



ALBUQUERQUE
ZEN CENTER

ZEN PRECEPTS

As the Albuquerque Zen Center begins a new study and leadership group working towards the “Taking the Precepts Ceremony”, or “Jukai”, questions have arisen: What are the Precepts? Aren’t they just a Buddhist Ten Commandments? What am I getting into if I decide to live my life by the Precepts?

An extensive amount of literature exists about the Precepts, including writings from Bodhidharma, Dogen Zenji, and contemporary Zen leaders such as Thich Nhat Hanh. Each of these resources offer deep, engaging insight into the meaning and usefulness of the Precepts in our daily lives.

But what exactly are the Precepts and why would one want to live a life according to these?

The Five Precepts are;

THE FIRST PRECEPT: REVERENCE FOR LIFE (Not Killing)

THE SECOND PRECEPT: GENEROSITY (Not Stealing)

THE THIRD PRECEPT: SEXUAL RESPONSIBILITY (Not Misusing Sex)

THE FOURTH PRECEPT: DEEP LISTENING AND LOVING SPEECH (Not Lying)

THE FIFTH PRECEPT: DIET FOR A MINDFUL SOCIETY (Not Using Intoxicants)

So, why would we want to Take the Precepts and live our lives according to them?

Well, to begin with, Taking the Precepts is a wonder-filled way of declaring your intent to follow the path and teachings of the Buddha.

They provide a 'way of being' to deeply manifest your relationship with everything around you, be it fellow human beings, the family pet, trees, clean water, rocks and mountains, the sidewalk, the daily garbage, everything! Everything you come into to contact with. And you cannot practice the Precepts in isolation or sitting in a cave on the top of a mountain! Precepts are practiced in real life and at all times.

Taking the Precepts also means that you are firmly committed to examining who you really are and who you thought you were. You're solidly declaring your deep intention to inquire into the true nature of this world, which indeed is your own true nature, and to develop the path of the Buddha.

However, the Precepts are not hard and fast rules for life, but guidelines to help us together to live in harmony. What does it mean that the Precepts are not hard and fast rules?

The first Precept for example "Not Killing" is vastly different than the rule "Thou Shalt Not Kill", which is generally understood as not killing human beings. The Buddhist Precept is far broader and applies to all living beings!

But wait! Don't we have to eat? Don't we have to kill living beings in order to eat? What if someone is going to kill my beloved ones, don't I have a right and a duty to protect them even if I must use lethal force? Isn't killing the same as stealing, as we steal another being's life?

Here is where the Precept becomes interesting and can help lead us to that greater understanding that has brought us to Zen Buddhism. Here is where fluidity arises. Here is where you decide for yourself if killing a cow ok? Is abortion okay? Is it better to eat a salad versus a chicken? Shodo Harada, Roshi teaches that indeed you must kill in order to eat, and in doing so in return you live a life of deep gratitude for that which nourished your body and which allows you to continue to manifest the Dharma.

Each time you fully practice and manifest a Precept the more you become connected with life, the more you begin to understand your own deep personal thoughts, memories, emotions and habitualized, instinctual patterns. In doing so you find that there is indeed no basis for those patterns and you find they have little if nothing to do with the very situation directly in front of you! What a wonder-filled journey!

The Precepts arise out of Wisdom and Compassion, and love. You want a better relationship? Manifest each and everyone one of the Precepts. You want to live fully, selflessly? Manifest the Precepts.

When you combined your practice of the Precepts with your vows and practice to seek Refuge in the Three Treasures you live a deep and powerful life in accord with others in the Sangha who have taken the same vows. Living the Precepts while interacting with the Sangha give you a perfect place to practice, in a neurotic free zone where mutual support is clearly manifested.

The Albuquerque Zen Center's Precepts study and action group will be undergoing a course of study of the Precepts utilizing the book "Invoking Reality: Moral and Ethical Teachings of Zen" by John Daido Looi Roshi and head abbot of the Zen Mountain Monastery, now deceased, and some of the Writings by Thicht Nhat Hanh.

In addition to studying these teachings each member undertaking the Precepts will be making a deeper and greater commitment to their personal practice by sitting Zazen more often than they currently do, serving as Zendo officers, assisting with the various Ceremonies and events at AZC as well as having fun and joining in on the Center's social events.