


THE TEN PROHIBITORY PRECEPTS

We should consider them always and we should not forget them, but we should not be bound by the teachings or precepts. That is how we keep our precepts.



There are ten prohibitory precepts, corresponding to body, speech, and mind. “Do not kill,” “do not steal,” and “do not commit adultery” are the precepts about our body. “Do not lie,” “do not sell liquor,” “do not bring up the faults of others,” and “do not boast of yourself and blame others” are about our words. “Do not withhold material and spiritual possessions,” “do not become angry,” and “do not debase the triple treasure” are about our mind.

Do not kill means “do realize our true nature.” It does not mean just not to kill some insects, and it does not mean just to have mercy. It is deeper than that. Of course, “do not kill” means that we should not kill even an insect, but that is not the real meaning of “do not kill.”

Do not steal. When we do not realize that we already possess everything, then we want to steal. But really everything in the world belongs to us anyway, so there is no need to steal. There is no need to steal it—you should take care of it! That is the meaning of “do not steal.”

Do not commit adultery. This precept emphasizes our attachment to some particular things. It does not mean just not to attach to others! We attach to things just as we attach to a girlfriend or boyfriend. To be able to do what is necessary, we need to be able to refrain from various attachments. In my temple, Zoun-in, I was scolded by my master many times: “You are committing adultery!” When I was attached to fine things, he would say, “Don’t commit adultery!” He was right, I think.

Do not lie. This precept is about words, but even when you aren’t saying anything, don’t lie! Your eyes tell lies, your countenance tells lies. This is true.

Do not sell liquor. This is a very important precept: “Do not sell liquor.” Nowadays you should add some more things here! “Do not sell” means not to boast, or not to take advantage of liquor. It is medicine. If you take it in the right way, it will be of benefit, but it is kind of breaking the precept, because

our nature is very weak to the temptation. We should consider this point when we take liquor.

The meaning of “Do not sell” is very deep. Do not sell liquor. If you boast about the profundity of Buddhist teaching, you are selling a kind of liquor to people. If you say that some religion is wonderful, you are selling some liquor. It is not only liquor—all of the spiritual teachings or things that intoxicate us are considered liquor. If you take these precepts literally, that itself is a kind of selling liquor.

We should always have freedom in the teachings and precepts. We should consider them always and we should not forget them, but we should not be bound by the teachings or precepts. That is how we keep our precepts. That is why we have the fifth precept. The fifth precept means absolute freedom from all the teachings. “Do not sell liquor” is very deep.

Do not bring up the faults of others. When we talk about someone's faults, it means we are talking about our own faults. Almost all the time it is so. When you talk about someone's faults, you should become aware that you have the same faults. So, it is a good thing to talk about it! But if there is no need to talk about it, that is much better. Do not bring up the faults of others.

Do not boast of yourself and blame others. When you boast of yourself and blame others, it means you have a very small self.

Do not withhold material and spiritual possessions. If you keep this precept in its true sense, it doesn't matter for you who has how much money. It doesn't matter. We should not be concerned about others' property or money. We should not count others' money—we are busy enough counting our money! So we should not be concerned about others' possessions. This is actually what we mean by "Do not withhold material and spiritual possessions."

Do not become angry. This is very difficult. Nearly all Zen masters are very short-tempered, but when I was young, we couldn't tell our masters not to become angry. It may be better to just recite this precept before our master. When our master says, "Do not become angry," we should repeat, "DO NOT BECOME ANGRY!"

Do not debase the triple treasure. I have thought that it is very funny that Buddhists set up this precept. It looks like Buddhists are protecting themselves by setting up this precept, and this one is supposed to be the most fatal, important precept! If you break it, you will be expelled. I have thought it is rather unfair to set up this kind of precept. “Don’t kill” is good, and “Don’t be angry” is very good, but “Don’t be blasphemous of the triple treasure” is a very selfish precept.

Moreover, if you break this precept, you supposedly go down to the bottom of the hell. It is even worse than if you kill someone. This is very funny. This is our system. It is a very good system—a very good system for me but not for you!

The person who breaks this last precept is supposedly a very intelligent and promising person; that is why we put a very strict and heavy consequence on them. The system of hell is not punishment, you know, it is training. Since this is a strong person, it is quite an understandable consequence. The idea is that those who kill people or steal something are not so intelligent, and usually they are not so good, so there is no use applying a strict teaching or consequence. It might be better just to treat them in an appropriate, tentative way. That is why we do not put such a heavy consequence on them. The people who are angry are supposedly very honest and very good, have a strong will and sincerity, so we put a heavy burden on them; we give them a heavy consequence. In this way of understanding, the tenth precept is for the most intelligent, good people, the ninth is for the next best, and so on.

DO NOT KILL

When the flies come, you might kill them. But you are always prepared for the possibility that you are doing something wrong.



We say “Do not kill,” but “Do not kill” doesn’t just mean do not kill flies or insects. Actually, if you say, “Here is a fly, should I kill it or not?” it is too late! We always have this kind of problem, even before we see the fly.

When we eat, we say, “Seventy-two labors brought us this rice.” Those “seventy-two labors,” you know, include keeping various insects out of the grain. So the precept “Do not kill” does not just mean not to kill insects. When you eat and say, “Seventy-two labors brought us this rice,” you are including the precept of “not to kill.” Even though we can only eat after there has been

a great effort to protect the grain from insects, the feeling you have when you say “seventy-two labors” should be related to the precept “not to kill.”

To exist here in this way is the result of sacrificing many animals and plants. You are always sacrificing something for your being. As long as you are involved in a dualistic concept, it is not possible for you to observe our precepts. The point of practice is to get out of this kind of dualistic concept and fill our being with gratitude.

It is actually very foolish to say “not to kill.” We say “not to kill” to point out something about our life. Each precept gives us a point of view from which to understand our life. “Not to kill,” “not to steal,” “not to speak ill of others”: each of these precepts includes the other precepts, and each practice or ritual includes the others. The way to observe precepts and to practice zazen is to have the actual feeling of your being here.

You can say, “Yes, I will do it!” to the precept “not to kill” because originally it is not possible to kill anything. You think you kill something, but actually you cannot. Even if you think you killed it, it is still alive. Even though you eat something, it is still alive in your body. If something leaves your body, it is still alive. It is not possible for anything to be killed. So the only way is to be grateful for everything you have. That is how you keep our precepts without having a dualistic understanding of them.

You may say, “If that is so, there is no need to have precepts.” But if you think in this way, you cannot feel your presence, your being, or the way you are alive here. If you think in this way, you do not have any gratitude or joy for life.

When the flies come, you might kill them. But you are always prepared for the possibility that you are doing something wrong. Even when you are eating, you are prepared for “Uh-oh!” You are not eating your rice carelessly, and you are reciting from the bottom of your heart: “Seventy-two labors brought us this food.” You bow in the same way. There is no other way, as long as you live.

If your practice doesn’t reach that far, it is not real practice. That is how you feel eternal life in a mortal body. When you say “seventy-two labors,” there is Buddha already, and there is nothing happening, even though many things are happening.