

## ten precepts

Sunday, June 19, 1966, Lecture C<sup>1</sup>  
Sokoji, San Francisco

Last time I explained the ten prohibitory precepts:

- Do not kill.
- Do not steal.
- Do not be immoral.
- Do not lie.
- Do not sell intoxicating liquor.
- Do not speak of others' shortcomings.
- Do not praise yourself or blame others.
- Do not grudge giving to charities, material or spiritual.
- Do not be angry.
- Do not speak ill of the Triple Treasures.

Those precepts look like quite common precepts and nothing special. They are [laughs] quite usual, and almost all people know them. But, they are pretty difficult to observe. This is a well-known fact. They are quite simple, but quite [laughs] difficult to observe.

So, in this point there is some reason why we have to emphasize those ten precepts. And, those precepts in Buddhism have special meaning because our precepts are not to attain some special achievement mentally or spiritually. To be a good citizen [laughs] is just why we have to be a Buddhist. There will be no need for all of us to be sages [laughs]. If we are good enough to be a good citizen, that's enough. If we are quite good as citizens of America, then I think we will not have any more wars [laughs] because we are too good. That is why I think we have to fight. If we are just good, common citizen, there will be no need to fight. This point is very important for us. Our precepts should be so very common and should be very usual.

And those ten precepts may be well-understood customs among human beings. And, it will be unwritten rules, but sometimes those ten commandments are set up as a law. Here—because they are difficult for us to observe, we have laws. So, when those precepts are understood as the laws of the country, someone may think it may be permissible to some extent to do something wrong—will be permissible if some attorney will say you can do as much as is [laughs]—to some extent it is good. That is precepts when they are understood as law. And, sometimes they may be understood as moral rules. In morality—they are rules which we should observe. So, in morality we emphasize the negative sense of the precepts. “You should do this; you should not do this” is morality.

But, this understanding of the rules of human beings does not work properly because under the

moral rules we do not feel freedom. We have no freedom in the moral realm. But, in the religious realm, we have two sides of the interpretation of our rules. One is a prohibitory meaning. One is a more positive meaning. We have to do it or we want to do it, instead of we should do it. When we say we should do it, that is moral precepts. But, when we say, I cannot help doing so, or I want to refrain from doing something bad, that is a religious understanding of our rules.

So in this realm, we have freedom. But, here religious faith is wanted. Without faith or without finding out your inmost request, you cannot obtain this kind of freedom. When you find out your inmost nature or buddha-nature, you don't want to do something wrong, and you want to do something good. Here you understand precepts in a negative and positive sense. This is why we have to have precepts.

So, here precepts is not just contact between people or between countries, or it is not the law of the country or law of the society. This contact will bring Buddha and sentient beings into a relationship. So, there we have no chance [laughs] to break it because we want to do it. When you want to do it, there is no chance to break it.

So, here again you come back to the animal stage. Animals do not do anything wrong. What they do is always right. But human beings have some ability or [laughs]—I don't know what to say— freedom to do something good or bad. So, in the human realm, we have to have some conduct between us. So that we might not get into confusion [laughs] there are some rules. And, we have two chances: to do something good or to do something bad. Morality is for human beings.

So, as Buddha said, a human being has some destiny to struggle with himself and with others. That is the nature of human culture. But, when our human culture is emancipated to the stage of religious culture, we have perfect freedom. In this sense we emphasize precepts. The difference between asceticism and Buddhism is this point: We acknowledge our human nature one hundred percent [laughs]. We are one hundred percent good. We accept it. Whether someone says good or bad, we have human nature. We have to accept it, and as long as we are human, we cannot be a god in the Christian sense. We cannot be a god. We are human beings through and through. When we are human beings through and through, we are buddha. But, how to be a buddha? Buddha must obtain perfect freedom. So, when we find out our true nature, we are buddha. And, for us there is no chance to do anything wrong. That is why we should observe our precepts.

So, we do not observe our precepts for any gaining idea. Just to be a human being is the purpose of observing precepts. There is no other purpose. Just to observe the precepts because we want to do it. That's all. That is the precepts. Ten prohibitory precepts.

So, ten prohibitory precepts may be the three corrective precepts: “the precepts which enjoin us to complete good behavior—the precepts which enjoin us to complete good deeds—the precepts which enjoin the completion of benevolence or loving kindness to all beings.”<sup>2</sup> Here

we emphasize the positive side of the precepts. And here, in three corrective pure precepts, we emphasize both the negative side and positive side. So, when oneness of the positive and negative side is attained, we say pure. By “pure” we mean oneness of the duality always.

As the Sixth Patriarch<sup>3</sup> said, there is no practice and [then] enlightenment. There is practice and enlightenment, and enlightenment is enlightenment, and practice is practice [laughs]. But, he said, you should not think after you practice, you will attain enlightenment—that our practice is a means to attain enlightenment. That is not right understanding, the Sixth Patriarch said. And, when he said so, he said, you should not have a polluted idea of practice and enlightenment—a stained idea. Stained idea means dualistic idea. If you think practice and enlightenment are two different things, that is a stained idea. If you understand practice and enlightenment is one, that is pure, an unstained idea of practice. So, he said, although there is practice and enlightenment, you should not have a stained idea: *zenna* in Chinese or Japanese.<sup>4</sup> *Zenna*. *Zenna sinko torii zai*.<sup>5</sup> “You should not have a tainted idea.” That means you should have pure understanding. By pure understanding, we mean understanding which is more than just intellectual dualistic understanding.

So here we say the “three corrective pure precepts” because these precepts express the oneness of the negative and positive attitudes of observing precepts. And further, those positive and negative attitudes of observing precepts will be attained when we realize our true nature and take refuge in Buddha, law, and sangha. That is why we have sixteen precepts.

The Triple Treasures means our fundamental nature to take refuge in Buddha, or the truth, or the sangha. And, when we realize our true nature, it means we have both negative and positive ways of observing precepts in everyday life.

But, as we have some human nature which is special to human nature, we have to emphasize the more negative, prohibitive side of the precepts. It is more suitable for a human being to emphasize the negative side. When we realize our true nature, we naturally will emphasize [1-2 words] but negative understanding of life. Before we realize our true nature, we emphasize the rather positive [laughs] side until we are completely caught by [laughs] our positive side of the activity: ignoring not to kill, not to steal, or not to be immoral, not to lie.

It is quite true when Dogen Zenji says human beings like something wrong [laughs]. That is quite true. And, ignoring something true [laughs]. We are not so interested in something right, something true. If all of us start to be interested in something which is completely right, then all social activity will be stopped [laughing]. There will be no newspapers, no magazines, no movies, no traffic, no airplanes, no trips to the moon [laughter]. Our human world will be completely blocked up. That is true [laughs]. We should know that.

So, Buddha was quite wise to accept both [laughs] sides [laughs]. Half and half. And because of his mercy, he emphasized the negative side a little more than positive side [laughs]. There is no need for us to emphasize the positive side. We are quite positive anyway. This is the structure of the precepts.

Precepts eventually go so far as the formality or behavior or demeanor which moral rules or laws of the country cannot reach. Whatever you do, to some extent, you have freedom. Even though you do not behave like a good citizen, you should not be put in jail [laughs]. So, to some extent, you have freedom.

But, religion goes deeper than that. It binds you, so far as it goes, to the demeanor of not only behavior, but how to smile, or how to blink [laughs] eyes. It should go so far, you know, because what will happen to you if your boyfriend makes [laughs] his eyes a triangle [laughs, laughter]. Before you say anything, that is the end of the [laughs] friendship. Religion goes so far. Religion is deeper, and it is more [laughs] real to us. That is religion. It goes very deep.

But when you understand religion as you understand some social contract, or rules, or law of the country, religion is very bad. It is terrible [laughs]. When a religion loses its faith and loses its freedom to believe, religion is the worst [laughs] thing you will have. So, if you believe in religion, you should believe in it from the bottom of your heart, or else religion is the worst thing to observe or believe in.

So anyway we should have complete freedom in religious faith.

Thank you very much.

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<sup>1</sup>This date is probably wrong: Four lectures on one reel-to-reel tape were assigned the same date. The previous recorded lecture in which Suzuki commented on the ten prohibitory precepts was given on 21 January 1966, so this lecture may have been given shortly thereafter. (See SR-66-01-21-A.)

<sup>2</sup> It sounds like Suzuki-roshi is quoting someone, but the source is unknown.

<sup>3</sup> Daijan Huineng (Daikan Eno): 638-713. Sixth Chinese Patriarch of Zen.

<sup>4</sup> zenna or zenma (Jap.): to defile a pure mind with a delusory one; to be attached to a dualistic view.

<sup>5</sup> Phonetic guess only. Transcriber is assuming the next sentence is the English translation of the Japanese phrase.

Source: Original City Center tape. Verbatim transcript by Adam Tinkham and Bill Redican (5/18/01). Lightly edited for readability by Wendy Pirsig and Peter Ford (9/2020).