

## Precepts

### ***A law of life: Life is non-conservative and irreversible.***

**Non-conservative** means: the result is the natural and unique product of the living process; in other words, the process determines the result. Different processes will lead to different results, though many times the differences may not be distinguishable to a naive mind on a superficial level. If one wants to be a millionaire, not just a million dollars but how he gets it will make him a different millionaire.

**Irreversible** means: any part of the living process cannot be erased without leaving a trace of the erasing. If one makes a mistake, he cannot just forget it or hide it away. The mistakes must be compensated for in other ways.

If this law is not valid, then all of the efforts in which people strive to be good and unselfish lose their foundation and meanings. And particularly, if there was, is, and will be a sage, then he is the most stupid person in the world. The sage does not know that he is a sage. People respect and honor him so that they call him a sage. If the sage were stupid, then all these people would be stupid and confused, too. This is against the experimental reports in history; and more important, against what we know in our hearts. A sage must be a sage; though we may disagree about who is a real sage. Consequently, one must live his life in a right way. And any mistake he makes, he himself has to compensate and pay for it sooner or later. Different ways lead to different places. The way which will transform a man into a Buddha is Buddha's precepts.

There are many precepts: 250 bhiksu (male monk) precepts, 348 bhiksuni (female monk) precepts, ten major and 48 minor Bodhisattva precepts. Regardless of the different kinds of precepts, they are all based on and derived from the four cardinal precepts and the two protective precepts.

The four cardinal precepts are:

- 1. Do not kill, and do not have any intention to kill.**
- 2. Do not steal, and do not have any intention to steal.**
- 3. Do not engage in foolish speech, and do not have any intention to engage in foolish speech.**
- 4. Do not have sexual misconduct; do not have any intention to have sexual misconduct, and finally do not have sexual conduct.**

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The two protective precepts are:

- 1. Do not take any intoxicant which may cause physical and mental harm, and loss of rational ability.**
- 2. Do not gamble which may cause financial risks, indolence, and reliance on vices.**

Let us examine the rational bases of the six precepts. The First Cardinal Precept: “Do not kill, and do not have any intention to kill.” At the first sight, you may think that you have observed this precept all your life because you have never killed anybody. But have you ever smashed the mosquito when he punctures your skin and sucks your blood? If you include the mosquitoes and other small animals in the precept, it may not be the case that you have observed the precept. Practicing this precept is practicing the compassion which is a fundamental element of self-nature. Do not think that a mosquito is too small to consider. As far as killing is concerned, there is no difference; the difference is in size and power. If you kill someone because he is weaker than you, then where is your compassion? You may defend yourself, saying that you kill him not because he is weaker but because he has caused you some harm, such as sucking your blood. This argument is not valid because, in the first place, if he weren't weak, you couldn't have killed him by the definition of “being not weak.” It may be true that, if the mosquito had not sucked your blood, you would not have killed him. But in this case, your compassion is not tested and hence, questionable. Therefore, you should thank the mosquito for his kindness to give you an opportunity to practice your compassion. He is your teacher. Many of you may not agree with my reasoning and think that I have gone too far off. If you think this way, it is fine; but you are not a Ch'an cultivator. A Ch'an cultivator cultivates only the mind, his own mind. Thus, if you respect the mosquito as a teacher, he is a teacher and you have learned the lesson, regardless whether or not the mosquito thinks that he is your teacher. That is the mosquito's problem, not a Ch'an cultivator's.

The Second Cardinal Precept: “Do not steal, and do not have any intention to steal.” Anyone, including those who steal, will agree with this precept when he talks about it with others. The message of this precept is very clear. Anything, if it is not yours, do not take it. If anyone questions me, “Have you observed this precept?” My answer is, “I did not observe it before September 9, 1977. This is the day when I vowed to take the Bodhisattva precepts. After that date, the thought of stealing has not occurred in my mind; yet I cannot, and need not to, make any conclusion because the karmic law will repay me according to what I have done.”

The active aspect of this precept is giving: giving one's material possessions, Dharma knowledge, and even one's body. When practicing giving, one should have no discrimination about the receivers, and have no attachment to the action of giving which is only a dharma or function. If there is not a single thought of the giving in one's mind, then there cannot be any domain (giver) and range (receiver). Thus, both giver and receiver are empty. This is the no-mark giving. And only no-mark giving can yield real merit which will lead one to the road of enlightenment.

The Third Cardinal Precept: “Do not engage in foolish speech, and do not have any intention to

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engage in foolish speech". There are four types of foolish speech: lying, decorative speech, abusive speech, and double-tongued speech. There may be many excuses, but the root of the foolish speech is to cover up the truth and one's weakness, and to fortify his ego-body. Therefore, when one decides to shed his ego-body and to strengthen his search for truth, all types of foolish speech should be eliminated.

We all know that physical objects, for example, a material body, cannot be defined or faithfully described by words, either orally or in writing. Description can be designed only for a particular purpose. When that purpose changes, the description becomes false. The only true description of a physical object is no description. Therefore, for a Ch'an cultivator, the less he speaks, the better. If he has spoken all with no word, he has attained the ultimate truth.

The Fourth Cardinal Precept: "Do not have sexual misconduct; do not have any intention to have sexual misconduct, and finally do not have sexual conduct." The sexual misconduct means any sexual activity with anyone other than one's spouse. All precepts not only refer to actual conducts but also refer to thoughts. One must realize that conducts are the activities of his physical body, while thoughts are the activities of his energy-body. Thus, thoughts are also conducts, the conducts of the energy-body. To distinguish these two, we will call them the physical conducts and the thought-conducts. If one wants to shed his physical body, he has to purify his physical conducts and then detach from the purified conducts. Similarly, to shed the energy-body, he has to purify his thought-conducts and then detach from the purified conducts. This is the real meaning of the proverb which says, "Do with no conduct and think with no thought."

Thought-conduct will produce physical conducts when the conditions are mature. Therefore, keeping precepts all the time and in all conditions means that you will not violate them even by any thought-conduct. This is called "keeping a pure precept." To keep pure precepts is what a Ch'an cultivator should practice.

To keep pure precepts requires much effort in cultivation, it is particularly true for this fourth precept. In our modern society, if one expresses a thought of killing somebody, he will not obtain any sympathy or approval from his friends and relatives. But if he tells his friends that he has a sexual desire toward an attractive girl, they may just laugh it off, or even express the same wish. For this reason, a cultivator should guard this precept more strenuously than any other one. To shed the confinement of the physical body, one has to remove all the desires which are directly or indirectly related to it. Within all the desires, the sexual attraction is the strongest one, and it challenges a cultivator all the time. Sakyamuni Buddha once said, "If one person had two sexual desires, no one would be able to cultivate the eternal truth." I have to confess that I have difficulty to overcome only this one sexual desire. It is difficult but not impossible.

There is another reason for Ch'an cultivators to observe this precept with more effort. In the mundane world, desires and thoughts cannot be judged if they have not been expressed as conducts. But in the energy or spiritual world, thoughts are conducts and they will be judged accordingly. If one

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has many dirty ideas in his mind and thinks that no one knows about them, he assumes he need not pay for them. Then he mistakes a payment by installments for his thought misconducts as not paying. This is no mystery, but simply the natural consequence of the karmic law.

As one cultivates to a deeper stage, he may see strange scenery in the energy-world during his meditation. The most common one is the sexual attraction. This may be a trap or a test for Ch'an cultivators. When such an erotic scene appears, one should think of its impermanence just like the morning dew. Do not follow it, and do not attach to it. Then it will soon disappear.

The Protective Precepts:

- 1. Do not take any intoxicant which may cause physical and mental harm, and loss of rational ability.**
- 2. Do not gamble which may cause financial risks, indolence, and reliance on vices.**

One element of enlightenment is the revelation of the knowing-all and understanding-all wisdom of one's self-nature. How can a cultivator intoxicate his already confused mind? How can a cultivator gamble for his destination? Many intoxicants are served as catalysts to foster other wrong behaviors and transgressions. For example, alcohol is often used as an initiative for sexual misconduct.

Taking intoxicants and gambling indicate one's dependent and irresponsible character. The drinker or gambler is unsatisfied with his present situation, yet he has no incentive and no ability to change it; so he escapes from it. He gets intoxicated for temporary relief and gambles for a chance. Either person has made two basic mistakes. The first one is that he has attached to marks, his present situation. Anyone who fights with the outside world to satisfy his insatiable desires is bound to be disappointed; it is an impossible mission. The second mistake is that, when he finds out that it is impossible to satisfy himself, he goes on the wrong path. Instead of understanding the truth about himself, he escapes from it. This is due to his stupidity.

The four cardinal and the two protective precepts have been very briefly explained. If one cultivates his conducts according to these precepts in detail, he has laid out the way to enlightenment. This is the right way and the only sure way.