

30.06.24 INTRODUCTION TO PRECEPTS PRACTICE: OPENING TO ONENESS THROUGH BEARING WITNESS TO SUFFERING

“We are healed of a suffering only by experiencing it to the full.”

— **Marcel Proust**

1. OVERVIEW

So, welcome once again to the annual full moon precepts practice group meeting which culminates in the Jukai ceremony at Yarrowarra in May next year. Everyone is welcome to attend when you can but if you are thinking about doing the Jukai ceremony you are encouraged to attend as much as possible. Apart from this monthly meeting, I am also offering 50-minute dokusan meetings based on dana contributions. Please let me know if you are interested in attending regular dokusan meetings once per month or a one-off meeting.

The reading materials for this year are:

The Zen Center of Los Angeles Precepts & Jukai Study Workbook, 2005.

Opening to Oneness: A Practical and Philosophical Guide to the Zen Precepts by Nancy Mujo Baker, 2023.

The Schedule for the Full Moon Precepts Meetings

In terms of the format for these meetings, we will always start with the 10-minute ceremony that is called the Fusatsu or Atonement Ceremony. The Fusatsu Ceremony is practiced in most full-time monasteries and is a “Day of Reflection” in which practitioners choose one or more of the ten grave precepts and embody it for that day – then hopefully take it forwards in everyday life. The term Fusatsu is derived from the Sanskrit word meaning observance. The exact form of the ceremony varies somewhat from one temple to another, but it usually begins with an offering of incense and then starts with chanting the Gatha of Atonement. Traditionally, Zen teachers say this Gatha is not a mere confession of personal flaws. Understanding the interconnection of all things, we take full responsibility for all that is and declare atonement – at-one-ment – with the truth of suffering, the Four Noble Truths. This is not about feeling shame or guilt, but rather is an open-hearted recognition of our part in everyone’s journey of **Samsara**. In taking the Buddhist Precepts, students take refuge in the Three Jewels – Buddha, Dharma and Sangha – in a ceremony known as Jukai. This is a formal acknowledgement of wanting to lead your life according to the Buddha’s teachings. Jukai is a personal and public commitment to aspire to lead your life in keeping with the sixteen precepts that form the basis of the Soto Zen practice.

Following the Atonement Ceremony, we will then share our personal reflections on the precept we have been practicing at-one-ment with over the last four weeks. This goes for about 20 minutes. Then we will have a short dharma talk, again of approximately 20 minutes, given by me or by one of our OzZen Facilitators. The talk will be on

the precept we will be reflecting on over the next month. So beginning next month, I will be giving the talk on the first precept of non-killing. The talk will finish by giving you some inquiry questions on the precept to guide your reflections. If possible, attendees will be encouraged to choose a partner to meet with once during the month via a zoom or telephone call prior to the next meeting. During the meeting the partners will take turns at answering the inquiry questions or asking the questions and simply listening free of any agenda. During the inquiry session there is no cross talk. At the end of the inquiry, participants can continue to converse for as long as they would like. If this is not possible, you will inquire into the question on your own and I would encourage you to record some of your observations and insights into a journal. At the end of the dharma talk and after we have handing out the inquiry questions, we will finish with the practice principles. I will say more about inquiry practice next month.

Because today's dharma talk is a general introduction to *Opening to Oneness by Bearing Witness*, there will be no inquiry for the next month, but you are all encouraged to familiarise yourselves with the recommended reading over the next four weeks, especially the book by Nancy Baker.

2. INTRODUCTION TO PRECEPTS PRACTICE

In OzZen our precepts practice is about opening to oneness through bearing witness to suffering. The founder of our precepts practice was Master Dogen. For Dogen, the precepts are not rules of conduct to be followed but manifestations or expressions of our original true nature. That's why Dogen's precepts are often written with the prefix "non" to indicate our practice is being one with the precept.

"In Dogen's terms, just as zazen is not a means to an end, not a technique for becoming enlightened, the precepts are not rules for living an ethical life so much as a expression of the realized life, the way we function from the point of view of actualized nonseparation." (from "Nothing Is Hidden: The Psychology of Zen Koans" by Barry Magid).

Our true nature is nothing more and nothing less than Life as it is. Our only teacher. Precepts practice is learning to love and appreciate our life as it is: *"We want to find our way to loving this life as it is. That's in a sense what makes this a religious practice – that we can acknowledge all these aspects of life and still find a way to say yes to it"* – Barry Magid.

It is impossible *not* to be our true nature, in the same way that from the absolute perspective it is impossible to break the precepts because our true nature is whole and indivisible. Our true nature is the totality of the whole of reality, hence it will always be ungraspable and unsurpassable – the ultimate mystery. However, when we are caught in a self-centred dream, we lose contact with our true nature and experience fear and all the other forms of emotional distress that manifests as suffering. The

Jukai ceremony and precepts practice are all about finding our way home, back to loving this life of ours as it is. Coming back home to the reality of our true nature. Receiving the precepts is receiving our life with love and tenderness. However, we often don't feel in love with our life as it is. In fact, quite the opposite, many of us come to this practice hating our life as it is.

Our Practice Principles are the foundation for our Precepts Practice. So, following on from the PP, the basic OzZen orientation to the precepts in our practice is to bear witness to suffering, and in our precepts study program, this is primarily focused on bearing witness to our own suffering, in the context of our everyday life. The precepts highlight some of the common ways we all get caught in the self-centred dream. We can understand the self-centred dream as a metaphor for how we fragment from our original wholeness and split into separate parts in order to cope with unbearable affect caused by our vulnerability as human beings to dependency and impermanence.

Suffering can be seen as the activity of separation. Suffering is also our wake-up call. No suffering – no waking up to our true nature. Suffering is our opportunity to see how we have separated from the reality of life as it is. How we are saying no to this moment. Precepts shine the light of awareness on some of the common ways we separate from life as it is. In our psychologically minded practice our precepts study is focused on how we experience separation and division within ourselves. We look at the ways we separate into enacting killing or stealing to cope with our own fears or our own sense of lack. Then through the process of

self-empathy we begin the process of reclaiming these separate parts, befriending them, even reparenting them, that is through embracing them with our true nature manifesting as loving presence, we bring them home to their original wholeness. This is the meaning of atonement – the at-one-ment of our practice – by becoming one with that which is suffering within ourselves, becoming one with the pain we have been consciously or unconsciously seeking to avoid. Our precepts practice is all about self-acceptance.

Precepts study as bearing witness has its origins in the work of Bernie Glassman and Barry Magid. Bearing witness fits well with lay practice, because we are no longer setting ourselves apart from our families and community by joining a monastery. The emphasis therefore shifts from following rules of conduct to being open and honest and accepting of ourselves and others, warts and all. It is a recognition, following Dogen, that the precepts are simply the manifestation of the awakened life we are already living – and precepts practice teaches us how we separate from our true nature by rejecting this moment and how we reconnect with our true nature by embracing the parts of ourselves that are suffering. Precepts are about loving ourselves. This moment is our true nature or true reality. This is the treasure. We only have to remember and recognise that which is already true.

Barry Magid defines bearing witness as “literally witnessing, observing, and experiencing, acknowledging, what’s going on. **It’s not about intervening, changing, fixing, purifying, perfecting or anything like that.**”

That is important. Our precepts practice is not a self-improvement project but the practice of self-acceptance. Precepts study is, following Dogen, to study the self, in all the various situations we find ourselves in our everyday lives. We do this firstly, by self-observation, or bearing witness to all the ways we separate from ourselves and others in this moment. Secondly, we then practice self-empathy by being curious, rather than judgmental, about understanding how this happens, understanding the history behind these strategies, including uncovering core beliefs. We need to understand what it is within ourselves we are running away from. Thirdly we need to become one with and feel the pain or the shame we have been avoiding. This is the at-one-ment process of our precepts practice. We shift from bearing witness to being able to literally bear the affect that was previously unbearable.

THE PRECEPTS AS BEARING WITNESS TO SEPARATION

The precepts shine the light of awareness into some of the common ways we separate from ourselves and others. This might take the form of rejecting a part within us or rejecting a part in someone else. We need to personalize precepts practice by expanding the ways in which we interpret each individual precept, for the precepts to become personally meaningful. For example, I don't know of anyone in our sangha who has literally killed someone – although if we were meeting with veterans or meeting with prisoners, it might be a different story. Therefore, what does “killing” mean to you? How do you make “killing” something that you can relate to? This is an invitation to think metaphorically: for example, do we try to kill a part in ourselves that we feel is unacceptable? Do we act or speak in ways to kill a part in our partner or our child that we find unacceptable? Do we say something which “kills”

a moment of possible connection? Do we sometimes act to “kill” someone’s enthusiasm for something? Insight into how you “kill” will teach you how you separate from self and other and will show you the parts within you that are suffering which are not in contact with the loving presence of your true nature. We inquire into all the precepts in this way:

1. In what ways does “killing” teach you how you separate from yourself and others?
2. In what ways does “stealing” teach you how you separate from yourself and others?
3. In what ways does “greed” or “misusing sexuality” teach you how you separate from yourself and others?
4. In what ways does “lying” teach you how you separate from yourself and others?
5. In what ways does “misusing intoxicants” teach you how you separate from yourself and others?
6. In what ways does “speaking about the faults of others” teach you how you separate from yourself and others?
7. In what ways does “elevating ourselves and blaming others” teach you how you separate from yourself and others?
8. In what ways does “possessiveness” teach you how you separate from yourself and others?
9. In what ways does “anger” teach you how you separate from yourself and others?
10. In what ways does “lack of faith in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha” teach you how you separate from yourself and others?

SELF-EMPATHY

Barry Magid speaks about the importance of practicing dependency intelligently. Given interdependence is our human reality, we need to recognise and accept our own human needs, including our needs for psychological validation and acknowledgment. We also need to acknowledge how we may deny or dissociate from these needs (spiritual by-passing). Being dependent “intelligently” means also recognising that other people are never going to be perfectly able to satisfy our needs for validation and acknowledgement all the time. That at times, they will frustrate and disappoint us. That includes our intimate partners, family, sangha friends and yes, therapists and Zen teachers.

Are you aware of practicing being dependent intelligently? Not denying your needs but being honest with yourself and others about these needs? Being able to see others we depend on as people who will at times frustrate and disappoint us?

We practice a form of not-knowing, being curious in our practice of bearing witness to ourselves. We develop a form of empathy and befriend those aspects or parts of ourselves that drive the impulse to separate from ourselves and others.

OPENING TO ONENESS

We are already whole, there is no division within our true nature. Dogen understood the precepts not as rules to be followed but as

manifestations of the awakened life. Dogen sees the origin of the precepts in the moment when Shakyamuni Buddha had his realisation when gazing at the morning star. He said, “that’s me!” Everything, just as it is, is perfectly being just as it is. However, a moment of fear or shame does not look like a beautiful star, but that also is not separate from our true nature. We need also to greet that moment with “that’s me!” Even our rejection of life just as it is, is perfect in being just as it is. There is nothing that is not just as it is. Thusness means life just as it is. There is nothing lacking, we leave everything just as it is AND we practice dependence intelligently – we care for ourselves and others. We care for our animal and human needs.

We turn towards our rejected parts with loving presence.

We practice non-killing by becoming one with the killer in us.

We practice non-being angry by becoming one with the anger.

Our practice is continual opening to oneness.

THANK YOU.