

Susan Moon
Week Three, *Learning to Be Buddha*
January 16, 2017
“On Not-Stealing”



Welcome to the third talk of our online retreat about practicing the Buddhist precepts in everyday life.

I'll start by reciting the five essential Buddhist precepts: I vow not to kill, but to nurture all life. I vow not to take what is not given, but to cultivate generosity. I vow not to misuse sexuality, but to treat each 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.

In my first talk I spoke about precept practice in general and what a gift it is to have these precepts as guides for our behavior, to make a vow and to commit ourselves to something wholeheartedly. In the second talk I spoke about the precept of wise speech, and how valuable it is to speak and listen from the heart. In this talk I'm going to turn to the precept about not-stealing, about not taking what is not given.

This precept comes up more often in our everyday lives than you might think, even if you're not a professional thief. It's all around us. For example, I might be contemplating picking a lemon from a neighbor's lemon tree, and I might say to myself, "Hmm, would this be taking what is not offered?" The answer depends on my relationship with my neighbors, what we might have said to each other before on various things. It's a really useful question. The precept seems to be about a specific behavior not stealing, but that behavior arises from a certain attitude. I think what's really important to this precept is an attitude of gratitude.

The idea of not-stealing is kind of coming from the realization that everything in our world, everything in our life is already given to us. Here I am, and I'm breathing the air that surrounds me, my heart is beating without me telling it to, I'm sitting in the Berkeley Zen Center, a place I've practiced for 40 years, and so much is given.

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Someone many years ago made an offhand comment to me and said, “Oh, if you’re interested in Zen, there’s a Zen Center in Berkeley.” So I climbed up the stairs of an old Victorian house, and inside the door I climbed up some more stairs into the attic, and there was the zendo. There was Buddhist practice waiting for me, just right there. What a tremendous generous gift from the universe.

I’m not actually saying that everything just lands in my lap. I’m not saying that it doesn’t take any effort, or that the universe just gives us everything all by itself. I’m really grateful to Sojun Mel Weitzman, who started the Berkeley Zen Center in the ’60s. I’m grateful to all the people in the sangha who built this room that I’m sitting in now, which wasn’t there when I first started practicing. A lot of effort goes into it, and it takes effort for me to show up too, a little bit of effort. If it didn’t take any effort at all it wouldn’t mean much. It would be like one of those toys that you can’t do anything with and pretty soon you get bored. So the effort itself is part of what’s given, the opportunity to commit ourselves to something that we care about.

We have to cooperate with the universe in receiving the gifts that it gives us. What is given to us is the chance to become human beings together. The challenges and the difficulties are given to us. We didn’t ask for these challenges and difficulties, but they are given, and what is given is a gift.

The precept of not taking what is not given is connected to the understanding that I have enough in this moment. The Korean Zen teacher, Seung Sahn, used to tell his students that they should have an attitude of “enough mind,” the mind that knows “I’m satisfied with what I have.”

When I come from a feeling of lack, then I’m much more likely to take what is not given. I’ll think other people have a lot of stuff that I don’t have and it’s my job to even things out. But I don’t know what other people have. They might have demons inside, or a

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history of loss that I can't imagine. Even a person who has plenty of privilege might still be coming from a sense of lack, still feel the need to get more stuff to fill a great hollowness inside. So, “I have everything I need,” is a really good reminder to oneself. Sometimes it might be a little easier to say, “I have everything I need at this moment.” It's a good mantra.

Of course, it is true that many people really don't have everything they need in the ordinary sense of the word. They lack food, and shelter, and clothing, education, health care, a safe place to raise their children. Addressing these very real inequities is something that we can all try to find ways to help with, like supporting workers' rights, or increasing the minimum wage to \$15 per hour. There are a lot of things like that that we could turn our attention to.

But here, I'm not talking about the essentials that everybody needs to sustain our lives. I'm talking about the bottomless feeling of lack that comes from a terrible greed, where we want and never feel like we have enough. We live in a society that encourages us to want stuff that we don't need. In fact our economy depends on our wanting stuff. This is something for us to notice.

When you make a donation to the Sierra Club they'll send you a little tote bag for free with a Sierra Club logo on it. I look at the form and I think, “Oh great, I'm going to get this little tote bag for free. Terrific.” But then if I stop to think about it I don't even want the tote bag. So I've taken to checking the box that says, “Please don't send me my free gift. Please use my whole donation to support the environment,” because I already have more tote bags than I need, and some of them probably even have the Sierra Club logo. They're all stuffed into a shelf in my closet. I say to myself, “I have everything I need, including tote bags.”

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It feels really good to say this. I'm discovering that having everything I need is a restful feeling. I have everything I need at this moment. It means I'm not acting out of a sense of lack. This is a kind of training of the mind.

I want to tell you one of my favorite stories about stealing. Ryokan was a Zen monk in 18th-century Japan. He was a poet and he lived alone in a hut in the mountains. One evening as he returned from a visit with a friend, he discovered a thief in the hut looking for something to steal, but there was nothing there. Ryokan said, "You've come a long way to visit me. I'm sorry to have you go away empty-handed, so here, please take my clothes." He took off his clothes and he gave them to the thief. The thief, somewhat bewildered, took the clothes and slunk away.

Then Ryokan sat down, naked, and he looked up at the moon and he said, "Poor thief. I wish I could have given him this beautiful moon." Then he wrote this haiku: "The thief left it behind: the moon at my window." There's no such thing as stealing in the face of complete generosity. What is truly valuable, like the light of the moon, can't really be stolen.

Along with gratitude, generosity can really help us when practicing this precept. It helps us not to take what is not given when we practice generosity. In my sangha we had a two-month period of intensive practice, and commitment to more intensive practice. I decided to take up the practice of generosity in a very deliberate practical way, and that every day I would give away something tangible. It had to be something that belonged to me or something I made. I couldn't just go buy something and give it away. It had to be something like a sweater, or a pair of earrings, a pot of soup.

Of course, I know that the greatest gifts are not tangible. There are things like time, attention, love, but it's hard to measure those things, so I did it with these tangible



objects. I found that this practice helped me to practice generosity in those less tangible ways as well. I would recommend this to you some time. It's fun to try.

Another unwholesome attitude that's related to taking what's not given is the idea that it's okay if you can get away with it. “What they don't know won't hurt them.” If nobody experiences being hurt by it, if nobody even notices it, why the hell not? The classic example of this kind of thing is taking pens and pads of paper from the office supply closet. The problem here is not the pens so much, the problem is the idea that it doesn't count if nobody sees you do it. That's not the point.

The precepts, as I've been saying, are not about people watching us to see if we keep them. They come from inside. If you see yourself do it, then that's what counts. The precepts are about intention, and if you think it doesn't matter if somebody doesn't see you, then you're not acting from a good, deep intention.

The attitude that “I'm at the center of the universe,” or the attitude of entitlement, operates at the level of society as well, when our corporations or governments take resources of poorer countries for their own use or profit. This comes up in our lives as well. The teak trees that were cut down to make the furniture on my back porch, were they truly offered? Or the labor of the women who sew the blue jeans I wear, was that labor truly offered? I don't know, but it's something to think about. This precept has really broad social and economic implications.

In the Buddha's time, it was much easier to know if you were stealing. You probably knew who made your clothing. You probably knew where your food came from. Most of it was probably grown locally. You knew where the thatch of your roof came from. You drew your water from the village well or from the river. Now our food and drink comes from sources that are often invisible to us. So we don't always know who we're stealing from, or who is stealing from us for that matter. But we can do our best to find out.



Keeping this precept without valuing material possessions too much; that's the kind of dark side of the whole thing. In our capitalist economies we put a huge emphasis on private property. Everything is owned by somebody. We lose our understanding of the commons that belong to everyone, like the air and the water. When a private company pollutes the water, as a side effect of their own profit-making endeavors, that's a kind of stealing. It's an abuse of the precept to use it to justify private ownership of what belongs to the public. So instead of, "You can't take this, it's mine," how about, "Let me offer you whatever I can so you don't have to steal it," like Ryokan did.

I want to read you a verse from Shantideva's wonderful text, *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*. Shantideva was an eighth-century Buddhist monk in India. Here he contrasts two different attitudes about generosity: "If I give this, what will be left for me? Is thinking of oneself the way of evil ghosts? If I keep this, what will be left to give? Concern for others is the way of heaven."

I'm going to end with one more story about stealing. A few years ago I was going to Arizona to teach a women's retreat with a friend of mine, another Zen teacher. I took that BART train from my home in Berkeley to the San Francisco airport, a long train ride all the way to the end of the line. When I got to the last stop at the airport I looked down and my carry-on bag—which contained my laptop, my cell phone, my cash, my credit cards, my old-fashioned paper address book, my old-fashioned paper calendar telling me everything I had to do for months to come, everything—was gone. It wasn't there.

There was nothing to do but get off the train. I reported the theft right away to the BART police there in the station, and then I went straight to the United Airlines counter. I was completely frantic. But I thought, "Maybe I can still go on the flight. It was an electronic ticket, so maybe I can go on the flight and I'll borrow some money from somebody in



Arizona.” But United Airlines wouldn’t let me board the flight because I didn’t have any ID to get through security. As far as they were concerned I was nobody.

They called the gate and I talked to my friend, who was waiting for me at the gate, and I said, “Go ahead, I’ll try to come tomorrow.” The one thing I still had was my BART ticket, Bay Area Rapid Transit that is, in my back pocket. So I got on the BART train and set forth on the long trip home to Berkeley. I did go back to the airport the next day with my passport as ID, and was able to fly to Arizona.

The point of the story is that when I got on the train to go home, I felt stripped of everything. I was in a state of shock. I was sitting there looking out the window at the hills, and I suddenly thought, “I’m alive. I’m alive. Wow. Nobody stole my life. Nobody stole my body. I still have my friends. I still have my family. Nobody I love was hurt. I’m alive. I’ve alive.” I was so ecstatic in that moment. I wanted to jump up and down in the BART train and start shouting about it. Even though it was a huge inconvenience, and I wouldn’t really ask for it to happen again, that theft was a big gift to me, and I still have a sense of gratitude for my life that was deepened by that experience.

In the deepest sense no one really owns anything, we all have to let go of everything when we die. In the meantime, everything is already given to us. So, let’s hold on to our so-called possessions very lightly and loosely. Let’s hold them without clutching. I vow not to take what is not given, but to cultivate generosity. What does this precept mean to you? How can we practice gratitude? How can we bring forth a spirit of sharing? How can we offer the kind of generosity that makes stealing impossible?

I’ll be back next week to talk to you about intoxication. In the meantime, thanks for your practice.