

Practicing the Precepts

by Kamala Masters

The Buddha's Teaching is often referred to as the "Middle Path." On this path we refrain from going to any extremes, and are in a place where we can be most clearly aware of what is going on in our own minds, hearts, and bodies. Being mindful, being aware, is the "middle path." It is from this place that we can see everything more clearly and are not caught in fear or attachment, doubt or pride, reactivity or apathy.

Practicing the precepts gives us an opportunity to practice awareness of what is going on within ourselves, and how our emotions, speech, and actions affect those around us. This means developing the sensitivity to know whether our speech and actions are fueled by greed, hatred and delusion or come from a wellspring of generosity, love and clarity. We can then begin to make more conscious choices to cultivate and act on those qualities that lead to love and wisdom and to refrain from those that lead to disharmony.

We can use the precepts as a training in awareness, rather than a set of strict commandments. This training helps us cultivate the beauty of inner and outer harmony. In turn, that pervasive harmony is conducive to quietude of mind and body. And from that deep feeling of quiet and seclusion, we feel safe enough to open to liberating wisdom. These are the *Three Trainings*: *Sila* or harmonious living, *Samadhi* or quietude of mind, and *Pañña* or wisdom of the true nature of life.

In each of the following Five Precepts are some examples of how we might take each one even further:

1 We undertake the training to refrain from intentionally taking the life of or harming any being. We do this by becoming more conscious of how our thoughts, words, and deeds affect others directly or indirectly. (In one Native American

Indian tradition, they say you can kill a tree by shouting at it continuously.)

We can also make conscious choices to protect life as often as possible.

2 We undertake the training to refrain from taking what is not offered to us. This training fosters a sense of being content with what we already have, which cultivates *letting be*. We can take it further by practicing generosity, which cultivates *letting go*. Letting be helps us open to and accept our moment-to-moment experience, just as it is. Letting go helps us to know deeply the impermanent nature of all experience, without identifying with any of it.

3 We undertake the training to refrain from using our sexual energy in a way that will cause hurt or harm to anyone directly or indirectly. This is a powerful energy, and it is easy to be careless in this area when we are not fully aware. It's hard to say for each individual what the parameters of one's middle path may be, but we can know for certain what hurts ourselves and others emotionally, as well as physically. While in retreat, this precept would mean being celibate.

4 We undertake the training to refrain from saying what is not true. We can take that further to cultivate speaking in a way that brings harmony, clarity, and love. This means speaking at the right time, to the appropriate person, in a loving tone, and consciously keeping the intention of the communication in mind, so that we do not pointlessly chatter. We might also consider whether it is best not to speak at all, even if it is the truth. In the West, we are often too enthusiastic about speaking the truth, when it may not help the situation. So we could ask ourselves does speaking this truth bring more harmony? Or is it just an opportunity for us to make a *dig* at another person? Does it come from deep, almost unconscious, habit patterns? Being skillfully truthful will bring us closer to the Truth of life.

And so will being more silent, in most cases. There is a saying... not to speak unless you can improve upon silence.

5 We undertake the training to refrain from taking any substance that causes the mind to be unclear. Substances that cause the mind to go into extremes of agitation, restlessness, or sluggishness prevent us from experiencing the truth of the moment as clearly as possible. This precept mostly has to do with use of alcohol and recreational drugs, but some substances that cause unclarity may be relatively benign. Sometimes in retreat I'm so sensitive that a cup of tea or some chocolate causes an upheaval of the inner stillness and clarity that was previously present. Again, this one is hard to say for each person, as the middle path may be different for each one of us at different times.

We want to consciously go towards the direction of experiencing life clearly, with as much compassion and wisdom as possible. Practicing the precepts means being aware of our inner life, and being sensitive to life around us. This will bring inner and outer harmony, help us to live our time on earth with happiness, and keep us on that middle path towards great peace and freedom.

Water

Isn't this what you wanted?
the body
opened, long like an afternoon shadow
a tree
dura wrapped inside the skull and high
starry
legs giraffe like, far below
dousing for underground sources of
water.

Marilyn Habermas-Scher

Mary's chapel is closed today
but choirs of sparrows
trumpet the resurrection
of each flower.

Ted Tollefson