pretty good meditation instruction. It puts us in the realm of complete non-discrimination. But how do we do this?

Some years ago I was practicing - at least, trying to practice and trying to understand - what this non-discrimination is and how to enter the state of non-discrimination. And one day I was in the Zendo and I got up and we were about to do kinhin and I said to myself, if I'm going to get beyond discrimination, why should I walk forward? Just because everyone else is? I mean, what am I doing here? I, maybe I should walk sideways. Maybe I should walk backwards. I mean, how do I get out of this realm of discrimination? So I went in, and I asked my teacher Sojun Mel Weitsman about this. I said, "I can't avoid discriminating. I mean, in order to live I've got to discriminate. How do I do balance non-discrimination and the need to discriminate? And he said, "discriminate from the standpoint of non-discrimination."

Very Mel. Very Zen. But actually, it's correct. That's why I, I wanted to start by chanting, the homage to Prajnaparamita, because it is non non dual. So you know, the third pure precept, I vow to purify the mind. When we chant the Prajnaparamita we say, "unstained, the world cannot stain her."

Mmm.

I like the fact that Prajnaparamita is personified as a woman. Unstained, the world cannot stain her. So when we come to purifying the mind, the third pure precept, it's worth remembering the koan you all know, where the second patriarch, Huike (Taiso Eka) goes to Bodhidharma and says, "Master, I can't quiet my mind," and Bodhidharma says "Bring out that mind before me and I shall pacify it for you." Then Huike says "I can't bring it out before me. I can't grasp it" and Bodhidharma responds "See? Pacified already."

Like Huike, I can't grasp my mind - so how can I purify it? So I think it's better not to vow to purify the mind. How about, instead, I vow to allow the mind to purify itself.

Now, can you trust your mind to purify itself? Most of us have this kind of secret fear, this internal conversation: "Oh my dirty mind! If I just let it go, terrible things will happen." So this is where faith and trust in fundamental wisdom - faith in mind - come in.

If we try and purify the mind through the precepts or any other way, it's like trying grasp the light in your fist. Thich Nhat Hanh says, if you take a glass of muddy water and you want to try and clarify it, if you keep stirring it, it just stays muddy. If you let it sit, it settles and gradually clarifies.

So maybe instead of the word purify, let's use the word clarify. To clarify all our thoughts - it's like making ghee, clarified butter. You just heat it up and froths and then you separate the out the solids and you get clarified butter. So the next time you're thinking "clarify my mind" just think: "butter!"

My teacher Sojun gave a lecture about practicing Prajnaparamita, and how the Heart Sutra starts off with Avalokiteshvara practicing deeply the Prajnaparamita. So he says the heart sutra is basically about compassion: the encounter of wisdom, nondual wisdom, Prajnaparamita, with compassion. That's what all the precepts are about ultimately: how to mix together wisdom and compassion. So I'm going to read a little bit of Sojun's talk.

He says, "Prajnaparamita is a word that has two meanings. One is perfection, the other is going or gone or going beyond. So we have the mantra at the end of the heart Sutra, Gya Te Gya Te Para Gya Te Para Sam Gya Te Bodhi Svaha!" Going, going, gone, all together gone....

[Which] implies that there is this shore and that shore. This shore is the shore of suffering and the other shore is the shore of release and liberation. So how are we going to get from the shore of self-clinging and suffering to the shore of liberation? My old teacher Susuki Roshi used to say that when you know how to live correctly on this shore you are already on the other shore. There really is no place to go.

One of the ways of knowing or discovering how to live on this shore is through the precepts. We approach the precepts via prajna, and approach prajna via the precepts.

This word Prajna means wisdom. But not wisdom in the usual sense. It is the wisdom of non-duality; the reconciliation of opposites.

Sojun says non-duality reconciles opposites. I'd say the realm of non-duality is *larger* than opposites: it goes to a different dimension.

Sojun goes on to list the paramitas.

the six Paramitas, which are the practices of Prajna Paramita. We usually call them simply, the six Paramitas. But more accurately they are the six Prajna Paramitas. The word Prajna is very important here. If we only think of them as six Paramitas we can easily fall into a dualistic self-improvement scheme..... The six Prajna Paramitas, as most of you know are generosity, noble conduct, patience, enthusiastic effort, meditation which is called dhyana or samadhi, and prajna itself.

Much like the precepts, the prajnaparamitas look kind of like ideals. However, if you think of them as moral goals, as self-improvement projects, you'll have difficulties. You start trying to be very patient, and this will make you very impatient. It's easy to get irritable when you're trying hard to be very patient and to be really sweet and generous. When we run into people who are like that, so moral, so sweet, so very very careful - we get a little nauseous. Sanctimony is far from sacred. But if we keep in mind these are six practices of prajnaparamita, the practices of deep nondual wisdom that leads to liberation, then we start to understand how to practice the Heart Sutra.

So how do we do that? In talking about the prajnaparamitas Sojun goes on to say

Usually we think in terms of a linear progression. I like to think of it as a circle. Because the first one which is generosity – dana, and the last one prajna, are really the two most important ones. When they are in a circle they are side by side instead of at the two ends. Prajna, which is non-dual wisdom, permeates all of them, as does generosity. As a matter of fact, each one contains all the others, so there are 36 in actuality, and each one is based on prajna.

In the same way that each of the paramitas reflects and contains the others, each of the ten precepts permeates the others. You can't practice any one of them alone. If you try and practice one of them alone, you're going to get into trouble and just get confused because you'll fall into this dualistic mindset.

So I want to present the precepts in the light of the paramitas. That's not often done, but I find it very helpful. The precepts are gifts. So I like to think of following the precepts as an offering, a way of practicing generosity. And generosity feels good, right? So instead of being in this

mindset of "am I being good or bad, moral or immoral," instead I say "Oh, let's be generous. Generous with myself and others in the world in the way I go through the world."

And it includes not just material gifts. Sometimes we offer a material gift to curry favor. We donate money or we give someone a present and we will look for the feedback. "Can you put my name on a plaque?" or, "did you like it?" There is generosity here but it is easily tainted. There are many levels of generosity. Pure generosity is simply giving and forgetting. We say, "The emptiness of the giver, the gift, and the one who receives." So with an empty hand I offer an empty gift to an empty receiver and pure gratitude arises. Simply giving is enough. Sometimes it is beneficial to give a gift anonymously. But even if we give a gift anonymously we should be careful about pride. All of these tainted aspects are dualistic.

Sojun has some nice things to say about generosity. He says *dana*, generosity

it's giving for the sake of giving itself. And it includes not just material gifts, material gifts. Sometimes we give those to curry favor. We want something in return. We donate something and we say, 'Can you put my name on that plaque? Did you like it?'

Are you familiar with this? Have you ever given something and said, 'did you like it?' Have you ever given something and wanted to get something back in return - even if it's just a 'thank you, I really liked it'? Yes, we all have. But asking someone "did you like it?" puts the other person in a terrible spot. What if they didn't like it? Do you want them to lie to make you feel good? If they do, is it you or they who is violating the precept against telling falsehoods.

When you give something to somebody, you have to give them the freedom to not like it. That's generosity. It's a little strange to think of giving something whether the person likes it or not: you don't want to purposefully give them something they don't like, but there's many levels of generosity.

So when we give a gift, we have to be careful. We have to be careful about pride. Look at me, I'm giving this year. Usually you *convey* a gift. You're the conveyor, but not, you're not the only one involved. There's a lot of lives involved in any gift that you give: the people who mined it and fashioned it and transported it, the people who told you what your friend might like.

Ultimately the greatest gift is a free offering, giving the gift without any expectation. How does this apply to the precepts? In precepts there's all these seeming rules of moral action which lead us to start expecting what the consequences of our action are going to be. Certainly it's reasonable to try and take those into account. But let's face it — how often have you anticipated what the consequences of your action might be, and it turns out to be something different? You can't know what the consequences of your action might be. So each action that you offer really needs to be offered without expectation. This is kind of impossible. But here we are in *sesshin*, in Zen, this impossible practice.

Since we're dealing with impossibilities, let's go into the first grave precept, "I vow to not kill." How is that an expression of generosity?

Most of the grave precepts are expressed as negatives. "I vow not to lie, I vow not to steal," and so forth. From a psychological standpoint, the problem with phrasing a vow in a negative is you can't observe what is not expressed: it's easier to develop a positive habit than it is to stop doing something. A number of Zen centers have tried to deal with this by offering the positive version of a precept. So for example, in the ordinary mind *sangha* instead of vowing



not to kill, the precept is expressed positively, as "I vow to take up the way of supporting all life." Dharma rain Zen center in Portland likes to have it both ways, so it says "I vow to not kill, to cultivate and encourage life." So they have both the negative and the positive. It reminds me of the echo we use at Berkeley Zen Center for the precept of not harboring ill will, though I'm going to alter it slightly: "Not negative, not positive, there is an ocean of dark clouds and an ocean of illuminated clouds." Dark and light, both go together positive and negative, both go together.

So it is with not killing. It's impossible. As soon as you have not-killing, killing arises. On a more practical level, you cannot live without killing.

When you eat something, you're killing it. Even if you're vegetarian. I'm quite convinced that plants are living beings and there's more and more science which suggests that they certainly have sensitivity and relationships and memory and all kinds of interesting things. But the basic fact is, if they didn't have life, eating them wouldn't be nourishing. You can't eat something which has never been alive and get energy from it. Life nourishes life - we eat life to sustain us. It's as simple as that. And when we eat life, we break it down and we destroy it and burn it up to give ourselves energy. It's absolutely unavoidable.

So then, what is not killing in the context of realizing that your very life depends on killing? If the cells, of the immune system in your body were not killing some of the organisms that are invading you at this moment, you'd be in big trouble. You know what happens if someone has no immune system and is thrown out into the world - they die pretty quickly. Calling it "the immune system" makes it sound neutral, but we need killer T cells to destroy infectious organisms. We rely on some parts of our body to kill some other living beings, we rely on other parts of our body to burn them up beings which have been alive and which we've killed so our teeth can tear into them, chop them into bits so our metabolism can burn them up.

Plants, and animals, give us their gift of life very generously. So we need to be grateful to them as we kill them.

We want to avoiding killing, but we can't. Someone once said to Joshu, "you're an enlightened Zen master, but rabbits run away from you. Why, if you're so enlightened, do the rabbits run away." Joshu looked him straight in the eye and said, "I like to kill." (laughter).

You may laugh, but you better get a very intimate with how much you like to kill. Because we all do it, and we like it. Next time you have a good meal and you rub your stomach in satisfaction you can go "mmm, killing."

There's so many ways of killing. How can we possibly justify it? Well, I'm not a vegetarian. I was vegetarian for a little while and then when I lived in Japan and the monks were not vegetarian, and I hiked in the Himalayas and none of the Buddhists were vegetarian, I re-evaluated my stance. In the Himalayas, the Buddhist villagers won't kill a yak themselves, but they like to eat yak meat. I once went to a village where an American friend of a friend was staying and was supposed to meet us, but was late. We asked him what had held him up and he said, "Well, there was a yak which had broken its leg, and all the villagers wanted to slaughter it and eat it, but they were all Buddhist so none of them could slaughter it. And they looked around and said, who is non-Buddhist here? And they looked at me. So I just spent the last hour slicing open the neck of a yak and draining it of its blood. It was quite an experience. Very messy. But now they get to eat the yak."

That's some of the background as to why I'm no longer a vegetarian. I don't eat much in the way of meat, but I'll have fish and I'll have a chicken sometimes. And the fact is whenever I eat

something that's been killed, some part of me dies and I'm aware of it. At least I try to be aware of it, so that when some chicken is placed on my plate, or vegetables or rice, and I cut into them, I try to be aware of, wow, here is a life which has been, and it's been given to me and part of me feels grateful and part of me feels pretty sad and humble. Like something inside me dies whenever I take life because I really don't want to take life. So part of me dies along with the chicken - to which the chicken might say "yeah,. well, you're getting the better part of this deal." True. But a part of us does die whenever we kill something.

One of my daughters, when she was a little girl, loved to sing along with our records of musicals. One day she was singing along with Ethel Merman, who some of you might know had a very loud, brassy voice. My daughter had a very sweet light voice, but she said to me "Don't I sound just like her?" I tried to be nice and said something like "Oh, well, you know, you have your own voice and it sounds lovely, but it doesn't sound like Ethel Merman." Years later my daughter told me that was when her dreams of being a singer were crushed. She was quite serious about it. I did not intend to do that, but I killed her dreams.

Every morning when you wake up, you kill your dreams. Do you take responsibility for that?

The only way I know of dealing with not killing from a non-dual perspective is to participate in the killing and bringing to life, killing and bringing to life, killing and bringing to life constantly, and to acknowledge it and embrace it fully. I'll often forget or miss it, but when I do engage in it fully, it guides me.

So yes, I kill birds, but I try to kill as few as I can, and I do kill fewer than I used to. Maybe you are more committed than I to not killing, so much so you might say, "okay, I'm not going to kill birds and I'm not, I'm not even going to eat. I'm going to get past killing." Maybe you think if you meditate enough you can survive on one grain of rice a day. Buddha tried that, and was rescued from starvation by Sujata. The fact is that if you don't eat, you're going to kill yourself. So you won't avoid killing. You can't avoid killing, but you can take responsibility for your choices.

Currently my precepts students are working with the one of not lying. One of them recently wrote that she had to lie recently in some work circumstance. The circumstances were compelling; she was in a tough situation and I can really understand and empathize with how she felt the need to lie. I just read her email this morning, but I am going to get back to her and the other folks and suggest: in that kind of situation, instead of saying "I had to lie" it's better to say "I chose to lie." When I eat a piece of chicken, better for me to say: I chose to kill this chicken and eat it. That helps me really embody and embrace fully what's going on. By taking responsibility for what you do you give yourself the freedom to choose: yes, no, to do it, to not do it, to do it. You take the consequences, take on the karma, and plunge into the wheel of the Dharma.

Doing this is to give yourself totally to this strange process of life and death. This is genuine practice. My teacher Sojun said that the best way of practicing the paramitas and the precepts is just for this, just for the sake of practice. I agree, but - as I was saying to some of you - sometimes I find the word practice problematical. It can make it sound like a rehearsal, like a preparation for getting somewhere. Instead, I like to think of practice as the art of fully expressing your life. Working with the precepts is the art of fully expressing your life in the midst of impossible conditions, deciding and choosing your way again and again and again and again.

But it's sometimes hard to decide. Should I eat chicken and fish? Should I be vegetarian? Should I lie? If it's going to prevent someone else from getting hurt, should I lie, or should I

stay with the truth? These are real dilemmas. The way you decide is to come back to the precepts in the light of the paramitas, to the non-dual wisdom beyond wisdom.

How do you do that? All of our practice goes into that “how,” all of our art goes into that. But maybe one way of doing it is: if you have a difficult moral dilemma that you're struggling with, and you don't know what to do, before you make your decision, just chant “gya te gya te para gya te para sam gya te bodhi svaha.” Just do that.

After you do that, you still won't know what to do. But you'll be okay because it will nudge you along the road of wisdom, which is beyond our knowledge, but which invites us to fully participate in this ungraspable play of light and shadow, life and death.