Precepts: The Practice of Kindness

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:01:51

It feels really different somehow beginning to speak to all of you sitting here at the beginning of a three-month course. It feels quite different to me from the other retreats that I teach throughout the year—I feel quite humbled and very honored to be able to be part of each of your three-month retreat. It's so rare and wonderful in this world to spend time with people who are so committed to bringing some light into their lives and into the world. In whatever way you might phrase that to yourself, it's quite an honor to be sharing this time with you.

I hope we can all keep coming back in our minds during the difficult times, or during the drudgery times, to the immensity of what each of you is doing—the immensity of the commitment that you're making to your path, to your freedom, to your awakening. Because a lot of the time this path is not an easy one. And that's something all of you already know, which makes it wonderful to be spending time and talking with people who already understand that.

When we're leading a retreat with many people who are new to practice, it's quite a shock for them. You might remember your first couple of retreats when you began to get it—that not only is it not easy, it's not a bliss trip, and it doesn't necessarily just go into lighter and lighter modes of being until we float away. We're really opening to the whole picture. So I feel very honored and humbled, and I thank you all for being here, being on the planet.

Tomorrow night, when we formally begin the full retreat, we will do it as we always begin retreats—by the taking of the three refuges and the five precepts. Tonight I want to speak about the precepts as practice, and tomorrow Steve will speak about the refuges.

I want to address the precepts so that when we take them, hopefully it's not another ritual that's nice—where of course we don't want to harm one another, so we'll take the precepts, get them out of the way, and get on with the real work, with what's really important. For me, over the years, working with conscious conduct, with trying to live in this world with an attitude of non-harming, an attitude of connection, has become more and more profound. In some ways, it is becoming the practice—in a way I never would have thought or expected in my early years of practice.

Thinking about why we come here, why we are doing this difficult practice, what really matters—I used to think I was coming to retreat, maybe I didn't put it quite so bluntly, but coming for some more ecstatic states of mind, for some greater depth of seeing and clarity, for greater concentration. All of these are very wonderful, but somehow I was looking for something a little more spectacular than paying attention to my speech and actions.

The Dalai Lama has said that his religion is kindness. For me, that's becoming not just a nice thing to say, but more and more one of the more profound expressions of understanding, of true open-hearted wisdom that I have heard. It's so simple, but to me it encompasses such a breadth and profundity of the wisdom that comes from our practice.

Working with the five precepts, commitment to conscious conduct, is actually learning to actualize the depth of understanding of our interconnection, of our oneness—that who I am and how I speak and act affects all other beings, and vice versa. To really pay attention to how I speak and act in the world is to begin to actualize freedom. Working with the precepts, working with how and why we speak and act, really becomes a practice of freedom, an expression of our deepest possible understanding.

In the way we do this practice, we practice from a foundation of loving kindness, from a foundation of compassion—beginning with the attitude with which we meet ourselves in these three months, with which we meet our experience, the attitude of loving kindness and compassion with which we meet one another, especially with which we meet the staff and teachers. They really need to be met with loving kindness and compassion. This becomes the framework for everything that we're doing here.

I've found in myself that in life or in retreat, it doesn't really matter—since we're in retreat, I'll speak to that. In retreat, for me, it's quite easy at times to lose track of, to lose sight of this broader foundation, this broader attitude of compassion and loving kindness to myself, to others, to experience, or to just paying attention to how and why I do what I do. The intention of practice can subtly turn into one of ambition, or a kind of materialistic attitude that we can bring to achieving certain states, experiencing certain states of mind, or changing the personality in certain ways.

For years I practiced in order to come out and be this certain kind of wonderful, fantastic person—loving and kind and filled with light. And of course, everyone would notice that when I came out of retreat. I'd judge how good my retreat was by how glowing I was at the end. Now, you might come out in a really glowing, loving space. Hopefully, as our understanding deepens, we do become more compassionate. But if our intention is to get that, then we're acting out of greed. We're not acting out of compassion to ourselves—we're strengthening our sense of separation.

Working with the precepts, these five very simple guidelines for behavior: not harming other living beings; not taking what is not freely offered; not misusing our sexuality to harm ourselves or other beings—in the context of retreat, of course, we are being celibate. The fourth is not to use speech in a way that harms ourselves or others—not lying, not using harsh speech, not using speech to divide or create separation between people, and not gossiping or using idle chatter. Luckily, since we're in silence, that's a whole lot easier, at least outwardly and verbally. But we can still look at speech in the little times that we talk here. I think that's one of the reasons interviews can be so intense sometimes—because it's just ten or fifteen minutes that you're really speaking, and so much goes on in that time that you can reflect about for days afterwards. The fifth precept is to really pay attention to keeping our hearts and minds clear, not

taking drugs or intoxicants that cloud the mind and heart, that cause heedlessness.

Again, here on retreat, that's a lot easier. Even if we only took these five precepts as blind rules, if we didn't really pay attention to why we were doing it but just said, "Okay, I'm going to follow these"—what a difference it would make in the world. It would be so amazing.

That's one of the reasons a retreat space such as this comes to be such a sacred space. We're creating a very protected and sacred space here together simply by observing these five very simple guidelines for behavior. Even if you don't pay attention to why you're doing it, even if we just blindly obey them, we're giving each other such a profound gift: the gift of fearlessness. To know that we can be in this place, not be afraid of one another, knowing that we're not here with any intention to cause harm.

When I come back here after traveling—I live in a little cottage down the road—it's such a powerful experience to feel completely safe, just in the world, so to speak. We leave the keys in the car. I never lock my house, and I never have one thought that somebody is going to come in and take something or trash something. There's just this sense of care, of protection, of fearlessness that we're giving to one another.

The Buddha advocated paying attention to our speech and actions as a deep form of protection for ourselves. There's a real happiness that comes when we are being in the world in a non-harming way. Have you ever noticed that in yourself? When you're being with people and you're not being harsh, you're not taking things, you're not actively wishing them ill—which, yes, sure, that comes up in our minds—but the times that we're not, there's such a happiness that comes from it.

So the Buddha advocated following conscious conduct as a way to protect ourselves from the results of our unskillful speech and actions. Protect ourselves from anger, from results coming to us from others. Protecting ourselves from remorse, for when we've done something unskillful, often it comes back up again in our hearts, in our minds. This often comes up in a long retreat, and we're protecting ourselves from the suffering of that. And by protecting ourselves, the natural result is that we are protecting others. Again, we can't separate ourselves from others.

The Buddha said once that all the joys and sorrows of beings come from their actions. When we are acting with care, from kindness, from a sense of our connectedness, from compassion, we are protecting ourselves from great suffering and giving others the gift of fearlessness.

So even if all we did was relate to these precepts as five rules that we had to follow in order to be here and get on with the practice, even that would be great. But it wouldn't have the profundity, the great depth; it wouldn't be a practice of freedom, a practice of liberation, if that were how we were relating to it.

What makes it so much deeper, what makes working with our speech and conduct so much more profound, is that the heart of an action, the seed of what makes our speech or action skillful or unskillful—skillful meaning leading to happiness, unskillful meaning leading to suffering, not like a good-evil judgment—what makes it skillful or unskillful is that the whole seed of action is in the intention,

in the volition that leads to our movement of speech, our movement of action.

So sila, which is the Pali word for virtue, for morality or conscious conduct—sila is a morality of intention or motivation. When we begin to bring mindfulness to our speech and actions, not so much focused on how it looks or on what the immediate noticeable result is, but when we look at the volitional force, the state of mind giving rise to the speech and action, that's where this practice of mindfulness of our speech and action becomes quite profound. And really interesting, too.

I mean, it's much more interesting to look at why I've said something unskillful than to just make another black mark: "Oh, you blew it again. Bad." "Oh, you said the right thing. Good." That's not so interesting. But to see when I've said something that has brought a feeling of discomfort to myself, or I see somebody else flinch—instead of just saying, "Oh bad, you blew it again," I can really look at the motivation behind that action. That's where understanding really begins to percolate, where we really begin to viscerally experience the connection between myself and others, that it can't be separated.

So what makes an action skillful, in the Buddhist way of speaking of action, is if the motivation, the volitional force, is arising from skillful states of mind. In the sort of negative way of phrasing it: non-greed, which is really non-attachment, generosity, inner contentment, renunciation. Or when our intention is arising from non-hatred, which is really compassion or loving-kindness. Or from non-delusion, which is really wisdom, clear seeing, equanimity, awareness of our interdependence.

An outer action might look like we're really doing the right thing. We could obey the letter of the precepts and have our intention be bringing suffering to ourselves. For example, I could not only not take what's not given, but seem to give something in a very generous way, while all my intention is in wanting other people to see how generous I am—which is actually both a kind of greed and a kind of delusion, comparing myself and wanting to look good. So all the seed is in the intention.

There's a little story about a Tibetan practitioner named Geshe Ben. One day he was expecting a visit from a large number of his benefactors. That morning he arranged the offerings on his shrine in front of the images of the Three Jewels—the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha—and he arranged them particularly neatly. Examining his intentions, he realized they were not pure; he was only trying to impress his patrons. So he picked up a handful of dust and threw it all over the offerings, saying to himself, "Monk, just stay where you are and don't put on airs."

When his teacher heard this story, he said, "That handful of dust that Ben threw was the best offering in all Tibet."

It's this kind of examining our intentions that makes bringing awareness to conscious conduct such an exciting and wonderful practice. Rather than just observing rules, we're learning how to practice oneness—how to express, to viscerally experience our non-separation from each other.

When we relate to the precepts with integrity and commitment, I deeply believe that working with them

becomes a practice of freedom. You can experience this for yourself, even in very small ways. We don't have to look at the most horrendous so-called breaking of the precepts.

Here's an example. Recently I was teaching at a retreat in New Mexico where there's a group shared shower. Everyone leaves their shampoos, and I was examining them—oh, that looks nice, that looks nice. It's one of my little fetishes; I like to try different shampoos. There was one that looked really interesting, one I hadn't seen before. And there was this moment of the mind saying, "Oh, who cares? No one will know. I'm sure she wouldn't care." How easy it is to just go and do that.

But I noticed it. Sometimes having the precepts as a set of rules can help us wake up. It's like, "Oh right, I'm not supposed to take what isn't offered. That's one of the rules." This can serve as a way to remind us to pay attention. Then, tuning into my own intentions, I could feel viscerally—and in my mind—the feeling of greed, that contraction of wanting, that sense of self quite strong. "I need to try the shampoo." It sounds ridiculous, but sometimes it's the ridiculous examples that help us see what's going on, because I couldn't get too upset about whether I tried the shampoo or not.

Feeling that contraction of self, that sense of real separation and grasping—it was suffering. And in the letting go, in not trying the shampoo, rather than feeling deprived—"Oh, I can't do it because that's what the precept says"—in really letting go of needing that shampoo, there was a movement from grasping and separation into oneness. That sense of contraction moved into expansiveness. And luckily, in that moment, not into a sense of pride (which would have been back into contraction again), but simply into: right, we're all part of the same show here. That isn't mine to take, and I don't need it.

It really was a movement from suffering to happiness, from separation and contraction to a glimmering of the potential of freedom—the spacious expansiveness of a mind not obscured by craving and aversion.

That's just a small example, but we can experience this way of relating to our intentions in countless moments. Even when we don't fully understand our motivation, we have this little list: "Oh, this isn't a helpful thing to do." Then we can pay attention to what changes when we act from skillfulness, from non-greed, from renunciation. It really is an opening into the potential of freedom, of clear seeing. And we have that opportunity over and over, in all kinds of small speech and actions.

This practice of relating to precepts moves from blind obedience or trying to be good into a real movement of the heart, where we get immediate feedback when we begin to move out of harmony with other beings and with ourselves. When we begin to speak or act not from kindness, but from some sense of "me, separate, I need, I'm better than you, I'm worse than you"—somehow needing to be taken care of at the expense of someone else. It becomes immediate feedback, a mindfulness of cause and effect rather than blind obedience to some rule.

Working with the precept of wise speech, of right speech, is in some ways the most tricky, the most difficult. Often I find I haven't had a moment to notice my intention before something comes out of my

mouth. I don't know the intention; I don't even know what I'm going to say as it's already being spoken.

I have a tendency toward humor, and at times it can get a little out of control. Over the years, as soon as something that's just a bit unkind leaves my mouth, I can almost feel the flinching, the pulling back of the other person, as I feel it in myself. It's immediate feedback: saying something unkind is harming myself in that moment at least as much—and probably more—than it's harming the other person.

It's an immediate feedback that I've moved out of kindness into self-interest. And right away, rather than going from that into judgment—which is just taking the same kind of aversive intention and turning it back on oneself, and that isn't any better—but instead of moving into judgment, to then begin to explore with mindfulness: Oh, what was the intention behind that? Not with judgment, not with a view to making ourselves wrong, but with a view to understanding.

Very often I'll see, oh, there was some sense of not feeling very good about myself and wanting to somehow be one up. Or sometimes just an exuberance that gets carried away. Sometimes it's just being in a bad mood—all kinds of things. But rather than just continuing the aversion towards oneself, by looking at the intention, by honestly seeing it with mindfulness, that's where we naturally let go of that need to look better, or of the attachment to exuberance and wanting to continue it.

So ultimately mindfulness comes down to be the main precept. In some ways, the only precept we need to really pay attention to. Thich Nhat Hanh says that mindfulness is the fundamental precept. He says, think of the precepts as a manifestation of mindfulness. When you're mindful, you are responsible—and then the precepts are not needed to dictate our behavior.

And that's so true. When we're paying attention, as I was just saying with speech, we don't need to have some list of rules. We know when we're acting from kindness, when our intentions are connected, when our intentions are coming from caring. And we know when they're not. It's really quite simple in that way.

Another aspect of loving-kindness and compassion as the framework for our speech and actions, as the framework for our practice, is that they are ultimately boundless. Compassion and loving-kindness grow and grow, almost spatially in a way, but they're boundless. They're not limited such that certain people deserve compassion and loving-kindness and certain people don't. Or that certain aspects of myself, certain aspects of my experience, deserve to be met with compassion, but others are really no-no, get rid of them. Not at all. So compassion and loving-kindness are boundless, profound—no limits, no separations.

I find for myself, in relating this to working with the precepts, that taking any of the precepts and looking more deeply into my own relationship to that way of being, seeing and feeling the depth of our interconnectedness with one another and with all life in the world—where do we draw the line? Where do I draw the line in working with a precept? For example, in not killing, or in right speech—where does that line draw? Just with the bare outline of what the words say?

The boundaries between self and other just begin to melt away. The longer I've been paying attention to behavior, just to these simple five rules of behavior, the less I can perceive any kind of real boundary. The boundary used to just be me and how I was relating to the person or the animal immediately in front of me. Then maybe to the ring of people I know. Or maybe to the group of all of us here. But because in this culture, in this world, we have so much information about human beings all over the planet, we can't really hide from even the intellectual knowledge that how we act is affecting beings in all parts of the globe. And so where do we draw the boundaries in working with these precepts? Where do we set the limits of our behavior?

I find this a really fascinating area of exploration—one in which there isn't, I don't think, an answer that anyone can say this is how it should be for you. But I've found for myself that it takes away any sense of cockiness I have, for one thing, to continue to explore how boundless each of these precepts is. It takes away any sense of arrogance that, oh, I'm really deeply at heart a kind person, or I'm going through life without harming anybody—I don't really have to pay too much attention to it, you know, I'm a good person. I don't mean to bring in guilt, as in "I'm not a good person." I'm just talking about taking away a sense of arrogance or thinking I don't have to examine this anymore. I don't kill beings. I know I don't kill beings. Let's move on to the second precept. But to really see how boundless it is.

Thich Nhat Hanh says that when we enter a meditation hall, we bring all of society with us. In a way, the suffering, the pain that we feel in our own heart is the suffering of all of society. And in some ways, I feel that's true in our practice here, and that's also how I relate to working with these precepts.

So I just want to give some examples of what I mean by exploring them in this way of boundlessness, because they just seem to get more and more refined. Thich Nhat Hanh, again, in talking about trying to really uphold each of these guidelines of behavior without getting judgmental towards ourselves—it's essential that we don't expect to begin by being perfect, because these precepts are very difficult, very difficult. But we incline our mind in the direction of working towards being perfect.

The Buddha said once, "I say that even the inclination of mind towards wholesome states is of great benefit. If even the inclination of mind is of great benefit, then what should be said of bodily and verbal acts that arise from such states of mind?"

Incredibly powerful, incredibly beneficial. But also to know that we can even just have the intention—sometimes the intention doesn't make it past the thought, but still that's beneficial.

So in looking at the first precept, for example, the precept of not killing, if you just take it as a blind rule without exploring more deeply, is it even possible to live a life on this planet as a human being and not kill? Whenever we drive a car, we're squashing countless bugs. Whenever we boil water, when we take antibiotics, we're killing little bacteria. Where do we draw the line? Each of us has our own area that we're comfortable with. And I find for me, it necessitates keeping looking more deeply. Keep looking more deeply. Because if it's just a blind rule, then I can say, "Well, forget it. I just won't kill the big things."

Sizism, you know. But little things that I can't see, then it doesn't matter.

But if we look at it as intention, then it takes on a whole other form. Knowing that I can't drive without killing, but beginning to look at where we can look—at where I act from an intention of aversion or of ignorance, of just not wanting to know. How often do we, maybe we don't deliberately go out and kill things very often, but I find for myself, more often anyway, there will be times when I can see that I just don't want to know.

I've used this example before. If I don't have my glasses on and I go to step into the shower, I can't tell what's on the floor. I can't tell if that little brown dot is just a piece of lint or a little spider. And I can see if I'm in a hurry in the morning, there's part of me that just doesn't want to know. And if I don't take the time to lean down and look, and I turn on the water and I still don't know as it washes down the drain, that doesn't absolve me. That's an intention of delusion, of not caring really, of thinking my own being more important, not feeling the sense of connectedness or caring for life, if that was a spider. And not knowing doesn't save me from having acted in an unskillful way.

So I can pay attention to when I do something like that, even if I still don't know, but there's a feeling of separation. There's that contraction of self, making me more important—my ten seconds of time that I save by not looking down, somehow making me more important, more separate. And there's a real shutting off of the world, a contraction that's actually suffering in that moment.

Of course, there are other times when we do know and it's a real dilemma. And that's where each of us has to look very carefully to consciously do what we need to do.

I know some of you might have been here some years ago when we were having the beginnings of our ongoing relationship with the cockroaches here at IMS. Because in the first years we didn't have any cockroaches for some reason. And some years ago we began to have a real infestation. It's the kind of thing we went through so much trying to find ways to work with it. I remember numerous staff meetings, board of directors meetings, teacher meetings, discussing every which way. We called in insect psychics from Vermont to try and send them out. We all made a vow for some period of time every night—we would all do loving-kindness to the cockroaches, asking them to leave. This went on, I don't know how long—at least a year. And in the meantime, it was really getting out of control, and we run a center that has to be certified by the Board of Health and all kinds of things like that.

So what to do? And as you can imagine, as many people as there were, are, that's how many different opinions there were about what to do. You can see we're faced with these dilemmas in our life. And sometimes we might each meet them differently. So it's to bring in a real awareness of our intention, bring it as much into our heart, into light as we can, and then do whatever our particular decision is at that time.

Another time, I was a manager here, and the house across the street that staff lives in now, we used to rent

it to friends. For some reason, the couple that lived there had gone away for a week or two. I went over to get something and the house was just infested with fleas. I walked out and really my legs were covered with fleas just having been in the house for a minute. It was really—you couldn't live there with it like that. So again, it's the dilemma of what to do, who would take the responsibility of calling the exterminators, because that's what it came down to. And I felt that was my duty to do that, and I did. I can't really say what all the karma is, but I felt that was something I had to do consciously, and I had to do it looking at the bigger picture that we were responsible for that building. Other people might have made other decisions.

So there's that level.

Can we live as human beings in the way that we live without ever taking life?

And then there's the level of how do we relate to the decisions that we've made. I've met people who are vegetarians out of a deep commitment from not wanting to kill animals, but who are so enraged at people that do eat meat that the violence they're suffering in themselves—in holding to that view and in blaming other people—that's also violence, that's also hatred, that's also giving rise to the intentions of separation and anger. And really looking at that.

This is from Aitken Roshi: "Practicing compassion goes hand in hand with practicing realization. On your cushions, you learn first of all to be compassionate toward yourself. I can recall occasions when I was sitting in zazen with my mind a turmoil of murderous thoughts and feelings. Perhaps you have had such experiences also. We vow to save all beings, but how do you save the roughnecks in your own mind? Treat them as neighbors who come to the door when you are meditating. Oh, there you are, you violent thought. With this recognition, you are at ease with yourself because you are no longer blindly responsive to your thinking and feeling, and thus you are no longer at the mercy of your karma."

So in a way, greeting the violent thoughts that come, the thoughts of harming, the thoughts of killing—that might seem distant now, but I happen to know from personal experience of people who, well into a retreat, had definite murderous thoughts and visions of people sitting around them, for whatever particular obscure reason it might have been. "Oh, there you are, you violent thought." In that moment, we're meeting it with compassion. In that moment, the intention of violence, the intention of anger and hatred has been shifted to the intention of compassion, to the intention of acceptance.

This is not a small thing. Because each time that the intention shifts, each time we can move from the violence to even the inclination towards kindness, that's the beginning of actualization of understanding. It's a huge thing. And we have many, many moments when we can experience this.

So just with this one precept you can see how it gets very subtle and profound. It also stretches out boundlessly in all directions. How do we define killing?

Thich Nhat Hanh is really wonderful, I find, in the way that he quite naturally seems to see the

interconnection of one act with all acts in life. So, for example, something I think about: I wonder if there are ways that I support violence in entertainment. If I go and pay to see violent movies, or if I enjoy watching violent TV shows or reading violent books, is there a way that I am contributing to the ongoing violence and the increasing violence in our culture? I don't know, but it's something that I feel I have to look at very deeply.

Or when I'm too lazy to do some bit of recycling, am I contributing in that moment to killing a portion of our environment, to actually killing some of the sustaining force of nature that supports all life on this planet? I don't know, but it can get very profound.

And talking about vegetarianism again, just the sense of—if I eat meat, because cattle take so much more grain to feed than if the grain was just used to feed people, am I in eating a hamburger actually contributing to starvation in Africa? I don't know if that direct correlation can be made, but that's one way of exploring the parameters of really trying not to have intentions of killing or harming other beings.

I also look at the ways that my mind creates a sense of us and them. Whether the "us" is meditators versus non-meditators, whether "us" is my family versus outside people, whether "us" is two friends versus somebody else who looks dangerous walking down the street.

A couple of years ago, my partner and I were in Thailand and we met a young man traveling who was from Croatia—he was a Croat. And he just seemed like any of the travelers you meet in Thailand from anywhere. We were on the train and he was reading the paper about something going on in Bosnia, some particular battle between the Croats and the Serbs. The Croats had won this particular battle. And in that instant, he changed from being just an average guy. He was cheering the way some people I know cheer football games. He was cheering about how the Croats had won this battle and how great it was. "I just hate all Serbs." This was said with so much vehemence, so much real fear and vitriol and separation. It was shocking to me.

But of course, more shocking is that he was just, you know, in a battle zone. Yet that's not something I'm unfamiliar with. I find ways that my own mind sets up divisions and distinctions between us and them. It creates fear and separation and the need for some kind of action to get what I need and protect myself. Is that promoting violence in the world? Is that promoting harming other beings? I think so.

So it really gets quite intricate. And not to look at any of this with a sense of blame or self-judgment—remember what Thich Nhat Hanh said: it's not about expecting to be perfect. If we don't expect to be perfect, it opens up the range to really be willing to look.

So the second precept, very similar: not taking what is not given. That's the sort of easy way of expressing it, but if we turn it around and make it more positive, to me this precept is really pointing us to the possibility of living with inner contentment—the real sense of knowing that just what there is here is enough. I don't need to take something else to find perfection or happiness or contentment.

Dogen, the great Zen master, said, "The self and the world are just as they are. The gate of emancipation is open." Not taking what is not given turns around to: can we live in this sense of inner contentment? These three months are a great opportunity to play with this idea. Can we live with the understanding that the self and the world are just as they are, and the gate of emancipation is open?

In that space, no thought of needing to take what isn't offered even arises. If I were in that space of inner contentment, when I see some shampoo sitting there, I don't think, "Oh, I wish I could have it, but I can't," and feel deprived. The thought doesn't arise. "Oh, that looks like a nice shampoo"—and it just sits there. There's no sense of neediness because there's not a sense of incompleteness. Again, this is opening to the potential of freedom.

In our retreat here, this inner contentment—it's another way I look at renunciation. We can tend to think of renunciation as deprivation, as a kind of hardship on ourselves. But really, when it's the space of inner contentment, it's the greatest happiness. And that's what we can practice here in not taking what is not given.

You have a lot of chances, even more here than you might have in other places, to look at whether it's possible to find contentment with what is given. That can be the food. It's rare that you spend three months with no control over the food that you're given to eat three times a day. This gets to be a really big deal. It's a lot. And when we're going through a difficult time, food is a great place to displace all that energy.

I remember my first few years of long retreats where I would just be thinking about if only I could have a big chunk of cheddar cheese or something, or a piece of bread—stuff that normally I don't even have to think about. And so much mental energy would go into wanting this piece of cheese or whatever it was. So much suffering.

In a way, as Aitken Roshi says, it's almost like stealing from ourselves in that moment. We're stealing from ourselves the potential for peace, the potential for recognizing happiness in that moment, because we're throwing all our happiness out onto the piece of cheese or the rice cake or whatever your particular mind might dream up about what would make you really happy if you had it.

So that's okay, the mind does that. We have the precept to stop us from actually going into the walk-ins in the middle of the night and taking it. A friend of mine has a great story from years ago. He was manager here about fifteen years ago, so nobody here now is involved in this story. He went into the walk-in refrigerator late at night, and there was a yogi in there with his hands in the dried figs or something like that. My friend said, "Oh, can I help you?" being polite. And the guy says, "I'm just looking for the maintenance office."

Before we get that far—I mean, nothing horrible would happen—but before we get that far, open to the potential for letting go and seeing that it's not deprivation. It's opening us up to the possibility of freedom,

you know, to let go of the fig or the cheese or whatever.

It can be hard here, and there's a lot of opportunity for that—with food, with rooms, with your yogi job, with meditation. There's a way we're all giving to one another through our renunciation. And there will be times, believe me, when something is just going to seem like it has got to be fixed, it has got to be given. And if it's not given, I've got to take it because I can't make it another day.

When your mind gets into that mode—we'll talk more about it later—we call it yogi mind. Just give it a couple of days. Don't trust it right away. Don't necessarily believe that's the true path of happiness, whatever that thing is. But maybe then you can remember the precept: "Oh yeah, don't take what's not given."

It's not just a rule to make things easier for the people who run this place. It's a guideline for my liberation. And we can open up and explore in that way.

And again, not taking what's not given—where do we draw the lines in the world? I read an article in the New York Times from a population conference in Cairo, talking about food and the shortages that are coming. And another concern is water. Someone from the Worldwatch Institute was saying that we've entered a new era, one in which satisfying the needs for seafood, for example, of ninety million people being added each year—ninety million people each year—satisfying their needs for seafood requires reducing consumption for those already on Earth. Satisfying the demand for grain also means reducing the consumption of those already here.

So if that's true, it doesn't necessarily mean I should starve myself to death, but to me it does entail looking at that salmon spread I had the other night for dinner. Did I have a choice? Is that actually reducing the consumption for somebody else? There might be times I really need it and times I don't, and I can bring more awareness to that.

Or being out in New Mexico just recently, which is like Los Angeles—it's basically a desert. That blows me away, that Los Angeles is a desert and how much water is needed for how many people there. In New Mexico, water is going to be a major difficulty in the upcoming years, and to have a really nice garden someplace like that literally means taking water from other people when there isn't enough to go around.

So it's not about guilt, but for me it's about really looking at how I use resources, and looking at when I don't examine how I use resources because I just want to be comfortable, or because I can't be bothered—again, delusion—and seeing how different it feels when I do pay attention.

It's not a giving up, not self-denial, not some kind of harshness or self-hatred. You know, "I will never turn the heat on again in the winter because that takes away fuel from other people." That's ridiculous. I couldn't live in this climate if I did that. But when I turn it down a little bit, I can see that that's not a deprivation—that's an actualization of my sense of connection with the earth, with other beings. It's actually a movement of love and compassion, not a movement of deprivation.

It's quite a wonderful way, for me, to look at how I act. It is an actualization of our interconnectedness, of coming out of the obsessive self-referencing that happens when we're going against the precepts. We come out of that obsessive self-referencing into a sense of acting with kindness.

Because at bottom, we all just want to be happy. We're all the same in that. And if I do what makes myself and others happy, life works. If I think I'm making myself happy by taking from others, nobody's happy.

That's the gift of mindfulness—that when we pay attention to what we do and why we do it, we begin to discover that what we thought was making ourselves happy, taking more things, working in this consumer economy that seems to operate by making us want more things... I get the New York Times on Sunday, and it's just page after page of new things to want that we never even heard of before. You can come away thinking, "Wow, I've really got to have that."

Moving out of that sort of self-referencing, thinking that's what makes us happy, and seeing that acting out of kindness for all beings is what truly makes us happy—it's a wonderful, wonderful practice.

I always do this. I only got through two precepts. So just extrapolate to the other three.

For here, sexuality we don't have to work with too much at all—hopefully not at all. We're not working with it while we're here.

I mentioned the four aspects of wise speech. I just want to say them again: not lying; not using harsh or abusive speech; not using divisive speech, like two people talking and putting down a third person, or trying to come between two people out of jealousy or whatever; and not gossiping, just idle and frivolous talk.

One Tibetan teacher, Patrul Rinpoche, says that when you really look at gossip that seems to arise spontaneously and seems sort of harmless, really examine the intention. How often is the intention fueled by craving or aversion or hatred? Or, I would also add, conceit—the need to make oneself feel better or put oneself down. Just look at the intention behind gossip.

So working with our intention, with a real commitment to kindness to ourselves and to others, and using these precepts as guidelines—sometimes I feel this in itself is such a profound practice that it would begin to encompass all the rest. We can really learn how to rest at ease in ourselves, in whatever's happening, with other beings.

And we can feel quite viscerally, actually experience, that when we come into the meditation hall here, we do bring all of society with us. Quite literally, none of us is practicing for ourselves alone. In some way, we're practicing for all beings. We're practicing for the planet. How we really come to understand ourselves in the world is going to manifest in the way that we relate to ourselves in the world—through our speech and through our actions. There can't be a more powerful way to express our understanding than that.

There's one last line from the book: "These five precepts are a vehicle of happiness, a vehicle of good fortune, a vehicle for liberation. Let our virtue therefore be purified and shine forth."

Let us sit for a moment.

Thank you for listening.

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