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*Guidelines for an Ethical Life*

Week 4: “The Delight of Living a Life Free of Intoxicants”

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Hello Dear Ones, and welcome back to our fourth and final part of this series of exploring the precepts together. Thank you so much for sticking around and seeing what’s possible when we choose to live a life in the bliss of blamelessness, and as we hold the dharma, embodied wisdom, and social justice as the viewpoint from which we know these guidelines for an ethical life.

As you’ve experienced over these first three weeks, the precepts rely on each other; the practice of any one supports and lifts the others up. By living these practices in our everyday lives, we begin to see their relationship and intersectionality to each other. One can know that the practice of caring for one’s sexuality and the sexuality of others is only possible when we’ve also undertaken the precepts to protect life, to be generous, and to care for our speech.

And though we’re coming to the end of this series together, I’m hoping this is the just beginning for many of you, and hope that you continue to explore living and knowing your practice off the cushion by incorporating the precepts into each thought, word, and action as you engage with the world around you.

So I thought I’d begin with a recap, just to remind us of where we’ve been and to set us up for where we’re going. In our first session together, I spoke to how the language of “abstaining from” had always sounded a bit harsh to me. So we’ve been working with the following version of the precepts, that remind me that I’m engaging in these practices to support, care, and protect myself and others because we share an interdependence that reminds me that we belong to each other. “Knowing how deeply our lives are intertwined, I undertake the precept to protect life, to be generous, to protect the sexuality of myself and others, to be mindful of my speech, and to be free of intoxicants for a clear mind and heart.” That’s where we’ll pick up today, the delight of living a life free of intoxicants.

At the beginning of this program, I told you a bit about myself, and now that we’ve gotten to know each other a bit better, you’ve probably surmised that I am a queer Black American woman who has chosen to live a life that is fueled by an ethic of love, faith, equity, and justice. And when that is your social location, and the dharma is your practice, one is very aware of our world, and all that stands against all that I stand for.

My dear friend and colleague Sylvia Boorstein refers to the fifth precept as “the practice precept that completes the first,” that first precept being our commitment to protect all living beings, no matter what. We pay attention and bring these precepts into every aspect of our lives as a roadmap to keep our integrity and dignity in check.



When most of us think of intoxicants, we typically think of things like drugs and alcohol, things that interfere with our ability to access clear knowing and can lead to the harming of ourselves or others. Many folks choose sobriety to support this commitment to not harm others or themselves.

I want to bring our attention to other intoxicants that can also cloud our hearts and minds and interrupt or deny our connections with others. In the today’s climate these intoxicants can look like the sensationalized news media, our social media, our hand-held devices, and the entertainment we choose. These can also confuse the heart and mind when we believe what we are told and are not seeing for ourselves. Seeing for ourselves was a clear instruction from the Buddha, he said *ehipassiko*, “Go and see for yourself.” For me, every intoxicant that I can think of that puts up this barrier to my truth can be classified into a bucket of one of the three poisons: greed, hatred, or delusion. Buddhadasa pithily refers to them as pulling in, pushing away, or running around in circles.

When ignorance is present and I begin to believe that the social conditioning around me that is rooted in the oppression of others is true, I know that my heart and mind have been colonized by these three poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion. When I forget my true nature I’m not able to see the humanity of others and I begin to meet anger with anger and fear with fear. When we’re not paying attention, these poisons can lead us to unhappiness and suffering. Just on the other side is this great possibility of liberation and freedom.

We can feel this in our bodies through *Hiri* and *Ottappa*, “these two bright qualities [that] protect the world.” *Hiri* is more of an internal gauge; it’s that feeling we get in the pit of our stomachs or that tingling under the armpits. It’s our conscience coming online when we’ve done or said something that is not in alignment with our values. *Hiri* allows us to keep our self-respect and integrity by gently reminding us of who we are. She invites us into our courage and back into our humanity.

*Ottappa* is more external and relational; it’s that sweet quality that allows us to move through the world with ease, lightness, dignity, and nobility, knowing that we have done nothing blameworthy. This ally in protecting the world is driven by being connected to something bigger than ourselves. It supports us in remembering that we are accountable to each other in our words, deeds, and actions; it reminds us that we are social beings and that we belong to each other.

This is easy to be reflected back to us when we surround ourselves with wise friends who have also committed to being on this path. *Kalyanamitta* are spiritual friends who are good, admirable, and noble. We turn towards these virtuous friendships for perspective when having a hard time seeing things right-sized. I was under a writing deadline the other day and I turned to one of my



dear *kalyanamittas* for advice and support. I told her that I had just been cleaning my house all day, that I hadn't been doing any writing at all, and she said, “Oh, you've been sweeping the temple!” She went on to say that there's nothing cleaner than the home of a writer who is under a deadline. And there is something—both literally and metaphorically—that I really appreciated about that advice that she offered. Removing the clutter sets up the conditions for our heart, mind, and body to move through the world with ease. Getting curious about the precepts in our everyday lives is like sweeping our temple. It clears out the poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion, creating the space that is needed to invite in tenderness, care, and generosity. It is the foundation, the starting point of our practice.

In our first session together I spoke of my first meeting and subsequent practice time in Uganda with Bhante Buddharakkhita. More than anything I was moved by his lightness; how free he seemed in the world, how nothing seemed to stick to him or weigh him down. So when he offered me the advice of having no separation between my practice and my life, I knew there was a lot to be known about taking what I had learned on the cushion in my formal meditation practice and moving it into every aspect of my life.

Just like the precepts that lean on and support each other, we lean on the support of our *kalyanamitta*, our spiritual friends, of *hiri* and *ottapa*, these bright qualities that protect the world; we sweep our temples, and we listen and begin to trust the felt sense of these bodies that contracts and expand. We know how to do this; this is our birthright, to be safe and to be cared for.

Dear ones, I hope that you've had fun over these last four weeks together, exploring, playing, experimenting, getting curious with these five precepts through the lens of dharma, embodied wisdom, and social justice. I hope that there is more weight and width and depth to how you're holding these practices and how you are learning to care for them. It's been a joy to share these practices with you all and I'm looking forward to hearing how this offering has landed for you. Thank you so much for your kind attention.