



Third Pure Precept: *Benefiting All Beings*

Dedicating oneself to the benefit of all beings is the job description of a Bodhisattva. That's what Bodhisattvas do. The first Pure Precept, "avoiding all evil," involves the hard, sometimes bitter work of studying and scrubbing the constricted, small self. The second Pure Precept, "doing all good," involves opening to the vast wealth of our True Nature. After the hard work of scrubbing, we learn to step into and embody the goodness erupting and overflowing out of the groundless ground of reality. Moving back and forth—from narrowness to bounty, from hard work to joyful play—we develop flexibility and skill.

The third Pure Precept, "benefiting all beings," puts our skill to work. Here, we step up to the plate to meet the many beings living in the Saha world—the world of suffering. Taking on the precept to "benefit all beings" is where the rubber hits the road.

As Bodhisattvas in training, we begin with compassionate *aspiration*—our desire to help—and evolve toward the ability to engage in compassionate *action*—the skill and capacity to respond appropriately. Developing the capacity to respond appropriately is the realization of the Bodhisattva path. Traditionally the path is described as having two wings, like a bird: a wing of compassion, and a wing of wisdom. To take flight, the bird needs both wings, working together in unison.

If we develop compassion without wisdom, we may be well-meaning, but our good intentions won't necessarily be skillful. If we develop wisdom without compassion, our clarity and insight may be accurate, but it is often too sharp and cold. No one can stand it.

Compassion needs wisdom's clear-seeing and precision. Wisdom needs compassion's warmth and empathy. Like the front and back foot in walking, wisdom and compassion come together to help us respond appropriately as we find our way, step by step along the path.

An Appropriate Response

The term "an appropriate response" comes from a Zen koan, or teaching story, in which a student approaches his aged, ailing teacher and asks: "What is the teaching of an entire lifetime?" And the teacher replies: "An appropriate response."

How do we learn to respond appropriately? This is the work of an entire lifetime. It's an alchemical blend of wisdom and compassion that is not reducible to formula or technique. To respond appropriately we have to show up, alive and awake, ready to meet the specificity of each moment. The English word, "appropriate," derives from three Chinese characters: meet, each, and teach "Meet each teach" suggests that when we wholeheartedly *meet each* unique feeling, or person, or situation, *teaching* happens. We teach and are simultaneously taught.

Besides meaning "each," the Chinese character, "ichi," can also be translated as "oneness." The double meaning points to the enigma of relationship. In true meeting, distinctions blur. The willingness to enter into and engage this dynamic interplay—without leaning too far into difference or sameness—is precisely what's needed to respond to life with appropriateness. When we meet from here, it becomes far less clear who is teaching and who is being taught. We lose our grip on who is helping whom.

Once I heard a student ask Kobun Chino Roshi about his work with the dying. "I've heard you often go to the bedsides of dying people," she said, "When you go to visit, how do you help them?"

Kobun tilted his head to the side, closing his eyes. Then he glanced up at her with a puzzled look and said, "Help them?"

"Yes, what do you do to help them as they are dying?"

“I don’t help them,” he replied, “I meet them.” Then he paused again, silently pressing the pads of his fingertips together in his lap. After several long moments, he looked up at the student with his soft, down-turned eyes and said, “I think, really, they help me.”

Compassion: To Suffer With

Compassion means “to suffer with.” *Com* means with and *passion* means suffering—as in the passion of Christ. Usually when we bump up against suffering—ours or someone else’s—we either rush in to try and fix it, or we rush screaming out of the room. We can’t stand it. Only a rare person can stay still and fully show up for the intensity of what’s happening. But it’s an amazing gift when someone can just be there for us, holding our pain without flinching.

Chao Chou (pronounced Jow Joe), one of the great masters from the golden era of Zen in China, was out walking on a winter day. After falling into a deep snow bank, he found himself unable to get up. “Help, help!” he shouted. Hearing Chao Chou’s cries, one of his students discovered him stuck in the snow. Seeing his teacher lying prone in the snowbank, the student walked over to Chao Chou and lay down in the snow next to him. Then Chao Chou got up and walked away.

What does it mean to lay down in the snow next to someone who has fallen and needs our help? Most of the time we either ignore others’ cries, or we rush in with ropes or life preservers to “save” them. We can’t tolerate the discomfort of “their” pain, so we either flee or rescue. Again, it’s a rare person who has the equanimity and presence to remain steady, right by our side until we find our way back to our feet again.

When you meet suffering, what happens? Do you turn your back and head in another direction? Do you drop into a hazy fog of confusion? Do you spin into a frenzy of activity? Having some insight into our usual modes of response provides an opening. It gives us a choice. When we know our habits and can catch them in

the moment, we have a chance to respond instead of react. We can choose an alternate course of action.

Bringing awareness and insight to our habitual patterns of behavior is one of the ways wisdom—the capacity to clearly observe—helps mature our compassion. But awareness is not enough. Insights are cheap. Every time I sit sesshin, I have at least one big insight. *When I hold onto pleasant experience, it becomes unpleasant. Or, The breath breathes itself.* At the time, the insight always feels huge, life-changing, monumental. This time I get it. Now I *really* understand. I won't be fooled again!

Inevitably, within a few weeks or months, I can barely remember what it was I was sure I would never forget. Sometimes I remember the words, but they ring hollow and distant. Given enough time, every insight loses its shine and luster. The real impact of sitting, it seems, is more somatic than cognitive. I may not remember, but my cells do. And little by little, this fleshly memory transforms my body and behavior.

Humans are not only consciousness, we are also physical, corporeal beings. Real change happens biologically. To further deepen our compassion toward an appropriate response, we must shift beyond appreciating compassion as a good *idea* toward developing a *body* of compassion.

Avalokitesvara: The One Who Hears the Cries of the World

The image of Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of great compassion offers an archetype for how to embody compassion. Avalokitesvara means, “one who hears the cries of the world.” In Buddhist iconography, she is depicted as having a halo of hundreds of arms—each reaching out to help. In the palm of each hand within this halo is an eye; the eye of wisdom or clear-seeing. Each arm, each effort to offer help and assistance, is adorned with clarity and understanding.

In a koan, one great Zen master asks another, “How does the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion use her manifold hands and eyes?”

His dharma brother replies, “It is like a man reaching behind him in the night searching for a pillow.”

In other words, compassionate action is simple, fundamental, nothing special. It's our most basic response—like reaching behind us at night to adjust our pillow.

Then the first Zen master replies, "Oh! I get it. I understand."

"What is your understanding?" his friend asks.

"There are hands and eyes all over the body."

His understanding reflects the insight that compassion is the very fabric of who we are. We can't help but hear and see and respond; it's in our wiring.

"That's pretty good," his companion replies, "You got about 80 or 90% of it."

This is standard Zen fare. One traveler on the path challenging, almost teasing another. These two are playing together, though their play—the question of how to enact and embody compassion in action—is of utmost seriousness.

In response to his dharma brother's challenge, the first master retorts, "Well, that's my answer. How about you, older brother, what's your understanding?"

And the second master answers, "The whole body *is* hands and eyes."

The difference between the two responses is subtle: "There are hands and eyes all over the body," versus "The whole body *is* hands and eyes." This first response hints of duality, depicting the body with its hands and eyes as separate entities. In the second response, separation is erased. Here, our whole being—the body, hands, eyes—are only one thing: compassion through and through.

When I first read the koan case, I felt the two responses land differently in my body, but couldn't articulate the difference. For a number of months, I took on the phrase, "The whole body *is* hands and eyes," as a mantra—repeating it silently as I sat in meditation, chopped onions, washed dishes, and swept the floor. After some time, the words served as a kind of bell, prodding me to drop into my direct physical experience of body and breath. This practice helped jolt me out of *thinking* about my experience into the dynamic immediacy of the moment. With my whole body as hands and eyes, responding arose naturally out of the vital, breathing dynamism of

life itself—which is compassion in the beginning, compassion in the middle and compassion in the end.

The Wisdom of Not-Knowing

Where knowledge gathers information, the embodiment of wisdom shows up in our willingness not-to-know. When we are absolutely convinced that our words or actions are helpful, we are usually in trouble. This kind of conviction smacks of arrogance and self-righteousness. Not-being-so-sure helps us avoid using our (seemingly altruistic) ideas and beliefs to bludgeon people. It softens our approach, asking us to step gently, with care and respect.

The word respect means “to look again.” When we are quite certain that we know what is happening, who a person is, or what an appropriate course of action would be, we can remember: look again. We can respect the person or situation enough to release our conviction and unfold our curiosity and interest.

Not-knowing plays a pivotal role in Zen lore. The Zen ancestor, Bodhidharma—frequently portrayed in Sumi ink paintings with a large, bulbous nose, furrowed brows, bulgy eyes, and a big hoop earring in one ear—reputedly brought Buddhism from India into China single-handedly. Bodhidharma was determined and unflinching in his pursuit of the truth. He was a giant of a man; an anarchist and a trail-blazer, who climbed over the mountains into the Confucian heartland with questions burning in his heart: *Who am I? What is truth?*

Bodhidharma is portrayed in Sumi ink and paper paintings as an enormous figure, with a red beard, a big hoop earring and bulging eyes. His stern, scowling, face seethes with intensity. This giant of a man was an anarchist, a trail-blazer, refusing to kow-tow to Emperor Wu, the leader of the Central Kingdom.

In a famous story, Bodhidharma visits the Emperor. In this renowned meeting between the esteemed leader and fierce holy man, the Emperor inquires, “What is the highest meaning of the holy truths?”

The Emperor's question is loaded, brimming with unspoken expectation for applause and appreciation for his dutiful support of Buddhist temples, teachers and teachings.

Bodhidharma, unflinching, replies, "Empty, nothing holy."

No special treatment for the Emperor here.

Emperor Wu, perhaps a bit taken aback by this terse and uncompromising response demands, "Who is facing me?"

To which Bodhidharma answers, "*Don't know.*"

Bodhidharma's "don't know" was not simple-minded. His deliberately chosen words offer a clear and pointed teaching. If we want to understand the truth, not-knowing is sage advice. If we want to understand the deep meaning of things, it helps to let go of our sureness and instead to wonder: Who am I? Who are you? What is human life, really?

When I lead coaching classes I do a live coaching demonstration. Though I've done it dozens of times, each time is new and challenging. I never know what will happen. Over the years I've learned that after I've asked lots of questions, listened, and done my best to understand the person facing me, I come to a place where I don't know what to say or do next. This moment feels like free-fall. The boundaries between coach and client fuzz and blur, and everything I know about coaching falls away. Suddenly, I arrive in my seat, startled and astonished—face to face with another living being.

The first few times this happened, I panicked inside, grabbing for a question, or paraphrase, or comment to fill the space—pulling a familiar technique off of an internal shelf and handing it to the client. Each time this happened, the life drained out of the relationship. When I stepped out of the raw and open intimacy of the moment into the role of "helping," the conversation became efficient and wooden.

Now I see these moments of free-fall as essential. I take them as a sign that we've arrived in the real "juice" of meeting. I take a deep breath and let myself fall into the intensity and vibrancy of the moment. Every time this happens I fear: Will something come? Maybe this time I will be dumbfounded and fall on my face! I never know what will come, and am often startled and surprised by what

arrives. Again and again I am delighted to discover a fresh, unforeseen response to meet the situation.

This ability to tolerate free-fall is the price we pay to enter the realm of wisdom. When we develop the capacity to stay present in the face of the disorienting, often frightening territory of not-knowing, the possibility of true meeting opens. Here we have the chance to greet each perplexing, unpredictable person or situation—stepping in to polka or salsa or two-step, as appropriate.

Compassion Wakes Up

In Zen temples all over the world, practitioners recite the “Heart Sutra,” a crisp, concise teaching about emptiness—the lack of any substantial, separate existence of all phenomena. Each morning Zen students recite, “No eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind...” Chanting these words challenges us, rattling our usual sureness and convictions. “No eyes?!” But I have eyes. What can this possibly mean?

“No eyes” does not literally mean we do not have eyes. We do. Emptiness is not nihilism. Rather, the teachings on emptiness ask us to consider the possibility that at our eyes, ears, nose, and all phenomenon, are beyond our ideas and images of them. Check it out, the sutra beckons: things are not what they seem.

After many years of reciting this text, the words lost their initial challenge and surprise. Having committed the chant to memory, the recitation became habitual and sleepy. The bells and voices of morning service blurred together into a long, no longer meaningful note. Rows of students in black robes bowing, foreheads to the floor, became a sea of bodies going through the necessary motions to pass time between early morning meditation and breakfast.

As the big bell sounded and the kokyo (chant leader) announced the opening of the Heart Sutra, my mind meandered forward and backward in fantasy. “I hope we have tofu scramble this morning....I love tofu scramble....I don’t think we’ve had it for at least two weeks...” Momentarily lost in reverie, the opening line of chant jerked me back into the room. “*Avolokitesvara Bodhisattva when practicing deeply perceived that all five skandhas (aggregates of experience)*

are empty and thus relieved all suffering.” After years of reciting the same words, suddenly it dawned on me: it is Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, that wakes up!

Reciting the chant year after year, I heard only the perplexing wisdom teachings: no this, no that, no anything at all. But that morning I saw that compassion plays the leading role. It’s Avalokitesvara, the embodiment of compassion who opens her eyes and sees deeply into the nature of emptiness—our ungraspable yet fundamental connectedness. It’s Avalokitesvara, whose aspiration to respond to the cries of the world, is matured and purified through her deep perception of emptiness, allowing her to reach her many arms and eyes into the world to respond to suffering with accuracy and kindness.

Listening to the cries of the world, we easily become overwhelmed or numbed out. Responding to the cries, we run the risk of burn out. To be successful, compassion-in-action needs a companion; a vast, still counterpoint. In order to *listen to the cries* we must simultaneously learn to *hear the silence*—the great mystery out of which suffering and kindness and all things come into being and pass away.

It’s like remembering the sky when there are clouds. Or remembering our breath in meditation when our minds spin and churn. Or the space between the notes, that makes the notes possible. When we forget the sky, the breath, spaciousness, our life gets crowded and chaotic, and suffering becomes overwhelming. We can’t bear to listen anymore. To keep our hands and eyes and hearts open for the long haul, compassion relies on wisdom.

This Is A Heart

Cultivating wisdom is one way to mature our compassion. Another way is to meet our *lack* of compassion with compassion—to keep widening the circle of love and acceptance to include the entirety of our experience: no part left out. When our heart is closed, or when we get overwhelmed or numbed out or burned out, we meet *that* with compassion, too.

In Japan, shosan ceremonies are akin to dharma combat—a chance for students to challenge the teacher and try to knock him off his seat. Adopted in Soto Zen temples in America, shosan ceremonies provide an opportunity for students to bring forth their heartfelt concerns and questions in a public venue. During the years I lived at Zen Center, shosan ceremonies were often held at the end of intensive retreat. As people imagined leaving the temple and returning to their worldly lives, there were typically a flood of questions about how to maintain the equanimity and compassion developed during the retreat. Toward the end of one ceremony, an older student approached the Abbot, bowed and said, “During this retreat my heart cracked wide open. I feel soft, pliable and tender. I’m afraid about what will happen when I leave. I want to keep my heart open at home, but it is so hard. Can you help me?”

The Abbot, wearing elegant brown silk robes and holding an ancient Chinese horsehair whip in his left hand, raised his right hand in a fist and asked, “Is this a heart?”

“No,” she replied.

Then he opened his hand wide, uncurling his fingers and extending them to their full length, and asked again, “Is this a heart?”

“No.”

“Right,” he said, gazing out over the hushed audience, opening and closing his hand again and again: “THIS is a heart.”

We think we want our hearts to always stay open. But a healthy heart moves with ease from systole to diastole and back again—sometimes a tight fist of restriction and renunciation, sometimes a wide open palm of generosity and goodness. The shape and function of the three Pure Precepts mirrors the terrain of the Bodhisattva path, snapping open and snapping shut, calling out the rhythm of life, of life, of life.