

Roar of the Tigress

Volume I

An Introduction to Zen: Religious Practice for Everyday Life

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*In this selection from **Roar of the Tigress**, Rev. Master Jiyu discusses the section on the Precepts from “The Shushogi”¹ by Great Master Dogen.*

Precepts: The Everyday Acts of Buddhas

Scripture: “Receiving the Precepts. After recognizing our evil acts and being contrite therefor, we should make an act of deep respect to the Three Treasures of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha for they deserve our offerings and respect in whatever life we may be wandering. The Buddhas and Ancestors transmitted respect for the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha from India to China.”

I think there’s a bit in the Bible somewhere which says that a man cleans up his house and comes back (all the demons are out of it), and he comes back and it’s empty and clean, and “Oh, it’s boring: there’s nothing in here.” So he goes out and gets a few more demons to bring in, because there’s nothing there. The instant you have done this act of contrition we’re talking about here, you must take

immediate refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Otherwise you will be casting about for something to take the place of all this stuff. Now, you've just got rid of it; who wants to scrub the house twice? Dogen makes it very clear: you've got to get the Buddha in there immediately. Faith, study, trust: they must take the place of the karmic baggage. You must get that in at once.

Scripture: "If they who are unfortunate and lacking in virtue are unable to hear of these Three Treasures, how is it possible for them to take refuge therein? One must not go for refuge to mountain spirits and ghosts, nor must one worship in places of heresy, for such things are contrary to the Truth: one must, instead, take refuge quickly in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha for therein is to be found utter enlightenment as well as freedom from suffering."

The main heresy of which they are speaking is teachers who say that if you find enlightenment (They usually don't say "the Eternal" because that smacks too much of the word "God"), you are totally free to do whatsoever you wish. This is why, when I teach Zen, the most important thing first of all is for me to speak of the Eternal, and the second thing to speak of faith, study and trust, and the third thing, responsibility. You need to talk about these things before somebody's got so involved in meditation

that the baggage they've had is starting to come up and they're getting terrified out of their wits as to what happens. We had a lady come to Shasta on one occasion for a retreat, which is a meditation weekend. She was Christian, and she had never meditated before; she learned very fast, and that day a whole bunch of past life stuff popped out. She was terrified, because with her Christian background this could only be a bunch of demons, and what was this stuff that was coming up? Before anyone sits down to meditate (which is why I spoke to you the way I did yesterday), you must know that everything hidden will come up and that it's normal, and not be scared of it. And that it doesn't alter, it doesn't damage, your belief in God or anything else: you just must do something about realizing it takes place, not get worried about it, and be willing to look at it honestly and make some changes in your life. Okay?

Scripture: "A pure heart is necessary if one would take refuge in the Three Treasures. At any time, whether during the Buddha's lifetime or after His demise, we should repeat the following with bowed heads, making gassho: 'I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the Dharma, I take refuge in the Sangha.' We take refuge in the Buddha since He is our True Teacher; we take refuge in the Dharma since it is the medicine for all suffering; we take

refuge in the Sangha since its members are wise and compassionate.”

And the Sangha includes the laity.

Scripture: “If we would follow the Buddhist teachings, we must honor the Three Treasures; this foundation is absolutely essential before receiving the Precepts.”

Yes, there has to be faith. You have to know that what you study, the Dharma (which comes forth from the Dharma Cloud, the cloud that hides the Eternal from our sight, as we say), is the medicine for all our ills. Remember: the “Buddha That Was to Come” was the “Doctor Buddha” who had cleaned up all His ills. We have to know that we can clean up all our ills, and we have to know that there are wise and good people who can help us. So, the taking of the Three Refuges is essential: it is the only thing that is really a formalized “prayer,” if you like, in every school of Buddhism. After that, they all have differing bits and pieces, but this one is common to every single school.

Scripture: “The merit of the Three Treasures bears fruit whenever a trainee and the Buddha are one; whoever experiences this communion will invariably take refuge in the Three Treasures, irrespective of whether he is a god, a demon or an animal.”

Now what they're talking of there is that whenever the trainee and the Buddha are one, whenever a trainee finds the Eternal, that refuge is immediately cemented.

Scripture: "As one goes from one stage of existence to another, the above mentioned merit increases, leading eventually to the most perfect enlightenment: the Buddha Himself gave certification to the great merit of the Three Treasures because of their extreme value and unbelievable profundity—it is essential that all living things shall take refuge therein."

Now, the Three Refuges—taking refuge in Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha—are also called the First Three Precepts. Then come the Three Pure Precepts: cease from evil, do only good, and do good for others. Now these are not as obvious as they seem on the surface. Cease from evil: everyone can understand the words of that, but not everyone knows what "evil" is. Ceasing from evil is a collective precept about refraining from harming other beings that comes about as a result of having "evil" analyzed out into the Ten Precepts, which we will come to later. If you like, these Ten Precepts telescope into "ceasing from evil." Don't kill, don't steal, don't covet, etc.: these are what bring about "evil." You have to look at that. So, ceasing from

evil, doing only good, and doing good for others are the Three Pure Precepts.

One has to also know what “doing only good” is, because “doing only good” for some is one thing and “doing only good” for others is another thing. Again, you have to take the Ten Precepts and telescope them into that. You then have to take the last one, which is “do good for others,” and that is much more complicated, because what it really means is don’t set up some karmic thing or other that will cause others to do wrong, just because you think it’s good. The example I gave of what was done at the end of World War I is an exact example of that. That is going to bring about horrendous horror. You mustn’t set up a chain of causation that will influence others to cause great harm. So you have to fit all the Ten Precepts into that one as well.

So if you start with the Three (cease from evil, do only good, and do good for others), you can literally turn—telescope—them upwards into the Three Refuges and downwards into the Ten Precepts. Because if you don’t have faith in the Buddha, you’re never going to be able to do this; if you don’t have places where you can find out what “good” is and what “bad” is, and what “evil” is and all the rest

of it, which is the Dharma, you won't have a rule of thumb to go by; and if you just think you are always right and never go and ask anybody, which is to take refuge in the Sangha, you will never get beyond your own opinions about all this. So, the Ten Precepts telescope up into the Three Pure ones, and they, in turn, telescope into the Three Refuges.

Scripture: "The Three Pure, Collective Precepts must be accepted after the Three Treasures; these are: Cease from Evil, Do Only Good, Do Good for Others. The following ten Precepts should be accepted next: 1. Do not kill, 2. Do not steal, 3. Do not covet, 4. Do not say that which is untrue, 5. Do not sell the wine of delusion, 6. Do not speak against others, 7. Do not be proud of yourself and devalue others, 8. Do not be mean in giving either Dharma or wealth, 9. Do not be angry, 10. Do not debase the Three Treasures."

Now, the *Kyojukaimon*¹ will speak of these in great depth. But the thing that each one telescopes into is very interesting. If you steal, in the end you realize that you stole from yourself. If you kill, you realize that you made yourself less than human. If you covet, you realize you have stolen your own peace of mind, because you are never contented. If you go against any of these precepts, the person who you harm, besides others, is yourself. Why do you make

clouds in a clear sky? Do not make clouds in a clear sky. When you realize that all of this is “soap opera” that you have created in what was a very, very clear sky, you can start to see how to deal with these things. The First Noble Truth of Buddhism is that suffering exists: “there is birth and death”, “how do I escape from it”, “I am so frightened”, etc. Suffering exists: pain, grief, illness, misery, family problems—they are all suffering. How do you deal with this, then? Suffering occurs because of a not understanding of the precepts, a non-keeping of the precepts. You take a look at yourself thoroughly as the stuff comes up in meditation, and you deal with it. The end of suffering comes when you find the Eternal and realize that the only way to live is by keeping the precepts. But you can’t keep them in a nice, neat package, because they are always impinging on each other, so the aim has to be to do only good, to cease from evil, and to do good for others by not causing them to do evil.

Now, there are different forms of these precepts in Buddhism, which is something a lot of people misunderstand. For instance, the oldest form is, “I promise to undergo the rule of training to teach myself to refrain from....” Think of the amount of qualifiers on that: there’s a tremendous difference

between that and “Thou shalt not”. “I promise to undergo the rule of training to teach myself to refrain from killing” or “...to refrain from stealing”, or “...from talking against others”. Another example of a different form occurs on the precept: don’t sell the wine of delusion. One form of this one is to refrain from abusing alcohol or drugs, and a lot of people think this is all it means. It isn’t. It is also saying, “If you delude other people with your theories and your opinions, they will become ‘drunk’ on those theories and will not be able to use their own minds to see what is really going on.” If you like, it is a precept against brainwashing. “Do not sell or spread the wine of delusion”: a very important piece of Buddhist teaching.

Now, in applying these precepts, you bump into all sorts of complications. Would it be wiser to tell the truth in a certain circumstance and perhaps speak against someone? Would it be wiser not to tell the truth and not hurt them? What is the best way to go? The answer is: absolutely cease from evil; do everything with the best of intentions. That you may or may not make mistakes is another matter. All the Ten Precepts are subject to this very careful scrutiny: what am I doing; am I doing the right thing; am I doing the best thing?

Sometimes we have to break one precept in order not to do something much worse. Whether we break that precept or not, we are going to take the karmic consequences of what we do; we are going to grow some more karmic consequence. If we break one precept, we will take the consequences of breaking that precept, which may be a lot less than the consequences of not breaking it, because we would have then done something much worse. Once again: Buddhism is for spiritual adults; it is not for spiritual children. The Ten Precepts tell you what can cause karma; then you have to work out how to combine them properly so as to cause as little karma as possible. So, there is no such thing as irresponsibility in Buddhism. You have to be a terribly responsible person or you cannot be a true Buddhist. And you have to be willing to take the consequences of every action.

Furthermore, you have to “mix and match” your precepts so that they will telescope nicely into the Three Pure Precepts. When people say to me, “How do I behave? What do I do?” I say, “Well, you ask yourself three questions. First, are you ceasing from evil? If you get a ‘yes’ to that, you can go on and ask the second question: am I doing only good? If you get an answer that says ‘yes’ to that (and you

ask these questions in the mind of meditation), go on to the next one: am I doing good for others? And if you get an answer that says 'yes' to that, then go ahead and do it. And you could still be wrong." It's important to know that you could still be wrong, because you might have got yourself in the way of it. So, because you always could be wrong, you then go and see a member of the Sangha. Whether that is a relative, a friend, or a priest, go and see someone who is outside of the situation and can perhaps help.

There is a saying in Zen, "When we find the source of the Yellow River, it is not pure." This means that however hard we try, nothing ever comes out quite as clean as we'd like it. (laughter) Keeping this in mind, remember that the person who gets hurt if you break the precepts is always you. If you go through the *Kyojukaimon* in detail, you will see how these things can harm you. It is you that gets hurt, along with a lot of other people. In other words, you've made a thunderstorm in a clear sky, which is an awful shame.

Now, how do you start putting these precepts into practice? Sometimes living by the precepts seems like such a daunting task that there's no point in

even trying. Well, you start by simply saying, “Okay, for today I am going to try to keep this precept, or that precept.” I tell people, if they’ve never done it before, to pick one, and not pick the hardest, and see how well they can keep it for the day. I learned this from the Chinese; I really admire their practicality. There is a set of ceremonies called “Jukai” [the formal taking of the precepts] in all Buddhist countries, and only in China is it possible for you to take as many precepts during that time as you really feel you can keep. For example, a butcher would not take the precept against killing. A merchant usually does not take the precept against stealing, which I found faintly funny, and you will find prostitutes who will not take the one against sexual indulgence, and that is understood. So start by taking one you can keep and, having discovered the joys that come from keeping one, you work from the known to the unknown. And it is surprising what happens: several of the female monks who were in the monasteries had been former prostitutes who, having suddenly discovered the joy of keeping one or two, said, “I think I’ll try to do a few more.” Choose one you can go with; don’t start the hardest way possible. Look at your character (only you can know your character thoroughly) and choose the one that is best for you, and that’s the one you start

with, and see how well you can keep it.

I used to love gossip at one time, and I can remember that I decided the one I was going to start with was talking about others, and I discovered that for three days I didn't say a word! (laughter) Which showed me how much wasted breath I'd been coming out with, and then I started thinking about how to talk to people and about what was truly useful conversation. So you start from the known and work to the unknown, and by keeping one precept you end up keeping the whole lot, and you end up knowing the Eternal, and that's really what you're out to do.

The fourth of the Four Noble Truths that the Buddha found was the Eightfold Path. Having got to the state where you've cleaned things up, you've dealt with the cause of suffering, now you come to the cessation of suffering, which is taking the precepts absolutely to the very best you can and being willing to always telescope them into each other and to go for help as needed (whether that be study, faith, or finding someone who can help you). When you've done that, then you can go on to what is called the Eightfold Path. That Path is the fruit of preceptual living: Right Thought, which leads to Right Speech,

which leads to Right Action, which leads to Right Activity, and Effort and Determination and so on through the eight. Which comes back in the end to Right Meditation, which is why you need to meditate night and morning even if it's only for a couple of seconds: it "puts your brain in gear" for what goes on elsewhere. If you put your brain in gear for only a few seconds or a few minutes, the day will be much, much better from every angle.

Scripture: "All the Buddhas have received, and carefully preserved, the above Three Treasures, the Three Pure Collective Precepts, and the ten Precepts. If you accept these Precepts wholeheartedly the highest enlightenment will be yours and this is the undestroyable Buddhahood which was understood, is understood and will be understood in the past, present and future. Is it possible that any truly wise person would refuse the opportunity to attain to such heights? The Buddha has clearly pointed out to all living beings that, whenever these Precepts are Truly accepted, Buddhahood is reached, every person who accepts them becoming the True Child of Buddha."

On that note (which I don't need to explain at all because you are then one with the Eternal, at least until you break the precepts again, at which time you have to do something about it and then you are back), we will break for a few minutes. I told you this

one was going to take a long time. [pause for rest break]

Now, can we have the next bit, please?

Scripture: “Within these Precepts dwell the Buddhas, enfolding all things within their unparalleled wisdom: there is no distinction between subject and object for any who dwell herein. All things, earth, trees, wooden posts, bricks, stones, become Buddhas once this refuge is taken. From these Precepts come forth such a wind and fire that all are driven into en-lightenment when the flames are fanned by the Buddha’s influence: this is the merit of non-action and non-seeking; the awakening to True Wisdom.”

This describes what happens at the time of finding the Eternal: the realization that you are beyond the opposites; there is no-thing that is outside of the Eternal, no-thing in this world that is not part of the Eternal, no-thing in the universe that is not part of the Eternal. And the “wind and fire”, well, if you meditate properly, you’ll find out about the wind and the fire. It is after reaching this viewpoint that we really commence true training. It is when you have reached the realization that everything is doing the finest job it can of being a Buddha that you are open enough and positive enough to be able to do really good training. While you are still nagging and

grousing and griping about everything, you are mostly just spinning your wheels. But it is when you start looking positively and saying, “Well, if so-and-so knew better, he’d be doing better, so he is showing his Buddhahood to the best of his ability at the moment” instead of griping about how he is, it is when you start seeing that the carpet is nice and warm for you to sit on rather than seeing the spot that is on it, it is when you start seeing the good, the Buddhahood, in things, that true training can commence in earnest. It is the same with the precepts: while the precepts are only rules that bind, not very much can be done, which is the danger of the “Thou shalt not” idea; but once you have got to the positive side, once you have given up fighting these things and seen the Buddha within them, true training has well begun.

Notes

1. Translated by Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett in *Zen is Eternal Life*, 4th ed. (Mt. Shasta, California: Shasta Abbey Press, 1999), pp. 94–104.
2. Great Master Dogen, “Kyojukaimon: Giving and Receiving the Teaching of the Precepts” in *An Introduction to the Tradition of Serene Reflection Meditation*, 5th ed. rev. (Mt. Shasta, California: Shasta Abbey Press, 1997), pp. 32–36.

