



Welcome, my name is Susan Moon and this is the first week of our online retreat on practicing with the precepts in everyday life. Thanks to *Tricycle* magazine for making these online retreats possible. It's kind of amazing that at this point in time we can have the dharma instantaneously go around the world, anywhere, just in a moment. Actually, the Buddha might not have been that amazed by it because it's really just an electronic manifestation of what he was telling us: we are all completely interconnected.

Still, we have to bear in mind that we are practicing Buddhism in a primarily non-Buddhist world. We're also interconnected with all the people who are not watching dharma talks online as well—and that's quite a lot of people. This is the first of four talks that I'll be giving. The Buddhist precepts are just a really wonderful gift to us. They're guides for our relationships but they're also a deep spiritual exploration and they've meant a lot to me in my life. I've benefited greatly by practicing with the precepts and so I want to share this with you.

It's not that I've learned to be a good person by practicing the precepts—the main thing that I've learned is that I'm not separate from other people. I'm *completely connected* to everyone else: [my recognition of this] comes from practicing with the precepts.

In these talks I'm going to suggest some practical exercises you can do on your own. Some of us may think of Buddhist practice as primarily meditation, but there are two parts to a practice: there's sitting down on the cushion (or in my case the chair) and there's getting up again. When we get up, we find ourselves in the world with other people. When we're sitting, when we're meditating, we can't really do a lot of harm to other people. It keeps us off the street for half an hour or so but when we get up and finish, then we are walking around, talking and interacting with other human beings.

There are different ways listing the precepts, different translations of them, and different collections of precepts in different Buddhist traditions, but all Buddhist traditions share the same five essential precepts. These are the ones I'll be talking about. They're about



essential moral concerns that apply to all human relationships. In a shorthand version they are: no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, no lying, and no intoxication. They are helpful: they help me avoid harming other people; they help me to benefit other people; they help me to realize that I'm connected with other people. If I lived all alone on a desert island with nothing but sand and rocks, maybe I wouldn't need the precepts so badly. I could tell a rock all the lies I wanted and it wouldn't matter, but I live in a world of relationships and therefore the precepts are an important guide for my life. It's such a gift to have these vows.

Several years ago, when I retired from my job editing a Buddhist magazine, I found myself feeling at loose ends. I wasn't sure what the center of my life was. What was *really* the purpose of my life? I was doing a number of different things that mattered to me but I felt I'd lost my center. I didn't know [if that center was] writing, was it teaching, was it family, was it sangha? I was really suffering over this and feeling kind of fragmented and I spoke to my teacher Norman Fisher about this. I said, "You know, Norman, I just don't know what the organizing principle of my life is. I feel like I don't have an organizing principle. I like everything I'm doing, but what's at the center?"

He said, "What are you talking about? Of course you have an organizing principle. The organizing principle of your life is the precepts. You have the precepts." The minute he said it I thought, *Oh yeah, that makes sense*. The precepts are a powerful organizing principle and they encompass everything [in my life], meaning I could keep doing the different things I was doing but feel as though they were organized under the umbrella of practicing with the precepts. The precepts are like a handrail or like a path—they aren't just a list of “no’s,” there's also a “yes” side to the precepts. There are different ways of translating the precepts but I will explain the precepts in a longer, more “positive” way.

I vow not to kill, but to nurture all life. I vow not to take what is not given, but to practice generosity. I vow not to misuse sexuality, but to treat every person with respect. I vow not to engage in false speech, but to speak and listen from the heart. I vow not to intoxicate



body or mind of self or others, but to cultivate a mind that sees clearly. I appreciate this positive expression of the precepts because it's easier for me to throw myself into a vow to practice generosity than to get excited about not-stealing. The precepts are not theoretical. They're about how I live my life, how I talk to people, how I walk with people, how I listen, how I sit down to eat, how I meet with others over and over again.

What do the precepts mean to you in your life? As you examine your life and your practice, and as you take up the precepts, you may have your own way of working with each one depending on what's coming up for you in *your* life. For example, the precept against false speech might become: "I vow not to denigrate myself when I'm talking to other people." For someone else it might be: "I vow not to exaggerate for dramatic effect," or "I vow to speak up with courage in defense of others." When I work with students who are practicing with the precepts (in preparation for the ceremony where they will formally take them), I encourage them to write their own versions of each, and to explain what they mean [in relationship to] their lives. You might want to try this during our month of practicing together and focusing on the precepts. I encourage you to try it. It can be quite meaningful and helpful.

In my next three talks I'll discuss one specific precept and I've chosen three that come up quite frequently in our everyday lives. But today I'm talking about the precepts in general, and about how this practice itself is such a gift. Every human culture has moral guidelines for behaviors and there is considerable overlap between them. For example, the first four of our five precepts—no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, and no lying—have direct parallels in the Ten Commandments. The Buddhist precepts, however, are not commandments; they're not orders coming from outside to tell you what to do. They're affirmations from within; they're vows of intention that we take. We give *ourselves* these precepts.

There's quite a different approach between "Thou shalt not kill" and "I vow not to kill." The precepts are really statements of intention. This is one of the most important things



about them. They're about our intention. They're vows, not laws that can't be broken, and they *will* be broken because it's not possible for human beings to keep these precepts perfectly. Take the precept "I vow not to kill." I have a pretty good chance of keeping it if I take it to mean that I vow not to murder another human being with my own hands, but when I take into consideration the myriad forms of life that surround me and interconnectedness of all beings, then it becomes impossible. What about the ants that I step on? What about the germs I kill when I take antibiotics? What about the taxes I pay that go to creating weapons that are used to kill people?

I will break the precepts, and when I do, I try to acknowledge it. I take responsibility somehow, I try to repair the damage if it's possible and I don't give up on myself. It's the spirit of the vow that's important. By the spirit of vow I mean, again, this wholehearted intention. This is what I'm going to try to do. This is what I'm throwing myself into. The late Zen teacher Shunryu Suzuki Roshi said, "Life is one continuous mistake." This is a very comforting statement: I appreciate it a lot and when I make a mistake or go astray I forgive myself and renew my intention. From this point forward I have the chance to start fresh.

It's kind of like that '60s slogan, "Today is the first day of the rest of your life." In the Soto Zen tradition, which I belong to, we have a monthly precept ceremony at the time of the full moon. We come together and we avow our ancient karma, meaning we acknowledge the wrongs we've done, we don't name them specifically, but we know that we have done them and we renew our vows. We say the vows again and we get to start again. Catholics have the ritual of confession and asking for forgiveness and in the Jewish calendar year I believe Yom Kippur is something like this: once a year you have an opportunity to give forgiveness and ask for forgiveness for wrongdoings of the past. You get to start the year fresh with a clean slate.

The precepts are ongoing, the vows are ongoing. It's never a done deal. It's never something that you can check off your to-do list. I continually renew my intention. As



they say in twelve-step programs: one day at a time. I continue step by step, and when I take these impossible vows I don't get discouraged. I don't say to myself it's just too hard for me I can never do it. I take the precepts because I'm alive. This is my life. This is my chance to be a human being. What a good thing it is that we're not perfect, too. What would you do all day if you were already perfect?

Maxine Huckestein is a wonderful Buddhist writer and a Chinese American. She's a peace activist. She teaches writing workshops and years ago I went to one where something she said made a big impression on me. She said, "All great literature is about the breaking of the precepts." I thought about it and I said, "Well yeah, that's right." *The Iliad*, all the plays of Shakespeare, *Crime and Punishment*, *Beloved*—it's true! You wouldn't really want to read a novel in which nobody broke any precepts. It would be a really boring novel. This is what our lives are made of. This is what we struggle with. She gave us a writing assignment which was to write about a time when you broke one of the precepts and this is a great writing assignment because it makes us think about our real lives and acknowledge what we struggle with.

I encourage you to do this sometime. Maybe you and a friend can give yourself the writing assignment. Write about a time when you broke one of the precepts and just follow it along—see what comes out and see what you learn about yourself. The precepts are not rigid. They're not strict rules that can never be broken. Sometimes there's actually a reason to break a precept.

Take not-killing: a couple of years ago rats moved into my house. I already lived in the house with four other people (my niece, her husband, and two young children) and the house was well-occupied already but the rats thought it was their kitchen. They thought it was their fruit on the kitchen counter. I tried Have-a-heart traps, but the rats just ignored them; I tried blocking up gaps everywhere but they still found their way in. Finally I gave in and used snap traps, the kind that kill rats instantly, and about four or five rats died that way. I felt really bad. I saw the dead rats and I felt really bad about deliberately taking



life but I also felt like it was appropriate. I prayed for the rats to have a smooth journey but I felt like it was something I needed to do.

Or, take not-stealing: there are different times when you would steal. What about taking away a knife or a gun from a person who you think might harm himself or somebody else? And not-lying: what if it were 1940 and you were in Nazi, Germany and a soldier came to your door and asked you, "Are there any Jews in the house?" If there were some Jews hiding in the basement, you would lie. Sometimes, for a much lesser reason, you might lie. You might decide to lie to avoid hurting somebody's feelings. It's up to you to decide. That's the thing. It's your job to decide and to discern whether or not this is the right time to break the precept or break the precept. Are you acting out of compassion or are you acting to protect yourself? All the precepts are like this. You are the one who has to make the call each time—keeping the precepts is a work in progress. It's something that we continue to practice with and think about.

Our meditation practice supports our work with the precepts. When you sit, you practice being a human Buddha. As you sit on your cushion you might have your monkey-mind jumping all over the place and you might say to yourself, "Oh that's okay, Sue, that's okay you're a human being, it's okay." It's because you are human that this is happening. Then you love yourself and you open yourself up to the breath—you let the breath breathe through you and you give yourself away to the universe again because you're Buddha. When you sit you have a chance to cultivate your own Buddha nature. You have a chance to cultivate your faith in your own truth and your inner light—if you want to call it that—and your good intentions. This really helps you to practice in the world. The world needs your practice; it needs my practice; it needs our practice.

Our world is in turmoil. It's completely unstable. There is immeasurable suffering in the world and there's a lot of fear. We feel like we don't know what to do. Now more than ever maybe we feel, "What can we do? What can we do? We don't know what to do." How do we step forth not knowing? Well we have these vows we can take. We can vow

Susan Moon
Week One, *Learning to Be Buddha*
January 2017
"What Are the Buddhist Precepts?"



not to take life, but to nurture it. Our vows help us not to turn away from what's difficult and as we step forth, a path opens. We see something to do and we do it. I really love the whole idea of vowing. It's so wonderful to just vow. Vowing is a wholehearted intention. Vowing is throwing your full weight into what you care about.

When I vow to keep the precepts I'm giving my small self to the big self of the universe. [Other times] I just vow. I say from my heart, "I vow," and I don't add any more words. That's the end of the sentence. It's a way of saying I make the effort to be a full human being right now—to be right here, right now, this minute. I'm listening. I'm ready. I vow. Here's a simple exercise you can do this week: each morning when you get out of bed and you put your feet on the floor, say to yourself, "I vow." Thank you and have a good week.