

Susan Moon  
Week Four, *Learning to Be Buddha*  
January 23, 2017  
“On Abstaining from Intoxicants”



Welcome to the last week of our online retreat on practicing with the precepts in everyday life.

I'll start by reciting the five essential precepts that are shared by Buddhist traditions: 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 the body or mind of myself or of others, but to cultivate a mind that sees clearly.

In the first talk I spoke about what a gift the precepts are as guides for our lives, as ways to help us realize that we're not separate from other people. In the second talk, I spoke about wise speech and how important it is to speak and listen from the heart. In the third talk last week, I spoke about the precept against stealing, the precept that says I won't take what is not given, which is a precept that encourages both generosity and gratitude.

These precepts are not abstract considerations that are relevant only for a monk or a nun living a pure and holy life up in the mountain somewhere, these are precepts that come up constantly our everyday lives. In this talk, I'm going to look at the fifth precept, the one that says I vow not to intoxicate body or mind of self or others but to cultivate a mind that sees clearly.

This one also has daily relevance because intoxicants of various kinds are all around us in our daily lives. The earliest version of this precept from the Buddha's time said, "I undertake the training to abstain from fermented and distilled intoxicants that are the basis for heedlessness." So even 2,500 years ago people were struggling with the harmful effects of drinking.

This version of the precept seems pretty straightforward, it is kind of like saying, “don't drink and drive,” and this is certainly a good advice. The precept is deeper and broader

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than this, however. To intoxicate means to take in poison, so a broader interpretation of the precept urges us to abstain from anything that's not wholesome for our bodies and minds, for our health.

The Vietnamese teacher Thich Nhat Hanh takes a very broad approach to this precept. His expression of the fifth precept includes the following statement. "I am determined not to use alcohol or any other intoxicant, or to ingest food or other items that contain toxins, such as certain TV programs, magazines, books, films and conversations." This may seem extreme, but I take this precept as a helpful invitation to consider what is poison to me.

If I'm choosing to take in poison and to engage in toxic activities, I at least want to be aware of it. I don't want to fool myself. It's come up recently in my life because I've been thinking about this precept in connection with the news. The last few months have been challenging, so turbulent in the life of our country and the life of the world.

I found myself paying much more attention to the news than I usually do. It's become a little compulsive. I have found that I don't have as much control of it as I would like. I started to think that maybe I'm actually poisoning myself. I know that I have responsibility as a citizen of the world to keep track of what's going on, but I was going too far. I felt like I was unnecessarily anxious and depressed. It was really troubling me and I decided to scale way back in my consumption of the news in order to focus on what I can actually do and to foster some equanimity—which is also a helpful thing in turbulent times.

There are times when we will break this precept, just like the other ones. There are some poisons and some mind-altering substances that we choose to take, like medicinal drugs, chemotherapy for cancer, antidepressants, and sleeping pills.

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When I was recovering from knee surgery, I had a lot of pain and I took some very strong painkillers, even though they fogged my mind. I was not fostering my clarity of mind by taking them, but they really helped me in my recovery. I knew that these drugs could be addictive, and so I had to decide when to stop taking them when my discomfort was manageable without taking the drugs.

I made that choice because the responsibility belonged to me. I can't keep the precept by simply following orders from Buddha. I'm the one who has to decide, and I have to engage with it in a full-hearted way. All human beings are subject to sensual desire, receive pleasure, and we avoid pain. Craving is deep in our makeup and it's helped our species survive. If we didn't like to eat and mate, we would be in big trouble.

But craving gets us into trouble too. Let's say I walk into the kitchen and I see on the kitchen table a plate of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies made by my housemate. Immediately a familiar smell travels up my nostrils and triggers a response in my brain. The signal moves down my arm faster than a speeding bullet to my fingers and they start to tingle and I want to grab for the cookie. It's before all thought, the wanting is so quick, and the wanting is so strong. It's just “I want, I want.” What is this *wanting*? Can I separate the wanting from the cookie? The cookie is just a cookie sitting on a plate, but the wanting is in *me*. The precept helps us to train ourselves to work with this wanting.

It takes practice, it takes time, it's part of growing up, and for me it's an ongoing practice. Here's an exercise you might try when you're about to reach for something out of sudden desire. You might stop for 30 seconds. Let's say you're about to open the freezer door and take out the ice cream. Just pause, I'm not suggesting that you not eat the ice cream. Just you can promise yourself that in 30 seconds, you can stand next to the open freezer door and eat the ice cream right out of the tub if you still want to, but in those 30 seconds, notice the wanting. Is there any pleasure in the wanting itself? Is there any way that the

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wanting can be its own satisfaction, or can you look at it so closely that it disappears?  
Can you get just as much pleasure from not eating the ice cream as from eating it?

Just notice it, and then if you still want to, go ahead and eat the ice cream and enjoy it as much as you can. You won't be doing it heedlessly. There's a meal chant that we say in my Soto Zen tradition that has relevance to this precept, and I'll just say a part of it:  
“Desiring the natural order of mind, let us be free from greed, hate, and delusion. We eat to support life, and to practice the way of Buddha.”

What is this natural order of mind? You could say that sobriety is the natural order of mind. Sobriety is the state of mind before you've added any intoxicants to your mind. The positive formulation of this precept says, “I vow to cultivate a mind that sees clearly,” so another way to say it might be, “I vow to cultivate sobriety.”

Sobriety sounds dreary, sounds like you're not really supposed to have any fun. Years ago my first Zen teacher, Sojun Mel Weitsman, told us that after he started sitting zazen with Suzuki Roshi, he decided to stop smoking pot. This was in the '50s and he was a hip cab-driving painter in San Francisco at the time, and various mind-altering substances were common in the world he lived in.

He said that after he started sitting, he noticed how good it felt to be sober, to reclaim his original clear mind like fresh air, like a child's mind. He said he lost interest in mind-altering drugs. This made a big impression on me. It startled me, I'd always thought of sobriety as the absence of any feeling at all. Now, I remind myself of Sojun's comment from time to time.

Sometimes instead of having a glass of wine, I focus on the feeling of seeing clearly, I'm trying to feel sobriety as a sensation. It's the sensation of brightness, or clarity, it's the

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pleasure of looking out of a clean window. I vow not to intoxicate body or mind of self or others but to cultivate a mind that sees clearly.

At first glance, this precept seems different from the other ones because it's about something I do to myself, it's not about my relationship with other people. Our society puts a huge value on individualism and on our individual rights. There's an unstated assumption that it's my own business whether or how I take care of my body, and I hear people saying things like: “I'd rather live a shorter life with whisky than a longer life with abstinence, that's my choice.”

Here's the thing: my life doesn't belong to me alone. My body doesn't belong to me alone. The teachings of the precepts keep reminding me that I'm connected to everybody else. I'm not separate, and my body is actually part of the enormous living body of the planet earth. I know that when the planet is poisoned, my body is poisoned, and it must follow that when I poison my body, I'm poisoning the planet.

It's like cigarette smoking. It's not an individual decision because the smoker hurts other people with second hand smoke. When I learned that I was going to become a grandmother, I was already in my '60s and I was feeling the aches and pains of aging. I started to think, “Well, I've really got to take care of myself now. I've really got to pay attention to my diet and my exercise so I can live for a while in good health and be able to hang out with my granddaughter and go down the slide with her.”

Our relationships are affected by our health, and so we all have people who don't want to see us suffer, and when we become sick, somebody has to take care of us. Let's do our best to stay healthy. Caring for our bodies goes along with having gratitude for this precious human birth. This precept brings up the whole matter of addiction.

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I was a heavy cigarette smoker for a long time when I was young, and giving up smoking was one of the hardest things I've ever done. I stopped and started and stopped and started several times before I finally stopped for good. I hope it was for good. It was over 40 years ago. Like most addictions, it started as just a pleasant activity and it was not essential to my well-being.

I was a 16-year-old girl hanging out with friends at summer camp and I really enjoyed the nicotine buzz as we sat talking late into the night about the meaning of life, but without my realizing it, smoking turned into something that I had to do to keep from feeling a horrible, horrible craving.

Addiction makes a person really self-centered. I remember now with horror how I used to ride to work in the car of a friend of mine in his VW bug. We would drive from Cambridge to Boston almost 50 years ago. He didn't smoke, and I did. Every morning and every afternoon, I would fill his tiny car with my cigarette smoke. I could see that gray air in the car.

He didn't ask me not to smoke. I didn't even ask him if it bothered him. I'm so shocked by that now, but I think I needed not to ask him because I didn't want him to say "No, don't do it unconsciously." This is a pretty good example of intoxicating myself to the point of being heedless of another person though I did finally managed to stop smoking and that's a good sign.

I wasn't a Buddhist yet, and I didn't know about the fifth precept, but the motivations mounted up until they outweighed the craving for tobacco. There was a chronic cough, there was shortness of breath, I wanted to go backpacking in the mountains, and I had two small children and I didn't want to model this behavior for them. I didn't know about second hand smoke then or of how bad it was, but I didn't want them to think this was a cool thing to do.

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Once we get to the point of physical addiction, the point where our bodies really need the drink or the smoke or the drug in order to feel normal, then we might need more help than the fifth precept can give us. We might need a support group, or 12-step program, or medical intervention of some kind. Addiction to alcohol or other drugs is actually a life threatening illness that needs compassionate treatment. Addiction can take us beyond the reaches of our good intentions or willpower. The Buddhist precepts can help though, by providing a framework, and by reminding us that we're not alone.

There's also non-physical addiction, kind of psychological dependency on a substance or an activity to the point where you feel seriously unhappy to go without it, and this can include things like video games and shopping and most of us have experienced this kind of addiction.

Here's a practical exercise for you. Make a list of activities you participate in and of substances that you ingest that are habitual and that you are addicted to in a sense that you're pretty unhappy to go without them. Is there anything on this list that you have serious qualms about? You might pick one that you want to watch and just pay attention to it. Notice what happens when you do it.

Is there an element of choice? You can keep a journal about it for a week or so and see what you learn. One of my addictions is my morning cup of green tea, and it has to be high quality tea too Shinsha or Dragon Well. I'm pretty unhappy without it. When I travel I usually take along a bag of good tea and a little infuser.

What if I got some place and they didn't have any green tea? My God, what would I do? Such suffering. Green tea is supposed to be good for you, so what's the problem? Well, what's bad for me is my fear of being without it, and my clinging and my anxiety about it.

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When I was traveling in Europe for a month recently, visiting different dharma centers, I decided not to take any green tea with me. I wanted to practice flexibility, and to not be bound by this clinging. I wanted to cast myself upon the fates and upon the good intentions of my hosts, and it worked out pretty well. I was proud of myself actually. Sometimes they had green tea, sometimes they didn't, but they always gave me something, and it turned out water is pretty good too.

Now that I'm home again, I drink my green tea with pleasure. I vow not to intoxicate mind or body of self or others but to cultivate a mind that sees clearly. This precept, like all the others, is an invitation to throw my lot in with everyone else. Actually I don't have any choice about that, we're all already in the same boat, and I can't get out of the boat by taking drugs. I can't get away from other people by playing solitaire no matter how obsessively I play it.

If I cultivate a mind that sees clearly, I'll see who's in the boat with me, and we can row together. I hope my discussion of precept practice has been helpful to you. Thank you for your time and attention, and may the precepts be an encouragement to you in your life.