



The Second Grave Precept: *Not-Stealing*

Most of us don't think of ourselves as thieves. We don't rob banks or steal cars or lift mascara from the local corner store. But it doesn't require out and out thievery to break this precept, which can also be translated as "not taking what isn't given." Not taking what isn't given points to the relational aspect of give and take. In this context, we can see that taking—things, time, even attention—occurs all the time. Anytime we take something without the other person's awareness, explicit consent or a direct offer, we are taking something that has not been completely given.

Taking is one-sided. I decide that I want something and so take it. Give and take is two-sided. It requires contact, communication and reciprocity. Often we jump over that, just reaching for what we want based on impulse. We can take out of simple greed, "I want that." We can take out of envy, "I want what s/he has." We can take out of entitlement, "I deserve that." We can take out of resentment or revenge, "They hurt or took from me, so..." Or, we can take out of laziness or lack of attention, "Oops, I walked off with a pen again."

Whatever the intent behind our taking, anytime we get something that was not explicitly offered, we break the mutual give-and-take of relationship. We commit the offense of assuming we can do something by our selves, on our own. In our usual way of thinking, it seems as if we do things by ourselves all the time. Exploring this precept asks us to look more deeply, challenging our felt sense of independence and pointing directly to the pain of our felt sense of separation. When we feel separate it hurts, and out of that hurt, we crave and grasp—seeking something to fill the gap.

Prescriptive Level: Meticulous Attention to Detail

The first level of working with this precept is the strict, “do not” level. Do not take what isn’t given. No matter what. Here the instruction pushes us toward meticulousness. We are asked to overcome our lackadaisical, even lazy tendency to slip and slide and blur the edges. “Oh it doesn’t really matter if I...” Well, yes it does. Here’s a chance to get really picky with ourselves. Not picky in order to be punitive, but to use our care and precision as a kind of latticework to help us wake up.

In Zen there’s a phrase, “ichi gyo zanmai,” which means, careful attention to each thing. Careful, even picky attention to detail is one of the hallmarks of Soto Zen. Zen practice instructs us to bring wholehearted care and attention to everything we do—from adjusting our posture when we sit, to washing lettuce, to cleaning the toilet. This can feel like a prison if we fall into the trap of trying to get it “right.” But there’s no way to get it right. The point is not the outcome. The point is to try; to pour your whole heart and body into something, regardless of how it turns out.

Compassionate Level: Who Owns What?

While we may not take directly, with our own hands, we rarely pay attention to the complex causes and conditions that allow us to have what we call ours. Beyond not taking what isn’t given, we can notice the impact of having at the cost of those who don’t. Our wanting, consumption and greed have consequences. At this level of exploring the precept, we widen our view to include the many people, animals and resources contributing to all that we have.

Americans comprise six percent of the world’s population and consume forty percent of the world’s resources. Astounding! Yet this statistic barely illuminates the result of our consumption in terms of those whose labor brings us the resources we consume. It’s rare that we see inside the lives of sweat-shop laborers, migrant farm workers or even the people who clean our rooms when we stay in a hotel. Instead we are showered with images of beautiful people wearing and eating and playing beautiful, delicious, high-tech products without any reminders of their true cost.

Similarly, we are encouraged to ignore the true cost of our consumption on the planet itself. Because the earth moves and

changes in geological time, the real impact of our actions may not show up for years or decades or generations to come. Even if we know that hundreds of species are dying out, global warming is melting the ice cap, and so on, if we don't feel the impact directly in our day-to-day lives, these facts are easy to disregard.

When I lived at Tassajara the intimate relationship between humans, animals and nature was much clearer and more obvious. At the bath house we always used biodegradable soap and shampoo—not just to be “politically correct,” but because the politics of our consumption were visible as the soapy residue on rocks and stones lining Tassajara creek. Sometimes I hear people critique monastic life as avoiding our checking out of the “real world.” But, to me, it felt more like checking in—caring for the whole world by way of taking exquisite care of our little corner.

Sometimes I think that treading lightly on the planet—doing less, rather than more—is a remarkably radical political act. It's radical because it flies in the face of our propensity to do, act, engage and consume. There's nothing wrong with taking action. There's nothing wrong with engaging and consuming. But often we overlook the quiet power of not-doing or consuming, or doing and consuming *less* as a powerful statement of our care and concern.

Descriptive Level: It Is All Given

When we fully appreciate our life, the impulse to steal evaporates. Why steal when we are constantly filled to the brim with non-stop experience? The answer is simple: we like some experiences and dislike others. The opening line of the *Verses on the Faith Mind* (Hsin Hsin Ming), states: “The Great Way is not difficult for those who have no preferences.” But we do have preferences. We pick and choose constantly. We like or dislike or have an opinion about everything.

To fully appreciate our life means to value *every* part of it. We don't have to *like* it all. But we need to treasure it all. Not because it pleases us or meets our needs, but because we have been born in a human body on planet earth in the midst of plenty; because life is life-ing, unstoppably 24 hours a day; because there is something rather than nothing. And we fully appreciate how amazing this is.

Full bodied appreciation is the posture and attitude of a Buddha. When we gaze at the world through Buddha's eyes we stand amazed: Wow. Amazing. Extraordinary. Holy cow! We all have moments like this, when the dust temporarily falls from our eyes and we see how things really are. These are moments of grace and beauty. Overwhelmed by the sheer magnificence of the world, we recognize and pay homage to the generosity of birth-and-death.

The ultimate meaning of the precept of not stealing is that, moment by moment, everything is completely given. The world doesn't hold back. It never has. We are swimming in a veritable ocean of beneficence and bounty. As Dogen says in his commentary on this precept, "The gate of liberation is open." From this place, the temptation to steal is laughable. What could possibly be better than *this*? Momentarily, the waiting and wanting are over. Now we are free to enjoy life exactly as it presents itself.