

The Precepts and The Three Turnings of the Wheel Dharma

The Buddhist precepts are not the equivalent of the commandments of Judaism and Christianity. They do not attempt to impose restrictions on behavior given by some outside authority, nor are they moral imperatives. However, when first encountering the precepts, most Westerners see them in a restricted moral sense; our ways of thinking on these matters are deeply ingrained. As we work with the precepts and witness our lives unfolding within them, the effects of the teachings slowly penetrate. The precepts are transformed from moral dictates, to guides, and ultimately to the awareness of the Buddha mind. The precepts are descriptions of the world of a Buddha, awakening expressed in daily life.

“Precept” in Sanskrit is *Sila*, one meaning of which is to form a habit. Habit as a precept means to take on vows to behave in certain ways. In Buddhism, vows can seem unattainable because they are looked at from the point of view of one life. The Buddhist understanding of vow transcends one life. Making a vow goes beyond the limitations of the moment, of the day, of a personal lifetime, introducing the eternal. When realizing this, the vast world of Buddhist action reveals itself. Acting in accord with the precepts is accepting the truth of Buddhahood, even when we do not yet fully understand what that means. Dainin Katagiri Roshi proclaims, “The main purpose of Buddhism is to form the habit of practice as a vow forever. This is just taking a journey in the universe, day by day, step by step.”¹ Considering this statement, a vow, the habit of practice, the embracing of the precepts as a way of life, provides refuge and is the beginning of the end of confusion and anxiety. What is a vow? It is an entryway into the vast aspect of our universal life. Katagiri Roshi taught that our limitations were not our problem; instead it is that we don’t understand our vastness.

There are sixteen basic Buddhist precepts that Zen adherents take upon lay ordination: The Three Refuge Precepts, The Three Pure Precepts, and The Ten Prohibitory Precepts. This study does not deal with the Refuge Precepts. It is said that the precepts describe the way an enlightened being naturally lives. At the same time, the discipline of upholding the precepts is part of the path to enlightenment. Following the precepts harmonizes our actions by bringing them into accord with our own true interests, with the well-being of others, and with universal laws. The Three Pure Precepts set the foundation for Buddhist practice. They appear simple but through enduring practice reveal their meaning and power to effect liberation. The Ten Prohibitory Precepts are expressions of the universal Buddha Nature and promote authentic relationships. Authenticity is the experience of the universal mind that illuminates all beings.

The Three Pure Precepts

Do not create evil

Practice good

Actualize good for others

The Ten Prohibitory Precepts

Do not kill – Affirm Life

Do not steal – Be open and giving

Do not misuse sexuality – Honor the body

Do not lie – Manifest truth

Do not intoxicate the mind – Proceed clearly

Do not speak of others' errors and faults – See past mistakes and articulate beauty

Do not elevate the self and blame others – Realize self and other are one

Do not be withholding – Give generously

Do not indulge in anger – Actualize harmony

Do not defile the Three Treasures – Experience the intimacy of life

The Precepts within the Three Turnings

The following charts illustrate the dynamic nature of the precepts. The precepts begin as guides to liberation and transform into manifestations of an awakened mind. The precepts develop within the Three Turnings of Wheel of Dharma. For example, the first of the Ten Prohibitory Precepts matures in this manner: “Do not kill” evolves into “Affirm life” and that into a deep realization of the intricately interconnected nature of existence. Each precept develops in the same manner, growing from the First Turning’s Personal view to the Second Turning’s Universal perspective. The Third Turning’s Wholeness develops out of the realization of their harmonious relationship. Study and meditation practice are the key components of the effort that results in the evolution of the precepts.

First Turning: The View of the Personal—Identity	Do not kill
Second Turning: The View of the Universal—Interdependence	Affirm Life
Third Turning: The View of Relationship—Intimacy	Recognize the intricate interconnection of all beings

The Precepts within the Three Turnings

	First Turning: Identity Personal	Second Turning: Interdependence Universal	Third Turning: Intimate Relationships
The Pure Precepts	Do not create evil	Practice good	Actualize good for others
The Ten Prohibitory Precepts	Do not kill	Affirm life	Recognize the intricate interconnection of all beings
	Do not steal	Be open and giving	Live unself-consciously, free of the need for attainment
	Do not misuse sexuality	Honor the body	Acknowledge the intimacy and equality of all relationships
	Do not lie	Manifest truth	Exhibit noble silence in speech and conduct
	Do not intoxicate the mind	Proceed clearly	Form intentions based on realized wisdom
	Do not speak ill of others' errors and faults	See past mistakes and articulate beauty	Know the root source of speech and language's liberating power
	Do not elevate the self and blame others	Realize self and other are one	Act without distinguishing oneself from others
	Do not be withholding	Give generously	Bestow the teaching of Emptiness when appropriate; try to make others happy
	Do not indulge in anger	Actualize harmony	Be aware of the unifying interplay of all dualities
	Do not defile the Three Treasures	Experience the intimacy of life	Observe how all phenomena express universal truth

¹ Dainin Katagiri, *Returning to Silence* (Boston: Shambala Publications, 1988) p. 95.