



The Fifth Grave Precept: *Do Not Intoxicate*

The word intoxicate means “to poison.” Buddhism describes three poisons—greed, aversion and delusion—that lie at the center of human suffering. These three describe the major responses that express our discontent with the way things are. When we don’t like what is happening, we either grasp after a more pleasant experience (greed), actively push away or reject what we encounter (aversion), or distract ourselves and space out (delusion). Moment by moment we express our basic dissatisfaction with our experience by tinkering with it. We aren’t satisfied, so we “poison” the purity of the moment by attempting to alter it.

The desire to change, improve or enhance what is happening is the root of intoxication and the source of addiction. This plays out in minor or major ways—as a very, very small adjustment (just a few inches to the left, please), or as grand and dramatic (a five-day alcohol binge). In either case, we reject the moment as it is given, and act out in gross and subtle ways to modify it.

Usually the word intoxication conjures up drugs and alcohol. But we can use anything as a means to intoxicate. We can imbibe substances or engage in all kinds of activities to assist us in getting away from unpleasant moments of experience, extending pleasant ones, or jazzing up dull, mediocre ones. Even spiritual practice can become an intoxicant if we use it to avoid difficulty or to create particular states of calm or bliss.

On Zen retreats, formal meals are eaten in the meditation hall using a traditional Japanese style called oriyoki, which has the look and feel of an elegant tea ceremony. Eating oriyoki meals includes an elaborate ritual of unwrapping and carefully laying out three nested bowls which are then filled with food. The first bowl, called the

Buddha bowl, is always for grain—oatmeal or polenta or cracked wheat in the morning and brown or white, short or long-grain rice at noon.

Sitting still and upright day after day, from five in the morning until nine at night, meals become one of the few sources of entertainment. One of my favorite parts of oriyoki meals is using gomashio—a specially ground sesame salt, offered as a condiment for the first bowl. Steaming warm oatmeal or simple white rice seems bland and boring. But oatmeal or rice with sprinkled gomashio, now that is delicious! Each day, I eagerly waited for breakfast and lunch, anticipating the pungent smell of ground sesame. For me, gomashio turned into an intoxicant. As one of my teachers described it, “You have to appreciate plain rice without gomashio first. Then it’s fine to sprinkle it on your rice.”

In her book, *Getting Our Bodies Back*, Christina Caldwell writes, “Addiction is not so much substance use or behavioral process as it is a movement away from our direct body experience of the real world.” She describes how in the face of intolerable experience—anything we find threatening—we check out, or dissociate. Losing direct contact with ourselves, we become susceptible to addiction, quickly seeking something to fill the hole left by our own absence.

We each have our own particular version of what’s intolerable—perhaps anxiety, or boredom or frustration or loneliness. We each have our particular ways of checking out—booze, TV, shopping, caffeine, M&Ms. While the substances vary, the impulse is the same: what is happening is not OK so I am going to shift it. Anytime we “use” a substance or activity, we are in the neighborhood of intoxication.

Though it’s true that *anything* can be used as an intoxicant, not all substances are equal. Reading *People* magazine is not the same as shooting heroine. Some substances and activities are more addictive and more harmful than others.

Prescriptive Level: Do Not Intoxicate

At the strict, prescriptive level, the original interpretation of this precept was vivid and clear. Do not drink or smoke or take drugs. Do not take in any substance in order to intentionally change or alter what is happening. Period. I know practitioners whose dedication to maintaining the precepts extended to include not taking aspirin for a headache, or receiving novocaine when visiting the dentist.

At the level of compassionate questioning, the interpretation of intoxication is widened and deepened beyond alcohol and drugs. Here, we get curious about all the many ways we check out—rejecting our present experience in search of a less painful or more pleasurable version. Beyond drugs and alcohol, what do we “use” to squelch our anxiousness or pump up our adrenals?

Watching TV, listening to the radio, escaping to the movies, or even reciting positive affirmations (“I am successful and talented and beautiful...”) can be means to avoid the gross or subtle discomfort arising in any moment. Any of these can also NOT be avoidance. It depends how we use them. How awake are we as we make our choices? And are we aware what inspires the choices we make?

Sometimes we don’t realize we are uncomfortable until we “wake up” and notice: oh! I am standing at the refrigerator eating again. Or, as Christina Caldwell describes, we may catch our unconscious anxiety or discomfort manifested in our physical habits such as nail-biting or foot-tapping. When I am anxious about something brewing just under the surface of my consciousness, I notice that I press my tongue against the top palette of my mouth. When I am overtired or feel in need of comfort, I habitually twirl my hair (an old move from when I was a little girl). When we catch onto these habits, they can become a signal, offering us an opportunity to get curious and wonder: what is going on here?

The point, as usual, is not to judge ourselves for our particular styles of checking out, but to sit up and take note. When we pay attention and allow our curiosity to open to what may have been previously “dead” areas of our life (areas we were absent from) we enter the heart of this precept, engaging our life with kindness and wakefulness.

We need to tread softly and gently here, with great heart. Opening up these areas may be distressing or painful. They closed down for a reason, after all. Move slowly and with care. When you catch yourself checked out, or reaching for a substance or activity to alter what's happening, instead try dropping into your direct somatic experience—even if it's only for a moment, or one breath. Don't analyze or try to figure it out. Just hang out with the physicality of it for as long as you can, and then let it go.

My “Bleeding Horses” Dharma group took on caffeine as our drug of choice to study—since it was one everybody could relate to. Caffeine seemed (on the surface anyway) less about avoiding difficulty and more about grasping an enhanced state-of-being. We drink caffeine to pump ourselves up. A cup of coffee in the morning zings our brain cells into firing faster so we can be sharper, quicker, more lively and awake, ready to face the day.

For me, several important things came from this exploration. At the time, my main source of work was leading corporate training programs. As an ex-monk, now wearing a suit, stockings and uncomfortable shoes, I felt like a wolf in sheep's clothes. I was quite convinced it was not OK to be myself. I needed to be super-Pam—peppy and zippy and able to keep the people in my classes interested and entertained.

Of course the caffeine kept me floating several feet outside my body, not listening to the fear and fatigue lodged there. I felt I needed to prove my mettle, and was sure that being my (regular, uncaffeinated) self just wouldn't cut it. Naturally this was exhausting. But the caffeine—and my unexplored assumptions—kept the whole show rolling along. Particularly in the late afternoon, after hours on my feet, explaining, describing, diagramming, and fielding questions from an often reluctant or skeptical audience, a cool can of diet coke just hit the spot.

In light of working with this precept, I decided to try an experiment. I would go without caffeine in the late afternoon. This felt scary, even threatening. But I was curious to see what happened.

What happened was I survived. I made it through the afternoon without drooling or falling on my face. And, without all the caffeine in my system I was able to relax and let the process

unfold on its own. As I stepped out of the role of entertainer, the students in the classes stepped in and up. The class became more about them and less about me—which was better for all of us.

In the process, I discovered that underneath my grasping for a sharp, lucid mind was aversion toward fuzziness, haziness, and lack of clarity. Yuck. And under the aversion, I found fear lurking: “I do not want to be slow, stupid, murky-brained.” I was quite sure that without the caffeine, I would be “found out.” Everyone would discover how muddled and confused I was. It was this fear that created my dependence on the caffeine.

The most impactful consequence of this exploration was that—as I found my way back into my body—I discovered something alarming. I didn’t like leading these classes. I didn’t want to spend multiple, ten-hour days in cinder block rooms with fluorescent lights and no windows, no matter how cool the material was or how much they paid me! When I decaffeinated and slowed down enough to listen, I got a very clear message: I don’t want to do this. I didn’t like the message one bit, since it challenged my livelihood and source of income. But it was loud and clear, and impossible to ignore.

This realization, though initially scary, became a turning point. I saw that proving I *could* do something didn’t mean I *wanted* to do it. And settling into the truth of this insight eventually allowed me to shift into less performance-based work, in a more nurturing environment.

Compassionate Level: Zen Sickness

Beyond drugs and alcohol and caffeine, Bodhisattvas must be particularly careful not to use spiritual teachings as intoxicants. Meditation itself can be used as an escape to push away difficult feelings or sensations by practicing intensive concentration on the breath. We may even get caught by remembering a past meditative state of calm or bliss, and then striving to “make” it happen again. Addiction to meditative states, referred to as “Zen sickness” is a well-known, yet insidious pitfall in practice—one I know intimately from personal experience.

During my first long meditation retreat, I sat with enormous physical and emotional struggle; my shoulders pinched up around my ears, throbbing in my knees and lower back, a wild, distracted, monkey-mind, and the full display of emotions—from rage to boredom to despair. After some days of this, exhaustion sunk in. And then suddenly, one afternoon on the brink of giving up entirely, my struggle and exhaustion gave way a state of remarkable ease, buoyancy and delight. Time slowed. Everything became exquisitely still. I felt as if I was sitting in the midst of a placid, warm ocean. Each breath was like a soothing balm, gently washing through me.

I was amazed, blown open and blown away. I thought I'd found the secret—which I couldn't believe no one had revealed to me before! But now that I'd found the answer, I held on tight.

The good news was that this experience revealed what was possible. Now, rooted in my cells, was the direct experience of the power and pleasure of practice, which kept me coming back. The bad news was that my practice became tainted with expectation and grasping. Every time I sat, I was on high alert—scanning internally, for the state of calm and spaciousness I hoped would return. Since my daily meditations paled in comparison to what had happened on retreat, I was constantly hungry and dissatisfied, and meditation turned into misery.

What I didn't realize at the time was that the tendency of mind to reject what is unpleasant and grasp after what is pleasant is universal. I had simply shifted domains—from the material world into the spiritual world, manifesting what the Tibetan teacher Chogam Trungpa called “spiritual materialism.” It's possible turn anything into “material” for grasping and personal gain—money, relationships, even meditation.

Descriptive Level: The Great Brightness

At the ultimate, Buddha-mind level of this precept we see that there is no need for improvement, and so grasping ceases. We stop fiddling with, manipulating and tinkering with life. We stop playing God—trying to eradicate the dark, difficult, messy parts of life, and intensify the mundane, not so interesting parts. We stop assuming

that, if only we were in charge, we'd make sure life was never painful and always arrived in techni-color. We stop imagining a world where it all works out and instead land right here, in this very world, filled to the brim with appreciation and gratitude.

We wake up and see the clarity and brilliance that is always right here, right now, no matter what the particulars of our moment to moment experience may be. Even our petty, anxious tinkering and manipulating is revealed as yet another display of perfection! Everything that arises—from the most boring to the most exhilarating to the most excruciating—is all of one piece, and we accept it all with curiosity, even awe. We relax and settle into our whole, full, outrageous life, with “no part left out.”

Commenting on this precept, Dogen says: “Where nothing can be brought in that is where everything is inviolable. This is exactly the great brightness.” Seeing the world through the eyes of a Buddha, we recognize that nothing is outside, so nothing can be brought in. Nothing we do or say or think can violate the world because we *are* the world. We are exactly the bright light we seek.