49. Engaging Precepts Mindfully

Open heart and good boundaries.

In the relative world in which we live, there are no absolutes. The Buddha's precepts are not a behavioral code to be followed at all costs. Neither are they frivolous suggestions to be tossed aside casually. Rather they are guidelines to be engaged mindfully and heartfully. After all, the Buddha's path is a middle way.

The middle way is not necessarily an easy way. At times we face choices that are neither clear nor simple. Strictly following precepts does not keep us safe or let us off the hook. However, in the long run, engaging precepts mindfully can help us navigate rough waters and learn how to live well.

To unpack how this works, let's start with stories about Suzie and Bandit and situations I found heart wrenching.

Suzie

Suzie was a tabby cat given into my care when I was seven. We became close friends. She slept on my pillow. She even allowed me to be in the closet with her when she delivered kittens. I watched her purr and meow and push the little blobs from her body and lick them to life.

One afternoon when I was ten, my father backed the car out of the garage. I walked around the corner just in time to see Suzie go under the rear wheel.

My father noticed the unnatural bump and jumped out of the car. Suzie lay on her side unable to get her feet under her. Yet she thrashed so violently she threw her body several inches into the air. My father murmured something about a knife and her throat and rushed into the house.

I didn't think I could watch. I saw the yellow plastic kitchen wastebasket standing empty by the back door. I filled it with water and gently lowered Suzie into it head first.

She struggled with surprising strength and coordination. I held her head firmly underwater until she stopped moving. I released her and slowly removed my arms from the pail. A bubble escaped her mouth.

I looked up to see my father watching from the back steps. He held a long carving knife in his right hand. He didn't say a word. I turned away and walked into the backyard to be alone.

A half hour later I noticed long scratches on my forearms. I'd been too emotionally numb to notice.

My father never spoke to me about it.

Bandit

I've owned cats all my life. They've been fond friends and companions.

When Bandit was nineteen (which is very old for a cat), he became lame and had spells of confusion. Sometimes he stood beside my bed and meowed for a half hour. But most of the day he seemed comfortable, sleeping on the foot of the bed or resting in his favorite garden in the backyard. Despite spells of disorientation and pain, on the balance he still seemed to enjoy being alive.

Then one afternoon my wife called to me. She had found Bandit lying on his side in the garden. Ants crawled over him, including across his eyes. He was breathing but couldn't blink.

"He doesn't want to be alive like this," I said. My wife agreed. I considered drowning him in the nearby hot tub. But I remembered how Suzie had struggled. Once I had brushed the ants off him, Bandit's situation was not acute. So my wife and I drove him to the vet who gave him an injection as we stroked him gently. I asked the vet how long until he dies. She said, "He already has."

Precepts

The Buddha's first precept is to "refrain from killing or harming living beings on purpose." He said that breaking this precept requires four things: (1) knowing of a living being who (2) we want dead and (3) doing something that (4) directly results in its death.

Killing Suzie and Bandit were literal violations of this precept. Though I grieved their deaths and missed them both, I

am at peace with what I did. Kindness and alleviating my friends' suffering felt more important than non-killing. Even if I thought my deeds created bad karma, I'd do them again.

We're Never Off the Hook

After hearing my stories about Suzie, a serious, long-time meditator said to me, "I'd never do what you did. I would sit with her. I'd send her loving kindness. I'd comfort her. But I wouldn't do anything to hasten her death."

When I asked him why, he said, "Because that violates the first precept about killing."

I responded, "But Suzie preferred to be dead rather than spend her last few moments of life in excruciating pain. Why wouldn't you break a precept to relieve her agony?"

He said, "Breaking precepts can disturb my meditation and create negative karma."

I said, "That sounds selfish. Selfishness can disturb inner peace and have negative karmic consequences as well. The precepts are guidelines, not magic shields to be used by rote in all situations."

We agreed to disagree.

Other yogis have raised a different objection. "Doug, what makes you so sure you knew what Suzie and Bandit really wanted?"

This is a valid concern. We don't want to be too casual about "putting a pet to sleep." It's difficult to know what another human really wants, much less a non-speaking pet. Many feelings can disrupt our ability to intuit another's wishes. Perhaps we're uncomfortable witnessing another's discomfort. Perhaps we're annoyed cleaning up after an incontinent pet (or person). Personal tensions can distort our ability to "read" another. Selfishness comes in subtle guises.

Despite the valid concern about knowing another's wishes, behind the yogi's question may be a dubious assumption: when

in doubt it's safer to do nothing; if we aren't certain what a pet or person really wants, it's best to be passive.

However, ethically there is little distinction between doing something that causes suffering and refraining from doing something that would relieve suffering. Inaction doesn't necessarily get us off the hook.

On the other hand, action doesn't necessarily get us off the hook either. I suspect there are consequences of harming others no matter how kind our motives. Occasionally I have killed a squirrel running across the road in front of my car. Despite doing everything I could to swerve, I hit it anyway. My intentions were save it, but my actions still killed it. I could feel the effect of this for days. Intentionally killing it would have had deeper and longer lasting effects. But harming unintentionally or harming with the kindest of intentions can still have an effect.

It's the nature of life in the world that sometimes the best we can do is to choose the least-worst alternative. To put this in old-fashioned terms, being an adult means making decisions based on our best understanding and living with the consequences.

The Buddha said that the motives behind our action or inaction are very important. They can even shape our perceptions. If our best understanding is ambiguous, it helps to look deeply and clearly at all our various motivations, make a decision as wisely and kindly as we can, and learn from the results.

We will make mistakes: errors of commission and errors of omission. Nothing lets us off the hook. But the more open we are with ourselves about our heart's intentions, the easier it is to learn. Sometimes this is the best we can do.

Hamburger Dilemma

Despite my willingness to kill a beloved pet to ease its suffering, there are times when I think the Buddha's injunction against killing doesn't go far enough.

Buying a hamburger doesn't meet the Buddha's criteria for breaking the precept against killing because (1) we didn't know the cow before it was killed, (2) we never intended harm to that particular cow, and (3) we did nothing directly to cause its death. The cow (4) died, but that is not linked directly to our intention or action. So eating a hamburger does not break the precept, according to the Buddha.

But living in the world of supply and demand economics, buying hamburger contributes a tiny amount of demand for cow meat, which encourages someone else to kill a cow. Knowing these subtle cause-and-effect relationships is enough to give me qualms about consuming meat in today's society.

I was a pure vegetarian for many years. I ate eggs and milk products but explained to my wincing friends that I would not eat any "flesh."

Then an acupuncturist convinced me that my blood protein was low. I'd be healthier if I ate a little fish from time to time. She reminded me that our bodies evolved on a diet that included meat.

As I reflected on this, her reassurance was not comforting. I knew I could get all the protein I needed from vegetables, but it took more work than I wanted to expend.

I reflected further that I couldn't survive without eating something that had once been alive. I had a friend who ate only the parts of plants — like fruits and leaves — that could be harvested without killing the whole plant. But this felt like philosophical hair-splitting.

Many Native Americans say that what's important is being humble, mindful, and grateful to the life forms that died so that we might live.

Today I don't eat any "flesh" except occasional fish.

This may sound like convenient rationalizing or a self-centered, "If it feels good it's okay." But I'm not suggesting you should model your diet on mine. I am suggesting that in the relative world there are no absolutes. We have to wrestle with

our actions and their effects. The conclusions you reach may be different than mine. How we engage the precepts is more important than the conclusions we reach.

Spirituality and Action

So let's look more deeply at how the Buddha intended the precepts to be used.

The goal of spirituality training is not rigid adherence to a code of conduct. The goal is a mind-heart free of distortion. Such a mind-heart can see clearly and dispassionately how the mind-heart works. It can see how the mind's attention moves. A mind-heart like this is free.

If we were fully enlightened, "if it feels good it's okay" would be a good criterion. We wouldn't need formal precepts. As Thich Nhat Hanh said, "When we are mindful, we know what to do and what not to do." But this side of enlightenment, our minds are not always clear enough. Our perceptions, feelings, and thoughts get distorted in many directions. Some things feel good in the moment and later cause regret. And some things feel bad or guilt-producing in the moment, so we back away and later wish we hadn't. Because of our propensities for confusion, it helps to have tools to navigate the world. It is in this context that the Buddha offered the precepts.

He saw a relationship between certain qualities of consciousness and certain behaviors.

He considered some qualities to be defilements or unwholesome states. They have tension and tightness that distort the mind-heart and obscure its natural clarity. High on the Buddha's list of unwholesome qualities were desire, grasping, aversion, hatred, confusion, and willful ignorance. Collectively they are called taṇhā, which is often translated as "craving" and literally means "thirst."

Some behaviors are generally unskillful and likely to cause harm. High on the Buddha's list of unskillful actions were killing, harming, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, gossiping,

spreading rumors, harsh speech, idle chatter, and taking intoxicants.

Tensions and distortions can easily give rise to unskillful actions. Unskillful actions easily give rise to unwholesome qualities. They feed each other.

The opposite is also true. A wholesome mind-heart is filled with kindness, compassion, joy, equanimity, or peacefulness. Such a mind gives rise to skillful actions like generosity, caring for others, and treating yourself and others well. These skillful actions, in turn, generate a peaceful, kind, clear, compassionate mind-heart with little distortion.

When we are confused, it is easier to see our outward actions than it is to notice our inward qualities. By flagging behaviors that give rise to unwholesome qualities, the Buddha was saying, "When you break a precept, it is a good time to reflect mindfully on what's going on inside." And "If you are tempted to break a precept, it is a good to time refrain from saying or doing something you may later regret. Instead, reflect on the quality of your mind-heart."

Killing

From the perspective of wholesome motivation, killing Suzie and Bandit was not a problem. I saw clearly what the situations were and was motivated by kindness and compassion — wholesome qualities. The problem with killing is that this is very rarely the case. Most often, killing and harming are motivated by aversion, hatred, anger, or fear. Even swatting a fly usually begins with annoyance — which is a form of aversion.

Killing is most likely to arise in everyday life when we're interacting with creatures we think are less important than us — mosquitoes, flies, ants, termites, rats, and other so-called "pests." We might imagine the inconvenience they bring us is more important than their lives: killing them is not a big deal.

But in those situations, if we look inside, there are contracted states. The contractions may be small enough to

ignore as we swat a bug and go back to matters of greater consequence to us. But in subtle moments of meditation, those acts of mindless violence can be disturbing and leave us restless without knowing why. Ignorance, whether intentional or unintentional is not conducive to well-being for us or for the creatures around us.

Devaluing life is the root of war and ecological crisis. So coming into a more harmonious relationship with all the creatures — large and small — increases our own peace and contributes to peace on the planet.

Ants

It is not always easy.

When I walked into my apartment a few months after moving to Sacramento in 2000, there were several streams of ants winding across the kitchen and down the drain in the sink. My first thought was, "I hope nobody sees them. They'll think I'm a sloppy housekeeper." I quickly turned on the garbage disposal. Ant carcasses spewed out of the disposal and splattered all over the kitchen. I was horrified at what I had done and vowed to find some way to live more harmoniously with these little beings.

I began to clean up the kitchen more thoroughly. Using trial and error, I learned what they liked and didn't like. Now, during the times of the year when the ants are more active, I'm careful to not leave food out that they find enticing.

Today, if I look carefully, I can often see a tiny ant here or there in the kitchen — scouts looking for something to harvest. But since they find nothing, they don't send for their buddies.

It feels good to know that I can share the space with them in ways that both of us are comfortable. I like living harmoniously around them.

Rats

My relationship with local rats was more difficult to work out. We bought a house near the American River in Sacramento.

This means we live along a greenway with lots of fields, woods, and a variety of creatures: birds, deer, coyotes, and rats, to name a few.

Rats are resourceful. They can squeeze through the tiniest cracks and survive for long periods on very few calories. They mostly keep to themselves, so I didn't mind having them in the backyard at night — I wanted to accommodate them. But I didn't want them in the house itself. I used hardware cloth and steel wool to seal tiny openings in the walls and roof. I used Havahart® traps to catch them and release them into the fields. I sealed food in containers.

Yet after several years, we could still hear squeaking in the walls at night, see holes chewed through food boxes, and find droppings in pans in the cupboards. One evening rats ran across our feet as we sat in the living room.

The next day I called an exterminator.

He carefully placed lethal traps around the foundation of the house and in the attic. Over the next several months, on my behalf, he killed about a half dozen rats. And that was it: no more rats. After six months we terminated our contract with him.

Several years later, we still don't have rats inside. Perhaps I had sealed the house sufficiently — we just had to get rid of the rat families that were already inside. Perhaps the new roof that we had to put on the house sealed up holes in our defenses. Whatever the case, we now have boundaries that allow us to live around the rats while keeping them out of the house itself without having to kill them.

Termites

The creatures with which I've been completely unsuccessful are termites. I cannot afford the damage they can cause to our living quarters when they chew through joists and beams unimpeded. We have an exterminator who drives chemically treated stakes into the ground to set up a chemical barrier. Every four or five years, they manage to breach the ramparts

and start to burrow through the house. The exterminator uses poison before they get very far.

I have an uneasy truce.

I've had more success with spiders, wasps, and other crawling or flying bugs. For years our practice has been capture and release.

Seriously

I take the precept to refrain from killing or harming beings quite seriously even if I haven't been able to figure out how to follow it literally in all circumstances. It has taught me a lot nonetheless.

I've recognized that we humans are the most predatory species on the planet. We quake in movies when we see velociraptors, wolves, or lions tearing animals apart. But we humans continue to do much more damage than they. We are taking out creatures and entire species at an alarming rate.

Despite our collective impact, few of us view ourselves as violent aggressors. We just do what feels comfortable. If that means swatting mosquitoes, shooting deer, or poisoning termites, we may shrug and say, "That's just how life is."

Seriously taking the precept of non-killing means I can't shrug any more. I've had successes and failures in trying to live by it. But it is harder and harder for me to do harm without recognizing what's going on inside as well as around me. Often that's enough to stop me.

Today I'm more aware than ever that our world is full of intelligent creatures and sentient beings. We live in a sea of relationships with many, many species. The birds and squirrels outside my window have the intelligence of small children. We can have quite complex relationships with small children.

My relationship with my nonhuman brothers and sisters feels more harmonious than before I began working with these precepts. And I'm learning more all the time.

The precepts are meant to be trainers in just this way: to help us learn to live with more wisdom and harmony in the world as it is.

Stealing

The second precept is to "refrain from taking what is not freely given." I inserted the word "freely" into the translation to make it clear that non-stealing includes being aware of how we use our influence on others. Browbeating somebody into giving up something they would otherwise keep is a form of stealing. We live in a world where the exploitation and the misuse of power are all too common.

The opposite of non-stealing is generosity. By taking this precept and using it wisely, we can move from the contraction of greed to the expansion of generosity.

Most of us can see the problems with robbing a bank, ripping someone off, or shoplifting. We can imagine rare exceptions where kindness or compassion may lead us to take something that is not freely offered. For example, Lawrence Kohlberg, in his study of moral development, proposed a scenario: your child is dying of a rare illness. The pharmacist has a medicine that will cure the disease, but he's charging an unreasonably high price. You don't have the money to buy it. Is it morally better to steal the medicine or let your child die?

As with Suzie's and Bandit's scenarios, this scenario is very rare. But it's enough to make the point that non-stealing is not an absolute. The Buddha included it as the second precept because stealing is generally precipitated by greed, desire, or intentional disregard — all are contracted states. In most situations, taking what is not freely given is harmful to the person gaining an object as well as to the person losing it. Adopting this precept encourages us to explore our motives when we are tempted to take what is not freely given.

For example: How do we feel when we take a pen home from work? Do we rationalize it? Do we think it is okay as long as nobody notices? How would our boss feel if she knew?

How do we feel about taking a pen from the office with the intent to use it for work we bring home? Is this a situation in which the pen is "freely given"? If it is, how do we feel if, when our work is done, we use the pen to create a family grocery-shopping list? Is that okay? Do we even think about it?

When is it okay to download music, movies, or documents from the Internet? Can we always tell if they are truly freely given?

I knew a monk who would not accept gifts that were left on the doorstep of his *kuti* (meditation hut) because he could not be absolutely sure they were freely given to him. When is it okay to take something even if we aren't sure if it's unencumbered?

When somebody tries to patent a human gene, they did not actually create the gene. They just claimed it. Is working with that gene a violation of this precept?

What does it mean to own something? What is our true relationship to objects?

Balance

The number of questions that can be asked about the relative world is infinite. One of the insights of situational ethics is that if we have one rule, we can live by it. But if we have two rules, there will be times when those rules conflict. So we need a third rule to sort it out. Now we have three rules. Each will conflict with the other two at times, so we need more rules to sort those out.

We cannot answer all the questions that can be asked about our actions. Trying to do so may lead to endless thought proliferation.

Finding the middle way between ignoring rules and overindulging is an art. Walking the spiritual path is an art.

To help us in daily life, the Buddha offered lay people five precepts. For retreats, he offered eight. I use seven. These are listed in the appendix (see p. 299).

Theravada Buddhist monks have 227 precepts and nuns 311. They have taken a path that is less involved in the affairs of the lay world and have more time to engage fruitfully in a larger set of guidelines.

How many precepts are useful for us? That's something we each have to work out. The Buddha did say that doing anything we feel is wrong damages us even if it doesn't break a formal precept. We have to work this out for ourselves.

Summary

If our mind and heart are serene and luminous, we sense easily what kinds of actions deepen our equanimity and strengthen our awareness. But if we are upset, angry, or disturbed, we may get caught up in events and take actions that leave us unsettled.

In the earliest saṅghas around the Buddha, there were no formal precepts. But as the saṅghas grew and a greater variety of people became monks, more and more of them would get caught in old habitual patterns — they'd do things that they later regretted or that scattered their minds.

So the Buddha and the saṅghas created precepts. They point to actions that arise from a mind-heart caught in tensions or distortions. The tensions and distortions might be subtle and difficult to see in an emotional moment. But actions are concrete and easy to spot even when we are overwrought.

Precepts are flags that say, "Hold on a minute. You are about to break a precept. This is a time for you to take a few breaths and pay attention to the quality of your mind and heart. Are there disturbances or defilements present? If so, reflect deeply before taking this action. Don't proceed until you are at peace."

For a precept to work, we must take it seriously. If we're willing to dismiss it when it is emotionally inconvenient, it will not be helpful. We're likely to get caught by unbalanced feelings.

On the other hand, mechanical adherence to precepts creates a mind-heart that is rigid and righteous when it stays within the rules, and rigid and guilty when it doesn't. Rigidity, righteousness, and guilt are not conducive to awakening. On the other hand, kindness and clarity are. They are the overarching qualities to be used when engaging precepts mindfully.

I undertake the precept to be
kind and generous to myself and all beings.

Related Chapters

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46. Awareness Is Magic, p. 217

50. Wise Acceptance and the Six Rs, p. 239