



## The First Grave Precept: *Do Not Kill*

In India there is a sect of Buddhists called the Jains, easy to spot as they stroll along, sweeping the ground in front of them with a whisk broom to avoid stepping on tiny, crawling insects. The first Grave Precept states: *do not kill*. Not to kill is to revere all life. It is knowing that in the entire universe there is nowhere to spit; that all ground is hallowed ground. At the same time, we are animals. Our biology demands that to stay alive we must consume and digest.

This precept generously offers up a dilemma, inviting us to enter and explore the predicament of life and death: is it possible to live without killing?

### Prescriptive Level: Do Not Kill

There are three levels of understanding and working with the precepts: as prescriptive instruction; as compassionate questioning; and, as a description of Buddha's mind. At the literal, prescriptive level, if the precept says not to kill, don't kill. Not killing means: do not eat flesh, do not kill insects or small rodents, do not support companies that make bombs, pollute with chemicals, sell alcohol or cigarettes.

These rules remind us of the fragility and tentativeness of life. Ensnared in bigger, stronger, faster automobiles, it is easy to forget the soft bodies inside. At the prescriptive level, we have rules—65 M.P.H., stop, yield—to remind us just how precious and easily damaged life can be. Rules point to the small margin of homeostasis necessary for human life, above or below which we perish, just like that.

If we ignore the rules, disastrous consequences are predictable. But if we hold on too tightly, we may kill the very life the rules are meant to protect. Rigid, rule-bound dogma and ideology consistently

create violence and misery: holy wars, bodies burned at the stake, infidels buried alive. We must handle rules with care—remembering that they are meant to serve a bigger purpose. Otherwise they become the very fire that fuels anger, hatred and violence.

The Jains, with their whisk brooms, take this precept to its literal extreme. But still I wonder: is it really possible to stay alive without killing? What about the tiny microbes in our food and water? What about the worms and bugs that die when we till the soil to grow wheat and corn and broccoli (even if it *is* organic)? Killing links us to our animal nature; insisting we remember that we, too, are part of the food chain.

Releasing rules into questions, takes us to the compassionate level of working with the precepts—the level of inquiry and curiosity. What is life? What is death? Being human is subtle and mysterious: What does it mean not to kill?

### Compassionate Level: What is Killing?

The ground of compassion is our willingness to open to suffering, and at the same time, and at the same time letting go of our fixed views and beliefs. Willing to step boldly into not-being-so-sure, the hard edges of our rigidity soften and give way to curiosity and wonder. Less convinced of our own point of view and willing to entertain other perspectives, we are less likely to condemn, deny, cut off, or kill.

Again and again, spiritual teachings announce that mature spiritual life is fundamentally about letting go—releasing our firm, sure grip of our convictions. The first thing the Buddha taught after he woke up was: there is suffering in life. The second thing he taught was that the cause of suffering is clinging—holding on, rather than letting go. This essential teaching, common to all schools of Buddhism, places letting go at the center. If clinging causes suffering, then letting go becomes the heart's sure release.

What are we asked to let go of? Everything. But, in particular, Buddhist teaching invites us to loosen up our tightly held ideas and opinions. When we open the fist of our knotted views and beliefs, we step into potential and possibility, building our capacity to tolerate

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differences. When we release our grip, and drop into the wild and raucous present, we are free to respond to whatever arises in the moment with clarity, spontaneity and love.

While I appreciate the wisdom and profundity of letting go, I can't say that I like it. I like to be sure, confident, competent, in-the-know. Letting go can be disorienting, even terrifying.

As a pre-adolescent I had a repeating nightmare. I called it the "elevator dream"—although what made it a nightmare was that there was no elevator in it. I dreamt that I was falling down an elevator-less shaft, tumbling toward my sure demise. The walls of the shaft were constructed of smooth, cold metal, and as I fell, I flung my arms and legs wildly, looking for something to grab to break my fall. But there was nothing. Though in the dream I never hit the bottom, as I fell I cringed inside at the imagined impact of my frightened body striking the cement floor below.

Night after night, as the nightmare unfolded, I pressed my feet down under the covers, seeking solid ground. But, just like in the dream, there was none. I would wake with a start, sitting up in bed with a sharp inhalation, placing my damp palms over my chest—listening to my heart, pounding in the dark.

Letting go is like sky diving with no parachute; a rapid, tumbling descent, with nothing to hold onto. Theoretically I understand that this is a good idea. But I don't like it. Letting go is a death, even if not a literal one.

We yearn and stretch for solid ground. But, as in the example of the dream, sometimes the ground itself is exactly the problem. As I fell, the combination of my imagination and conviction about the cement floor at the bottom of the elevator shaft caused my instinctual wiring to tense and grip. But what if I was wrong? What if the floor of the elevator shaft was a pool of cool, clear water? Perhaps if I had let go of my convictions—I might have been able to relax and enjoy the ride.

Letting go cracks open our sureness and self-righteousness, allowing us to stay in the ample expanse of our questions. Curiosity

stimulates and calls forth creativity, soothing frustration and soliciting freshness and vitality.

One summer at Tassajara, a group of us spent several long, hot afternoons re-cementing stonework. The stones, hand-carried decades earlier from the creek, were carefully balanced and stacked in place, cemented together to create the cool-in-the-summer, warm-in-the-winter refuge of the dining room. As we worked, scraping the cement out from between the stones, biting deer flies, tiny flies that swarmed into our eyes (in search of liquid), and mosquitoes buzzed all around us. We swatted instinctively as the insects dive-bombed us, causing itchy welts to rise on our sticky skin.

Soon a debate broke out between staunch “do not kill” advocates and those who opted for a more lenient interpretation of the precepts. “So what if we itch and suffer. The precept says ‘don’t kill.’ That means not killing flies and mosquitoes.” “Be reasonable. We have work to do here. These bugs are intolerable. We can’t just let them devour us.”

After several hours of verbal battle—each side planting stakes in the ground to defend their position—tempers flared and our cumulative fatigue increased. Finally, perhaps out of exhaustion, we stopped arguing and began to explore how to address our dilemma: *We need to do the work. We don’t want to kill the bugs. And we don’t want to get eaten alive. Now what?*

The next day, an array of bug-deflecting contraptions appeared: washclothes laced with mosquito repellent; sun glasses stuffed with tissue paper; bonnets with corks and balls of cotton bouncing from their rims. We alternately lathered our skin with olive oil, lemon juice, and coffee grounds. We donned brightly colored t-shirts and shorts, and then wore only white. Testing our way through a series of experiments, sharing our successes and failures, the tone of our conversations changed, we discovered a whole host of strange-looking but pragmatic ways to deter our tiny insect friends from lurching on us, and the tedious scraping work was completed with zest and enthusiasm.

Curiosity breeds creativity. It also facilitates an appreciation for the complexity of life. Is telling a lie a bad thing if it prevents

someone from hurting themselves or someone else? Does taking from the rich to give to the poor cause us to become a folk hero or a thief? What if taking one life saves a hundred others? How we answer depends on our perspective. Considering multiple perspectives helps us consider and appreciate others' views, opening us up to the multi-dimensional, messiness of life.

Fundamentally, the precept of not-killing asks us to take on the Hippocratic admonition: do no harm. As we enter and explore the complex, messy territory of non-harming, we discover previously unseen links and connections. Wearing leather shoes causes workers to go blind in factories in Asia. Drinking non-organic coffee diminishes the water supply in the Amazon. In the tangled web of life, not harming is many-layered and multi-faceted.

Everything we think and say and do has an impact. Knowing this, we try to make choices that support rather than diminish life. But unless we are clairvoyant, we can't know for sure the exact impact of our words or deeds. We do the best we can. So do our friends and enemies.

This is not an excuse to slip into apathy or to fall asleep. Living with questions is an invitation. Look around. Marvel at the elaborate, dynamic world we inhabit. Then—go ahead—step in, eyes wide open.

### Ultimate Level: Life is Not Killed

The Indian sage, Nagarjuna, is reputed to have rescued the great non-dual teachings on emptiness from under the sea. Nagarjuna introduced the teaching of the Two Truths. There are two coexistent planes of reality, he said. There is the ultimate truth that we are absolutely, inextricably not separate, and the relative truth that—in our day to day experience—we *seem* to be.

The final approach to studying the precepts introduces Dogen zenji's radical notion that "*Life is not killed.*" Dogen's interpretation points directly at ultimate truth of how things really are—unclouded by the dualistic nature of discriminating consciousness. Yes, birth and death appear he tells us, but fundamentally, no one is born and no one dies. Life itself cannot be killed. This level of understanding

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the precepts is the most difficult, most enigmatic, and most readily misunderstood.

We need to be careful here. Leaping over the relative truth of birth-and-death can be used as an excuse to dismiss, ignore, spit at or even kill life. It's easy enough to say there's no such thing as killing. But the sure way to demonstrate our understanding that life is not killed is by not killing. Seeing the world through the eyes of a Buddha, we behave as Buddhas do. We don't kill or steal or lie or intoxicate or slander.

The way to cultivate the mind and heart of a Buddha is not to imagine what a world of "life is not killed" would look like. That's just cultivating our imagination. The way we discover Buddha's world is by carefully observing the one we've got—the everyday world of birth-and-death. In this world, we *do* feel separate from other people, and because of our felt sense of separation, we are perpetually drawn toward or repelled by them. This is the bitter work of studying and confessing the machinations of the self.

Years ago I was a hospice volunteer. Every week I would drive to Laguna Honda, the enormous skilled nursing facility in San Francisco, for my shift. I was always late. Getting out of my car, I heard the shouts and moans from inside the building which housed the poor and elderly too sick to be cared for at home.

The hospice unit on the fourth floor had a shiny cement floor and yellow walls. Long rooms with tall windows lined both sides of the broad hallway. Patients lay in bed, alone or surrounded by family and friends. Sometimes they sat out in the hallway in a wheelchair, wearing a bathrobe and slippers, waiting for someone to give them a push to the coke machine or garden.

Alvin resided in bed number eight. Before cancer, he worked for the postal service. Now he was hooked up to a morphine drip. Alvin spent most of the day watching soaps and game shows.

When I came to visit, I'd pull up a chair next to his bed. Alvin would nod to me with a weak smile and shift under the covers.

"How are you doing today?" I'd ask.

"Not bad," he'd say, keeping his gaze fixed on the TV.

"What are you watching?"

“Hollywood Squares.”

We arrived at an impasse. I hate TV. For Alvin it was a lifeline. I was a volunteer, ostensibly visiting the hospice ward as service. But my self-importance screamed for attention. I sat in my chair, eyes closed, listening to the storm inside: “Don’t you know I have better things to do than watch Hollywood Squares?! I drove an hour through traffic to sit by your bedside, and you ignore me to watch TV!”

The Hollywood Squares laugh track erupted and I opened my eyes. I glanced at Alvin, sighed and joined him in staring at the TV screen—famous people in boxes, lit up with lights.

Suddenly Alvin let out a moan. His face tensed and his body twisted in pain. He reached for his morphine pump and pushed the button: beep, beep.

I watched as he writhed and moaned, closing his eyes and muttering words I couldn’t make out. I stood up and leaned over the bed, watching, my palms clammy and my breath catching high in my throat. When Alvin pushed the pump again for more morphine, I fled to find a nurse.

Later that evening, describing the scene to a friend, I heard myself say, “It was too much. I just couldn’t stand his pain.” Then I stopped mid-sentence and caught myself. Whose pain was it that sent me fleeing the room? When “his” pain registered in my body, was it his or mine? Maybe, just maybe, we are not as separate as we seem.

### Cherishing All of Life

Last week I read in the news the story of a majestic black filly chased down and run over by vandals in a pickup truck. The story described the filly’s hoof prints smeared by muddy tire marks, and the iron grid from the front of the truck imprinted on her chest. Long after tossing the paper into the recycling, the nauseating images swept through me. How could someone be so cruel? What meanness of spirit led to that brutal, violent act?

The action of killing is the most extreme form of karma, whether enacted by crushing a horse with a truck, or squashing an ant as it crawls across our kitchen counter. But subtler forms of killing are enacted through our thinking and speaking. How often do we crush or squash unsavory thoughts into submission? How often do we use sharp words to degrade or diminish someone in conversation?

Rejecting or cutting off waves of emotion that rise and threaten our carefully constructed image is violence directed inwardly. Denial and repression kill by rejecting parts of life. Similarly, words spoken with the intent to harm slice and destroy. When we take on the precept of not-killing, it's best to cast a wide net—confessing the hostile, mean-spirited karma of our thoughts and words as well as our actions.

Admitting our meanness, hostility and aggression can feel embarrassing, but there's also relief in it. It's like throwing open the doors and windows of a neglected house, letting the light, allowing the wind rush through to sweep away the dust in the closets and corners. We don't need to slave away with a broom and mop. We don't need to fix or mend or beautify. Letting in the light of our awareness, we see that there's more than enough of beauty to go around.

The revolutionary, and thus difficult to grok proposition in Zen is that when we see the world through Buddha's eyes, we see that we are *already* Buddha. And so is everyone and everything else. The secret is that this vision does not lead to sloth and indifference, as in: if everything is already Buddha, why bother making an effort? Seeing with the eyes of a Buddha illuminates a world where there is no need to slice, dice, deny or cut off. Instead, bathing in appreciation and amazement, we turn our thoughts, feelings, words and actions toward cherishing all of life.

I read a second story in the in the paper last week about a woman—a nameless bodhisattva—whose actions epitomized caring for and protecting life. Day after day, she passed homeless people camped out in the parking lot of her office. She was a bit frightened,

but instead of ignoring them or calling security, she stepped in to help.

First she brought bag lunches, distributing them to the homeless men and women in their makeshift campsite. As news spread of her generosity, the morning crowd grew beyond her lunch-making capacity, and she recruited her colleagues at the office to help out—making sandwiches, folding napkins, buying and bagging fruit. As she got to know the people she served, she saw that although her lunch-making helped alleviate their hunger, it did nothing to provide a warm, dry place for them to sleep, medical care or other services they needed.

She did some research, made some calls and made up dozens of 3x5 cards, listing the names, addresses and services offered by local clinics and homeless shelters. A friend laminated the cards, and they began passing them out. Word spread, and soon social workers, nurses, restaurant-owners and politicians joined in, contributing psychiatric and medical care, food and drink, papergoods, gift certificates to local fast food restaurants, concern and enthusiasm.

Without knowing how to do it, this anonymous woman turned toward the heartache in her midst and responded with love and care. There are still hundreds of homeless people living in parks and parking lots, in alleyways and under freeways. But in her small corner of the world, suffering was alleviated.

Killing—with thoughts, words or actions—shreds the fabric of our shared humanity. Cherishing and protecting life mends it back together again. Whether we work with the precept of not-killing at the level of prescriptive instruction, compassionate questioning, or as a description of Buddha's mind, the price of entry is always the same: the quality of care and attention we bring to ourselves, to each other, and to all of life.

Precept practice asks us to meet each moment with respect and reverence for the sometimes horrifying, sometimes awe-inspiring display of samsara—the world of birth-and-death. Tiny stitch by tiny stitch we do our part, stepping in to meet our life with both wide-open curiosity and picayune attention to detail. As Bodhisattvas-in-training, not-killing unfolds in the heart that blooms forth when we

catch a spider in a glass, cover it with cardboard and scurry to the door—watching as it scrambles with its strangely jointed limbs out of the door, into the night.