

The Precepts

May 2002

“One with strong respect for the training”: This element of respect is very important. The Pali word, *garu*, literally means “heavy.” It’s something you give weight to, something that registers for you, something that matters. It’s not something you just take lightly. You look at your life, and there are so many demands made on you that you get pulled in all kinds of directions. If you don’t set your own priorities, other people are going to set them for you.

So what you’re doing as you show respect for the training, or give weight to the training, is that you give the training of the mind priority in your life. You realise: This is the most important thing you can do, to straighten out the mind.

Because if the mind isn’t trained, it’s going to create all kinds of problems. It won’t be able to handle anything properly. And if the mind isn’t trained to handle things properly, what’s going to handle things properly in your life? It’s the most important aspect of your life. Everything filters through here.

So you’ve got to make this spot as well-trained as possible. Give it as many skills as you can. As we’re sitting here meditating, we’re learning a lot of those skills. As I said this afternoon, the skills you learn as you’re sitting here with your eyes closed are not just for times when you’re sitting with your eyes closed. They’re for use all day long.

Being in touch with your breath, being in touch with the energy of the breath in your body: That’s an important skill right there. Because as you go through the day, if you really are in touch with this kind of energy, you begin to see how you tend to waste it. Or how you open yourself up to negative energies from outside if you’re not careful.

So the first thing you need to do in order not to waste the energy, not to open yourself up in that way, is to be in touch with your breath energy. Then, as you’re more in touch with it, you learn how to foster good energy in the body, fill the body with good energy. You gain a sense of how you can replenish it when you need to—and how to protect it when you have to as well.

After a while, you begin to get a sense that it’s not only the breath coming in and out of the nose, but it’s the whole energy field in the body, and there’s an energy field surrounding the body as well. When the energy field inside the body is going well, it’s like a current going through a wire: It begins to set up a magnetic field around itself, to protect itself. In that way, you’re not soaking up the energies of other people.

Then there's the question of how to deal with thoughts as they come in. It's not just a matter of shutting out all thoughts of past and future. Sometimes you have to use past and future in order to get things right in the present.

After all, the Buddha himself didn't just talk about the present moment, he also talked about past and future with all his observations about previous lives, past lives, future lives. Some of the suttas talk about whole cycles of time, how the entire universe evolves and devolves.

The purpose of those observations, though, was to bring the mind back to the present. All of these stories and descriptions of the way the universe is shaped, the way your lives are shaped from one lifetime to the next, come down to your actions.

And where do your actions happen? They happen right here, right now. And what's the most important factor in charge of those actions? The mind. Your intentions. In fact, your intentions *are* the actions.

The whole universe, as you experience it, is shaped by your intentions. So you'd better get them under your control. That's one way of thinking about the past, thinking about the future, that comes back to the present moment.

Other times, when you're getting discouraged in the practice, you stop and think about the good things you've done in the past. There's a whole series of reflections the Buddha lists. You reflect on the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha. You reflect on your own virtue, your own generosity, your own good qualities. These are reflections on the past that you bring into the present to put the mind in good shape. You take your ability to think, your ability to form thoughts, and you put it to good use.

It's not that you're just supposed to snuff out thoughts of past and future, and be totally aware in the present moment. Now, if you could do that, or if you did do that, you'd have to go down to the looney bin. That's where people who are totally in the present moment stay: no thoughts of past, no thoughts of future. Just present awareness. It's a mind that's not functioning properly.

You need to think about the past at times. You need to think about the future at times. But the question is, how to do it appropriately—and how to have those thoughts under your control, so that when they're going out of bounds, you can rein them in. Then, when it's no longer necessary to think about those things, the mind comes back to the present.

You want to get your center of gravity so that it's centered *here*, rather than tipping over into the past and future all the time. It's like lowering your center of gravity so that it doesn't tip over so easily. It tips only when you want it to. And then it comes right back. You want *this* to

be home base.

This is what it means to have respect for the training: that you do it all the time. It becomes your first priority. And you take the skills that you've learned—not only in meditation, but also the skills you've learned about generosity, the skills you've learned about virtue—and you put them to use.

And these are skills. We tend to think about the precepts as Sunday school rules, but they're not. They're skills that you develop. How can you go through life without killing? How can you go through life without stealing, without lying? Without having illicit sex, without getting involved in intoxicants? That's a skill.

Sometimes it requires a lot of ingenuity. Like the precept against killing: There's always the problem about how to deal with household pests. Well, learn to use your ingenuity. Anticipate the problem, and prepare for it beforehand.

Or the precept against lying: There are times when, out of kind motives, you don't want to fully reveal the truth. Okay, how do you do that skillfully, so that at the same time, you don't let any falsehoods go past your lips, but at the same time, you maintain that kind intention, not to utter truths that are hurtful? This takes presence of mind; it takes ingenuity. These are all skills that we work at.

You want to get to the point where you approach your life as a skill: How can you deal with other people in the most skillful way? How can you deal with yourself in the most skillful way? Once you have that intention, to look for the skillful alternative, it really changes your life. Instead of just doing things the same old way over and over and over again, you look for new ways, more skillful ways.

It's like someone who's trained to be a carpenter, and whose skills at the beginning consist only of knowing how to hit with a hammer, cut with a saw. You go around hitting with hammers and cutting with saws, and there are certain things you can build with those skills, but there are other skills that you need to develop as well: how to use a chisel, how to use a drill. Then as you master more and more skills in your repertoire, you can create better and better things. At the same time, you open your life to whole new possibilities.

It's like the deer in the forest. They talk about how, in the early winter, deer will establish a path through the forest. Then, as the snow gets deeper and deeper, they follow that same old path around and around the forest. Any trees that happen to be near the path will get their bark stripped off as the deer feed on it.

But if it's a limited path, going only a limited ways through the forest, then as the snow gets

deeper and deeper, and the winter gets longer and longer, there's no more bark on the trees right next to the path. And even though there are a lot more trees in the forest, the deer won't leave the path. If there's no more bark on the trees next to the path, they die—even though there's plenty of bark in the rest of the forest.

This is the way we tend to lead our lives: We establish these same old ruts in our lives and we go through these ruts over and over and over again, until we've worn out all the nourishment that they might have to offer, and there's nothing left, even though there's plenty more nourishment all around us. If we were only willing to learn how to open our minds through our skills—to become aware of new possibilities, new ways of administering our own minds, straightening out our own minds, new ways of dealing with other people—then the more skills we developed, the more opportunities we'd have.

So make this the top priority in your life. Because as you develop these skills in the mind, whole new areas in your life will open up. Whole new dimensions in your life will open up as well if you approach it with the proper intention, which is to look for the skillful alternative.

In particular, look for the skillful ways of using your mind, skillful ways of using the breath, ways of using your mindfulness and alertness. These really basic qualities have an awful lot to offer if you explore them, if you apply them—with respect. Give *them* priority in your life, and see what they can do for you.