

The Ten Precepts Meeting: The Ceremony of Daily Life.

Rev. Eko Little

[Held annually, the week-long Ten Precepts Meeting retreat is designed for those trainees who wish to take refuge in the Three Treasures and commit themselves to keeping the rest of the Precepts as well, thereby becoming lay Buddhists.]

Welcome to those of you who are here for the first time; it is very nice to see you. To those who are coming back to be here again, it is wonderful to see you. I love to see people come at this time of year because I have never forgotten my first Ten Precepts Meeting. I hope that, if this is your first, you will look back on it as one of the more joyous occasions in your life; hopefully, one of *the* most joyous.

Because some of you are doing this for the first time, I want to explain the ceremonies in a little bit of detail and because some of you have done this many times before, I would also like to talk about what the Ten Precepts Meeting means, about the aspects of training that arise as a result of doing these ceremonies.

What does it mean to take part in the Ten Precepts Meeting? What does it mean to be a Buddhist? To me, implicit in being a Buddhist is the idea of searching for something: one's life has been found to be incomplete somehow and no matter what one does, no matter what sort of job one has or friends one has, there is this feeling that something is still missing. Perhaps, if you have had a certain amount of experience in Buddhist training, you can say that what you search for is the Lord of the House or the Cosmic

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Buddha. I remember that when I came to Buddhism, however, it was not that clear to me, and for many of us it may be difficult to say that we know what it is we are searching for because what we are looking for is beyond the bounds of our ordinary mind or ordinary level of consciousness. So there is nothing wrong with your being here and not knowing what it is that you are looking for. The most important thing is that you are looking and that you want to find it.

Because nothing in the world has been able to satisfy the longing of our hearts, we begin to look inside ourselves. This is the beginning of the Buddha seeking for the Buddha; it is what brings us to the Ten Precepts Meeting and what eventually leads us to the night of recognition. It is the Buddha seeking for Itself, the Buddha longing for Itself and, eventually, finding Itself, which is what we call the realization of one's Buddha Nature. Everyone has Buddha Nature; everyone possesses It. But to really bring It forth, to make It shine and to make It a reality, one has to train. One has to use one's willingness to cultivate this desire and this longing in order that it may change from a little belief or a doubt that makes you question what you are doing to a reality that fills your whole life. The more you train, the more it happens.

The ceremonies for the Opening of the Gate of the Ten Precepts show you what you can do in your Buddhist training every day of your life. It is said that in religious training there are cooler and warmer moments. There are times when things are really happening, when it is extremely rough and all you can do is hold on. These times may be a bit easier to deal with than the times when nothing seems to be happening and everything is arid or empty: every day you seem to be just going along and nothing is happening, nothing is moving. These ceremonies show you how to deepen your training no matter what state of mind and body you happen to be in. The week of the Ten Precepts Meeting is somewhat dramatic, but what you should be able to find during it and what you should be able to carry back with you into your

daily life is an understanding that the Ten Precepts Meeting can be every day for you. The ceremonies will not be of great use unless you can find something that you can apply to your everyday life, to your everyday training.

It is interesting to note that, with the exception of the Ceremony of Following Where the Precepts, as the Blood of the Buddhas, Lead, almost all the ceremonies take place at night. Whether this is by accident or design (probably a little bit of both), it is interesting to note that they take place in darkness. Darkness should be home to a Buddhist trainee because, to some degree or another, one's life is filled with darkness. There is nothing wrong with that, as we shall see; but in each of these ceremonies, you will find that you move from darkness into light and go back out into darkness again.

The first ceremony that we will be doing is the Ceremony of the Reading of the Ten Precepts. The Japanese word for this, *Kyojukaimon*, is translated as "giving and receiving the teaching of the Precepts." It is interesting that the Japanese characters not only mean accepting the Precepts, but also giving them for, when we practice the Precepts we also give them to others. I shall explain this more fully later on.

You can make a commitment to keep the Precepts for a day, for a week, for a month, for a year—for your whole life. In practice, however, you can only ever take them for now. Their meaning will change and will grow as your training deepens and at each moment you will have to *want* to take them. The next time you are in the ceremony hall and you have a few moments, go into the Achalanatha shrine which is on the left-hand side of the main altar. Achalanatha is one of the Kings of Light and he stands in the middle of flames of fire holding a lariat and a sword. He uses the lariat to grab demons and tie them up, and he uses the sword to cut through delusion. I often think of the rope as the Precepts with which, in the beginning, we bind ourselves up. We tie ourselves up with them and we do so willingly. With the

sword, we cut through delusion. A good word for delusion is also confusion. Therefore, Achalanatha stands in the middle of fire holding the sword and the lariat as if to say, “If you wish to take the Precepts, if you wish to tie yourself up with them, if you wish to accept the difficulty of trying to follow them in daily life, here they are for you!”

The Precepts start with natural morality: we all know the consequences of killing, stealing, lying, etc. But as our training deepens, the Precepts begin to take on a deeper significance. I have heard Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett explain that the Precepts help you to see the *whole* of the Cosmic Buddha. That is their purpose. They are not there to get in your way; they are there to help you. They are like the guardrails on the freeway: there are six lanes to move in but you don’t go past the guardrail over here, and you don’t go past the guardrail over there, and all along the way, they help you get to where you are going. In the *kaimon* of *Kyojukaimon*, the character for *kai* means “precept” and *mon* means “gate.” Truly, accepting the Precepts is the gateway into the Buddhist Way.

Achalanatha stands in the midst of flames, i.e., Achalanatha stands in the midst of hell. It is good to know that hell in a Judeo-Christian context means something a little different from the hell the Buddhist is talking about. The Buddhist term for hell in this context is *samsara*, the constantly turning wheel of birth and death. Achalanatha stands amid the flames of suffering, which are part of physical existence. He is also called the Great Immobile One and this explains the ferocity of his image. He is the Bodhisattva of awareness, steadfastness and immobility. He is just going to sit there; he is going to take the Precepts; he is going to cut through confusion and there are no two ways about it. So Achalanatha is a very good expression of what arises naturally when you meditate. Everyone likes Avalokiteshwara because Avalokiteshwara looks like such a gentle lady, but it is important to look at some of the other

Bodhisattvas too and see what they are trying to teach. You *do* have to be a bit fierce, in a positive sense, in order to train properly; you have to have courage. Courage is another word for will; and the only thing that stops the will is fear—“the only thing to fear is fear itself.” Once you become really familiar with the home of your own meditation, once you know That to which the Precepts are pointing, fear is never going to stop you again.

The most important thing in taking the Precepts is to understand the idea of intention because taking the Precepts and training yourself does not mean that you stop making mistakes. That you sometimes break them is sad, but the important thing is that your intention is to always keep them, to the best of your ability. The whole key to taking the Precepts is that you *want* to keep them; and when you find that you have made a mistake, you don't have to hide and say, “Oh my gosh, I've broken the Precepts, what am I going to do?” You “sit up straight in the presence of the Buddhas” and say, “Yes, I now realize that I made this mistake and I am not going to do it again.” Then you go right on from there. When understood properly, the taking of the Precepts does not add another veneer of the fear and guilt that so many of us grow up with; but, instead, they are a tool that will free you from them. The Precepts embody a morality (I use that word with some trepidation because of the connotations it has in our culture) that actually sets you free.

What sometimes happens when people take the Precepts is that they go on and train for some time until they begin to notice that something within themselves, despite the fact that they *want* to keep the Precepts, keeps coming up and getting in the way. We all have our own particular recipe for suffering, whether it is in the form of fear or anger or lust or confusion: the details of suffering are different for every person, yet its root is the same for all of us. Often it can get to the point where you feel like there is almost another person inside of you saying, “I don't want to do that!” or “I've got

to do that!” Should a person be unforwarned, it can lead him to doubt himself: he thinks he must be doing something wrong in training. It is important to realize, however, that the arising of this seeming obstruction does not damage or diminish the sincerity of your intention; it does show you that you need to train yourself more. As time goes on, the more you commit yourself to training and take refuge in the Three Treasures, the more this little fellow that we call “self” actually becomes your best friend because it is the very vehicle that leads you to the Truth. Another word for the arising of self is the *koan* and it is quite normal for it to “arise naturally in daily life,” as Great Master Dogen says in *Rules for Meditation*. The koan is not only the vehicle for suffering, but also for enlightenment. If you study it and take refuge in the teachings, it will lead you into a deeper understanding of the Precepts and enlightenment.

The next ceremony, after the Ceremony of the Reading of the Ten Precepts, is the Ceremony of Lay Ordination. Within our school of Buddhism, a trainee is *ordained* as a lay Buddhist only once and you should know that taking the Precepts formally is the meaning of lay ordination. This does not mean, however, that you never take the Precepts again. You can take them many times, every day as a matter of fact. It is customary for a trainee to put his kesa or token kesa on his head each morning and recite what is called the kesa verse:

How great and wondrous are the clothes of
enlightenment,
Formless and embracing every treasure;
I wish to unfold the Buddha’s teaching
That I may help all living things.¹

The “clothes of enlightenment” are the Buddhist Precepts. They are the vehicle with which we penetrate the Truth and by which the Truth penetrates us. So after ordination, the first thing trainees do after their first meditation period of the day is to reaffirm their desire to keep the Precepts by reciting

the kesa verse with the token kesa upon the head. And as I said in the beginning, the most important thing is to take the Precepts now—today—and worry about next week, next month, next year when it comes. The most important thing is to take them now because the only time you *can* keep the Precepts is right now. Therefore, to become a Buddhist is to receive the Precepts and then practice them. You will have to decide how deeply you are going to go, you will have to decide how far you are going to take them. The Buddhas only point the way; they cannot do your training for you. Only you can know when you have made a mistake, when you have broken the Precepts; and only you can decide that you are, nevertheless, going to continue to try to keep them. It is all up to you.

The next ceremony is called the Ceremony of Contrition and Conversion. It is the epitome of the idea of going into darkness and, from that darkness, into light. For those of you who have never done it before, I would like to explain a little bit about it. On the night of Contrition and Conversion, the ceremony begins with a period of meditation. When the gong is struck, the trainees line up and begin to process slowly along a very dimly lit path, chanting “Hail, Shakyamuni Buddha.” We chant “Hail, Shakyamuni Buddha” because we are doing what He did. This, to me, is another great thing about Buddhism: it does not matter if you are a layman, it does not matter if you are a monk, it does not matter if you are a woman, it does not matter if you are a man. When you train you are doing exactly what the Buddha did, in exactly the same way.

In the first small shrine that you come to, there will be a priest who represents Avalokiteshwara, the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion. The priest will take a piece of paper, cense it and then hold it out to you. The paper is meant to symbolize all of one’s karma. It is important to note that the priest will not give it to you; you have to decide to take it for yourself, just as when we meditate, our karma arises and it is

up to us to decide whether or not we are going to do something about it. The priest will hold it out to you and if you wish to take it, please do so. You then bow and walk back out into the darkness. Further on, there is a second shrine in which another priest is sitting representing Samantabhadra, the Bodhisattva of Great Love, selfless love. Samantabhadra holds a bowl into which, if you wish, you put your piece of paper. Thus, you first recognize and accept your karma and then you give up all the ways in which you perpetuate it—you put your piece of paper into the bowl, bow and go out again into the darkness.

You continue on in the darkness, all the time chanting “Hail, Shakyamuni Buddha,” until you come to a third priest who represents Shakyamuni Buddha. That priest will burn incense and make gassho to each trainee who comes up, while in the background you hear the Contrition and Conversion verse.² Here it is shown that when you truly cleanse your karma you become a Buddha: this is the first sign of recognition, and the recognition is twofold. When a real act of contrition and conversion is done, *you* begin to get a sense of what a Buddha is. “Buddha recognizes Buddha and Buddha bows to Buddha.”

When the procession has finished in the ceremony hall, the three priests light each paper and burn them in a cauldron at the center of the hall. This fire expresses that time when the desire for training has become so strong, when the fire of our determination has become so strong, that the spirit of Immaculacy, of Buddha Nature, blazes up within us. The three priests of Avalokiteshwara, Samantabhadra and Shakyamuni Buddha again bow to all of you in recognition that this is what you truly wish to do, this is what you have done, and this is what you will do. The trainees return the bow, the ceremony is over and all return again to sit in meditation—you go back into darkness. The darkness is the darkness of facing oneself. Within that darkness, however,

there are moments of certainty when one sees the Buddha and receives the teaching. These moments kindle one's faith; they give us the courage to go back into the darkness, and we eventually realize that the darkness is not really an obstacle. When there is darkness, there is darkness; and when there is light, there is light. You can learn from darkness just as well as from light. Remember, though, that it is a mistake to desire either the darkness or the light. *Desire* is the keynote here. Sometimes it is dark, sometimes it is light: both states are part of training and enlightenment.

The Japanese word *sange* has often been translated as "contrition." "Remorse" also touches it—remorse over the suffering that one has caused. Out of it, however, comes gratitude because when you meditate, you come to realize that there really is something wonderful within yourself and all around you, and that you don't have to hold on to this "stuff" any more. Many of us spend a lot of time holding on to the "devil" we know because we think it is a lot safer than the devil we don't know. In training, you have to step out into the unknown, you really have to take risks. Americans like to have everything laid out for them: "Yes, I have a contract to do this, I have my insurance policy, I'm all set to go, my life is secure." The weather this year has been a good teacher. Look at all the suffering and misery that it has created. It is another sign that all things are impermanent and no matter how perfect man becomes, suffering will exist. Therefore, it says in the *Rules for Meditation*, "Give up everything."

Many of you have probably thought, "Well, if I give up everything, does that mean I have to shave my head and become a monk?" The answer is that it may mean that—it meant that to me—but it does not *necessarily* mean that to you. We each find and express our training in different ways. Furthermore, to give up everything today will be different from giving up everything in five years, ten years, or twenty

years because you continually go on in training; through the darkness of everyday life, you continually try to do something about yourself. When we realize that the only thing we truly possess is the certain knowledge of the Eternal, we understand Great Master Dogen's words, "All I know for certain is that on my face there are two eyes and a nose." And if you ask me, "What have you learned in your twelve years in the monastery?", I would say that within everything there is an Unborn, Undying, Uncreated, Unformed, That which we call the Eternal. When we realize that we really do possess It, and when we have faith in It, when we live in It, we *can* give everything up gladly.

Giving everything up does not mean that when the child is crying we say, "Sorry, kid, I'm going to go off to meditate now!" That is not giving up everything! True meditation cannot be done for a selfish motive. Giving up everything means that we recognize that there is something greater than ourselves: we listen to It, heed It, live in It completely. It is not going to ask us to break the Precepts, It is not going to ask us to hurt another being; It will, however, ask us what we really want and it is important that we be ready with the answer. I know what my answer is, for me; each of you will have to find out what your answer is.

This brings us to the next ceremony, the Ceremony of Following Where the Precepts, as the Blood of the Buddhas, Leads. Only the day on which it takes place and not the time of the ceremony is announced. At some time on that day, the Master leaves her house very quietly and begins to walk towards the ceremony hall, softly chanting "Gyatei, gyatei, hara gyatei, hara so gyatei, Bodhi, sowaka!" This is the last line of *The Scripture of Great Wisdom* meaning "Going, going, . . . always going on beyond, always BECOMING Buddha. Hail!"³ You really have to be on your toes, and when you see the procession move, go to it, and join on the end. The procession winds and it twists and it turns and it doubles back



*“Going on, going on, and always going on beyond,
always BECOMING Buddha. Hail!”*

on itself. The idea of following the old monk is the same as following one’s heart, the Cosmic Buddha, following the Precepts through the twists and turns of everyday life. To do that, one has to listen very deeply to one’s heart, listen for the call, heed it, say “Yes! I’m ready” and then follow it. All of us have our own karma to fulfill. Mine is to be a monk at the moment; yours, at the moment, is to be lay trainees, to take care of your families, to do your work, or whatever it may be. The Bloodline of the Buddhas is a representation of how to live in the world with all the difficulties, with a bright mind. Do not forget the “Hail!” at the end of the mantra! Training must become consistently bright. And that takes time, effort and experience for it can be hard to keep up that brightness—especially when it seems like the whole world around you is going crazy! But the Precepts and the Bloodline of the Buddhas show us how to live in the world.

Ketchimyaku, itself, means “bloodline,” the Bloodline of the Buddhas. The blood of the Buddhas is the Precepts: the Bloodline is their Transmission. In the ceremony hall during this ceremony, the master shows her Bloodline of the

Buddha's silk that she received from her master and explains how the Precepts come from the Eternal, how they have gone through all the Buddhist Ancestors down to her at the present time, and now on to those of you who are taking the Precepts. Each person who takes the Precepts is added onto the Bloodline and is called a new ancestor, for simultaneous with the acceptance of the Precepts is their Transmission. The Precepts define the relationship between self and other such that when we keep the Precepts, we are already automatically giving them to others. We may not be conscious of it, but as one's training deepens, one comes to see that this is true.

On the last night of the Ten Precepts Meeting is the Ceremony of Recognition. At Recognition you are again sitting in darkness. In groups, the trainees are brought up onto the main altar from which they see, in the shrine of the Founders, the three Abbots, Avalokiteshwara, Samantabhadra and Shakyamuni Buddha. In Buddhist terminology, to climb Mt. Sumeru (which is represented by the altar) is to become Buddha. From the viewpoint of enlightenment, Buddha *does* recognize Buddha, and Buddha bows to all other Buddhas. Thus there are mutual recognition and gratitude. It is said that enlightenment is very much like a rope. When one strand does its job, it makes it possible for each of the other strands to do its job. The enlightenment of one person becomes the enlightenment of everyone. Shakyamuni sat beneath the Bodhi tree 2500 years ago and look at how His enlightenment has affected our present lives. *One* person trained Himself and became enlightened and think of what a great influence it has had and how it has been carried down through to today! It is truly amazing!

The Recognition ceremony recognizes the Buddha Nature, the Eternal, within each one of us. It is the jewel of faith. The interesting thing about faith is that it begins with doubt: we go along in life and all of a sudden, for whatever

reason, we find that things don't seem to be right anymore. That doubt, that sense of incompleteness, makes us begin to look deeper into ourselves and what we do. That is what brings us to the monastery. As we work on doubt, it turns into belief because we find the Buddhist teaching and we begin to believe in it. It is not enough to believe in something, however, one has to have faith. Faith is taking belief a step further, for it is the intent and the practice of living to the *best* of one's ability. Belief is a passive thing; faith is much more active. It says in one of our offertories, "Wherever a True Heart exists," wherever there is a pure intention, there "the Dharma springs up also;..."⁴ It does not matter if the person is a fully enlightened Buddha or a street sweeper from Toledo, Ohio; where a pure heart exists, there is the Dharma. If we are really looking, we can see this Dharma being shown to us; and if we are really training, we can show it to others; we may not see it in ourselves but it will be there. Through faith, we eventually find that It is a reality: It becomes and is one's everyday experience. During the Recognition Ceremony, the entire universe, represented by the monks, celebrates in gratitude, for the Buddha has shown the Precepts to all living things and all living things have taken the Precepts and will take the Precepts, eternally.

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1. See *The Liturgy of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives for the Laity*, comp. Rev. Master P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett, M.O.B.C., 2nd ed. rev. (Mt. Shasta, California: Shasta Abbey Press, 1990), pp. 57–58.
2. "All wrong actions, behaviour and karma, perpetrated by me from time immemorial, have been, and are, caused by greed, anger and delusion which have no beginning, born of my body, mouth and will; I now make full and open confession thereof." See *ibid.*, p. 28.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 73–74.
4. Offertory for Founder's Day.