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Guidelines for an Ethical Life

Week 2: "The Joy of Protecting Life and the Gift of Generosity"

December 12, 2020



Hello, Dear Ones, and welcome back! This is part two of the series "Guidelines for an Ethical Life," a way for us to look at, experience, and know the precepts in our day-to-day lives.

Today, we'll be exploring the first two precepts: the joy of protecting life and the gift of generosity. We bring these practices to the forefront of every aspect of our lives, not just for our personal liberation, but for the freedom and liberation of all beings. In part one, I spoke to how this practice of having the precepts as my constant companion became an integral piece of my life. The advice I received from a teacher early on planted a seed to explore what it would look like to fully integrate my life and practice. In this integrated life I wasn't leaving the goodwill that I had cultivated on my yoga mat or meditation cushion behind when I went out to engage with the rest of the world. My life became my practice, and my practice my life. The precepts have been the soil from where my practice has grown. Nothing is too small or too big that these five ethical guidelines can't hold.

As many of you know, there are eight precepts. The first five precepts are held by us as householders to remind us of how deeply our lives are intertwined. We undertake the precepts to protect life, to be generous, to protect the sexuality of myself and others (and for some that looks like celibacy), to be careful with my speech, and of course, to tend to and pay attention to the intoxicants that could cloud my heart and mind (and for many people that also looks like sobriety.)

The additional three precepts are meant for monastics, and they include not taking a meal past high noon, not to adorn the body with garlands and perfume, and not to sleep on a high and lofty bed. In our time together, we will be exploring the path laid out to support the laypeople as we hold our obligations and our day-to-day lived experiences.

So we begin our journey with the joy that comes through protecting ourselves and others, and the gifts of generosity. I love that these are next to each other and hold the honorable position of the foundation of this practice because it allows us to see the connection, this through line, and how the application of one precept supports and lifts up the others.

With these first two precepts, we are moving towards undoing the stress of an egocentric life and we're bringing the welfare of others into our hearts and minds. Ajahn Succito says that in Western society, "our sense of what we belong to ends at the edge of our skin." And we can feel that as a society, along with all of my freedoms and abundance as an American I also know that America is a global leader when it comes to loneliness, illness, addiction, and violence. I think a lot of that comes from a culture that reinforces this myth of being alone, disconnected, and not belonging to anything or anyone.



I was reading [an article in *The New York Times Magazine*](#) recently where the writer was sharing his observations from raising five chickens. He was speaking to the strangeness of these animals, and finding more similarity with his domesticated pets than the animals to each other. He says, "To say this could seem to denigrate them, but that sense itself speaks to a problem: that so many of our standards of respect, dignity and value are linked to individuality and autonomy. To be a person, or personlike, is to be understood as a single being. How different to be part of a flock and to have so many of one's behaviors and motivations filtered through the group dynamics of that collective. Flock allegiance seemed always paramount for our five birds, guiding and propelling them, most notably as nightfall approached, when they all, as if on cue, began heading back toward the coop. Once they found their way inside, they would spend the night nestled together, perched all in a row." So this flock allegiance he speaks of is how I imagined my ancestors of enslaved Africans and my Indigenous ancestors, the Seminole peoples, and queer folks, women folks, I think this flock allegiance is how we survived, by staying close and connected and holding each other tightly. This remembering of our connection that stands up against isolation, the impact of capitalism and white supremacy, and instead invites us to see how we can continue to open our hearts and to lean on each other so that we might thrive as a culture.

In the classical teachings, there is this invitation to not kill other living beings. And most of us are like, "Cool, I can totally not kill other living beings, that's not a problem." But are we actively engaged in protecting life? Are we *actively engaged* in protecting life? Thich Nhat Hanh says, "So the question is whether we are practicing loving ourselves? Because loving ourselves means loving our community. When we are capable of loving ourselves, nourishing ourselves properly, not intoxicating ourselves, we are already protecting and nourishing society. Because in the moment when we are able to smile, to look at ourselves with compassion, our world begins to change. We may not have done anything but when we are relaxed, when we are peaceful, when we are able to smile and not to be violent in the way we look at the system, at that moment there is a change already in the world."

This teaching flows into our practice of *dana*, the Pali word for generosity. When I began my practice, I, like many people, was in a very transitional stage in my life. I didn't understand the dharma at all but I loved the way I felt after sitting with my sangha. I loved the warmth of the people and the felt sense of a body at ease. The loving instructions that I heard repeatedly were to not worry about not getting it but to allow the dharma, the teachings, to just wash over me, and this confidence that one day, I would understand. One of the first teachings that I thought I "got" was *dana*, generosity. I was like, "I get it, you come in, you hear a talk, you put some cash in the box at the back of the room," it all seemed very straightforward and very transactional. At that stage of my life, that made a lot of sense.



But what I didn't get was generosity was inherently reciprocal. You couldn't give unless there was someone to receive. And I did not understand how to receive. When I first moved to New York in the late '90s to start those lean years of a career in the fashion industry, my very concerned parents would always reach out and ask if I needed support with rent or food or anything. I would always say, "No, no, I'm good. I don't need anything." And I noticed that every time they asked there was this tightness, clenching, and shutting down; heat would arise in my body just from the mere idea of someone asking if they could help me, if they could offer some generosity towards me.

I shared this with my teacher Gina Sharpe, and she asked me to begin a practice of saying yes to every act of generosity and to do this for a whole year. Through this process, I began to understand that I was cultivating the fullness, the entirety, of this practice of dana, of generosity. The act of giving is a movement towards a shared world and experience. And so when I said "no" because of my pride and my ego, it cut off my ability to be in this shared experience, to be in relationship with others, and it cut off the possibility of others sharing their form of generosity. When I began my practice, I didn't connect the sense of warmth and the ease of my body and the kindness of these strangers in my new sangha as generosity living itself out. But these friendly gestures, like allowing someone to lean on you, getting someone our undivided attention, or attuning to the needs of ourselves and others are all acts of dana. The cultivation of generosity is about bringing people to mind; it's about developing the intention to share. When we hold generosity as a value, we begin to get curious about the whole of another person's life instead of these broken off and fragmented, small slivers of their story. We begin to move away from pity and shame, and towards deeper connection, relationship, and even compassion. Generosity is said to be a quality that testifies to the depth of one's humanity.

So, Dear Ones, in our time together today we explored the first two precepts: the joy of protecting life, and all of the gifts of generosity, both in receiving and giving. When these two are sitting side by side, I am reminded of one of my favorite quotes by the poet and essayist Audre Lorde. She says that "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare." When we tend to and care for ourselves, we are caring for and tending to our society as a whole, with a deep fierceness and deep commitment.

So how does this land in your body? What part of your body is clenching or tightening? Have we created a mental note of "Yes, I can be generous, and I can protect those people, but definitely not those people." Is the mind saying, "Yeah, I could do that. But first, let me tend to everyone else before I tend to myself."

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And so, Dear Ones, we are coming to the end of our time together today. The time until we meet again is when our practice really comes alive. It's when we have the chance to bring our attention and awareness to see how and when we are tending to, caring for, and protecting our lives and those around us. We can begin to explore generosity both in the giving and receiving and seeing where that balances, if we're leaning more on one side than the other. For some folks, this might look like creating really clear boundaries in our lives. And for others, it might mean to soften and to be more receptive.

So join me next week as we continue to explore undertaking the precepts. We'll be looking into how we protect and care for the sexuality of ourselves and others, and also how we care for our speech. So join me next week as we look at resting in renunciation and the triumph of skillful speech. Thank you so much for your kind attention, and I'll see you next time.