

Leslie Booker

*Guidelines for an Ethical Life*

Week 1: “Remembering That We Belong to Each Other”

December 5, 2020



Hello, Dear Ones. My name is Leslie Booker, and I'm a teacher in the Insight lineage. Welcome to part one of "Guidelines for an Ethical Life." My life and practice live at the intersection of dharma, embodied wisdom, and activism. That looks like taking these ancient wisdom practices, knowing them through our bodies, and then utilizing them throughout our lived experience and our day-to-day lives, whether we are activists, educators, parents, working in tech, or working in urban agriculture.

In my first ten years of teaching mindfulness I shared these practices with incarcerated and system-involved youth in New York City and other vulnerable populations. During this time I began to understand the depth of these teachings and the importance of making them accessible so that we can carry them through all aspects of our lives, not just when we have a comfortable cushion to sit on or a perfectly quiet place to practice. I also work nationally as a guest lecturer and keynote speaker at conferences and universities, and I teach in dharma centers, expanding our vision around culturally responsive teachings and reimagining this paradigm of self and community care. I am also very proud to be a recent graduate of the Spirit Rock four-year retreat teacher training.

Over these next four weeks, I'll be offering teachings on *sila*, the Pali word for moral conduct, these ethical guidelines of how we move through the world, taking care of ourselves, each other, and the planet. Sila is the first bucket in the eightfold path. It lays the foundation to make sure that we are attuning the heart and mind to skillful speech, skillful action, and skillful livelihood. This is the foundation, the soil from which the rest of the teachings of the dharma can grow and flower.

In our time together we'll look at sila through the lens of the *paramis*, the ten perfections or attainments that the brahman Sumedha was said to have practiced for eons and eons before he was born as Siddhartha Gautama, the one who sat under the Bodhi tree and awakened to become the Buddha that we know today. From this view, sila focuses on skillful action and unfolds into the five precepts, this list of things that we recite on the first night of retreat of what we're going to abstain from while on retreat. This includes not harming, not stealing, not engaging with sexual energy, not speaking, and not using intoxicants.

For me, the language of abstaining has always felt a little harsh. Someone telling us not to do something isn't the same as telling us what to do and why we're doing it. So we'll be working with the version of the precepts that reminds me that I'm engaging in these practices to support and care for and protect myself, and to protect you as well. Because consciously or unconsciously, we are interconnected, and what I do will impact you and vice versa.

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So those precepts are:

"Knowing how deeply our lives are intertwined, I undertake the precept to protect life.

Knowing how deeply our lives are intertwined, I undertake the precept to be generous.

Knowing how deeply our lives are intertwined, I undertake the precept to protect the sexuality of myself and others.

Knowing how deeply our lives are intertwined, I undertake the precept to be careful with my speech.

Knowing how deeply our lives are intertwined, I undertake the precept to be free of intoxicants for a clear heart and mind."

For our first week together, I want to spend some time sharing how I came to really deeply appreciate the practice of the precepts and how I work with them. Like most of my family of origin, I grew up in the Baptist church in Virginia. When I was around 10 or 11 years old I began to understand that I was experiencing two different types of Christianity in my life. One was what I was learning in my home and within my family: one of deep care, love, and caring for other people. But at church, I was getting the kind of teachings that were about hatred and a lot of homophobia was wrapped up in there. It didn't feel good at all for me. So around 12 years old, I sat my parents down, and I said, "Look, I'm getting few different messages here I'm a little confused about what I'm supposed to believe." My mom explained to me that people can manipulate or skew any teaching to benefit themselves. They understood where I was coming from, then my mom said, "You can stop going to church. But the only thing I ask of you is that you remember to care for and treat others as you would have them care for and treat you." And so I took that promise really seriously and I tried to be as kind of a person as I knew how to be.

Fast forward 20 years and I am introduced to the dharma. Probably two years into my practice I was able to go and sit my first retreat. My teachers were Gina Sharpe, Larry Yang, and Bhante Buddharakkita. At the end of the retreat, Bhante says, "I've opened up a Buddhist center in Uganda, everyone come visit!" I was incredibly intrigued so after the retreat, I went up and spoke to him, and he's like, "Yeah, yeah, come and visit!" So about six months later, I changed apartments so I could save some money, quit my job that was coming to an end, and I went to Uganda to study with this monk. And at the end of my time together it was time for me to come back to New York City. I had learned and grown so much in that time, and I wasn't sure how to implement what I learned in Uganda during this time with Bhante. So I asked him for advice.



He said to me, "Your life has to be your practice, and your practice has to be your life. There can be no separation." My brain and my heart kind of separated there. I didn't quite understand what he meant. My brain was like, 'That is the worst advice. It makes no sense. I don't know what you're talking about.' But the way that those words landed in my heart and body, I knew that there was a beautiful nugget of wisdom that I didn't quite know what it meant yet, but if I held on to it, it would reveal itself to me. What I learned later on was that Bhante was inviting me to not live a fragmented life, to live a life with intention and integrity. A life that is integrated and whole.

This is when I began to check in with the precepts with each aspect of my life as I moved through the world. Each word I said, every action I took, every partner I was with, I reflected before, during, and after. I reflected if these actions were leading to affliction—to deeper harm and suffering—or if they were leading myself and others to greater liberation and freedom.

As a global community, we are living in the most desperate times I've ever experienced in my lifetime. Between the global pandemic, the racial reckoning—which is way past due—our forests being on fire, and folks being displaced and losing loved ones. We are living within a shared trauma. And the body is in this hypervigilance, this grasping and tightening and getting rigid.

So how do we practice with this? How are we showing up in the midst of all this suffering and can we stay in relationship with each other? This is what I'm curious about right now. When we sit on our cushions, is our practice going so internal that we're actually bypassing over what needs to be tended to in this world right now? How are we caring for each other in these turbulent times? Do we turn away from someone who is asking for help because we don't trust what they're going to do with that one dollar that we're offering them? Do we scream at people who don't share our political views? Is our sexual energy one-sided either because it's not reciprocated or because we're not considering the impact of our actions on another person? Do we allow our hearts and minds to get colonized by the three poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion? As we take in what we see in social media, and believe it to be true?

Dear Ones, there is a tenderness that arises in our bodies when we realize that we belong to each other. This tenderness, embodied as *silā*, manifests as a fierce showing up for one another, grounded in the knowledge of how deeply our lives are intertwined. Until we see each other next time, I invite you to explore moving through this world, watching the news, going on social media, engaging with folks that we might not have a shared value or share belief system around. As we engage, can we hold in our hearts that they belong to us and that we belong to them? And when we do, what shifts, what expands, what contracts? Does our heart begin to shift? Do we begin to view the world with a more expansive vision?

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I'm looking forward to being with you next week, where we will be exploring the first and second precepts: how we can protect life and how we can bring generosity into our lived experiences. Thank you for your kind attention. I'll see you next week.