

ETHICS ARE OUR NATURE

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I don't intend to explain the Zen precepts, or ethical principles, in a traditional way, but in a way that helps you to understand that the precepts are something everyone has as their own nature. They are not something that was decided by Buddha. Precepts are what make Buddha be Buddha. Precepts came first and Buddha came next; before Buddha appeared there were precepts. In this sense, there were precepts in China before Bodhidharma arrived. Before anyone comes into this world there are precepts. Everyone has these principles in the true sense.

We interpret them differently because of differences in our ways of life, but originally ethical principles are just our human nature. When we transmit the precepts, we put emphasis on this point—not on each of the two hundred fifty precepts, but on the original, universal point that is available to everyone and that everyone can accept. Instead of putting emphasis on individual precepts, one by one, we put more emphasis on our original human nature, or Buddha nature.

Our intention in transmitting precepts is to reveal what our original human nature is, beyond our various ways of life and interpretations, and to understand how each precept is related to this original nature.

When Oka Sotan Roshi was a young boy, his teacher Token Mitetsu Roshi told him to go buy tofu for the monastery meal. On the way to the store, he saw posters advertising an acrobatic theater, and he looked at the pictures for a long time without realizing how much time was passing. Then he heard his temple's lunch bell. He was supposed to have been back already with the tofu for the meal, so he dashed to the store.

“Give me tofu!” he said to the shopkeeper. As soon as the shopkeeper gave it to him, he dashed back toward the temple. On the way, he realized he had left his hat in the store, so he ran back and said “Give me! Give me! Give me!”

The shopkeeper said, “Give you what?”

“Give me!” the boy said again. His mind was so busy that the word “hat” wouldn't come out, and all he could say was, “Give me! Give me! Give me!”

The shopkeeper said “Give you what? What? What?”

Finally the boy was able to say, “My hat!”

“What is the matter with you?” the shopkeeper said. “Your hat is on your head!”

So the boy dashed again back to his temple, with his hat on his head.

That was the story.

The precepts are something like the boy’s hat. The precepts are always on his head, like his hat. If he always has his hat, then there’s nothing to think about. That is how we should actually keep our precepts.

Even if you laugh at what Oka Roshi did when he was just a boy, he was a very good priest. When he got back to his temple, they had to wait a while before they ate, so he must have been scolded. Even though he was scolded, he was a good boy. There is no need to wonder about that point. You cannot say he was not observing the ethical principles of Zen. He faithfully observed the precepts, and he always put his hat on his head. Sometimes he forgot he was wearing his hat, that’s all.