

Dharmette: Five Precepts (1 of 5) Preserving What Breathes

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So hello and welcome. And as it's the beginning of the week, I have a new series of talks and maybe a little bit of a special time being over this holidays, the winter holidays. So what I'm inspired to do is hopefully give five simple talks, but maybe in their simplicity being very meaningful, profound. Simple talks about the five precepts. In some ways, Buddhism, Buddhist practice and training begins with the five precepts. And in many ways, it ends with the five precepts, in that someone who becomes mature in this practice lives by the five precepts without trying.

That any tendency they have to harm living beings, to take what is not given, to engage in sexual misconduct, to speak falsely, and to be intoxicated, disappear for someone who has matured in this training. And so, in some ways, it defines the beginning and the end of this path and everything in between. And the first precept, that usually sometimes is described as refraining from killing, killing living beings. I'm fond that the word for living being, *pāṇa*, P-A-N-A, in Pāli, refers to breathing beings. And so in some ways it's all those creatures that we share this profound capacity to breathe with. And I kind of delight in that, just like we breathe.

Dogs, cats, deer that we have around here, squirrels. All these different creatures have lungs and breathe like we do. It's such a common feature, a necessary feature for much of life, that sometimes being alive is defined by the first breath someone takes. And dying is no longer breathing. I've been with both animals and humans when they take their first breath. And it's quite special.

It feels like a kind of, to me, a kind of a miracle to see that first breath. The first time I saw it was when I was attending to the birth of a cow, the calf. And as this calf was being born, it didn't seem like it was alive at all. And I was even a little bit worried. And then as it was

coming out, at some point, it took a deep breath and opened its eyes, and it was very much alive. And I've been with people and they took their last breath and kind of watching, even attending, watching them breathe, knowing that this would be the sign that they had died and wanted to be right there with them, maybe holding their hands, and watching and seeing that there was that that was a last breath.

Nothing more is coming. And breathing is the nexus of meeting points with so many emotions, so many attitudes, so many motivations, so many ways of living in the world. It has to be because we need a lot of oxygen, shifting amounts of oxygen, to do all the different things we end up doing as human beings. And so the breathing adjusts itself constantly. But it also gets adjusted and changed by our ways in which we're tense, the ways in which we are stressed, the ways that we are resisting, or angry, or even greedy. And the breathing gets held.

And this instruction, the first precept, not to kill living beings, sometimes I translate not to harm living beings. How do we harm ourselves by how we abandon our easeful breathing? How do we harm ourselves by willingly getting caught in all kinds of feelings, thoughts, ideas, emotions, so that our breathing gets held, gets tight, gets constricted, gets forced, gets labored? And is there another way? Is there a way to breathe easily? And so this first precept to me of not killing living beings points to the centrality of the reference point of breathing for what it means to be alive, even when we're not in danger of dying.

But the quality of our life, the fullness of our life, the living of our life, doesn't have to be curtailed or limited or diminished in the way that is represented by how that happens with breathing. And one of the great gifts of mindfulness of breathing, where most meditation practice, as we get at ease, is how we can discover a profound sense of easeful breathing. Yeah. It wasn't until I was probably 20 or 21 that I had a clear feeling, now I've learned how to breathe. Of course, I've been breathing for many years until then. But it wasn't until then that I discovered meditation and really gotten into it.

And there's something about the ease in which breathing can happen in meditation. The relaxed way, an easeful way, an unconstrained way that breathing can happen. And it wasn't easy. It took a while for me to find that. Took a lot of relaxing my belly, which was chronically tense. That I started then to see how I limited myself whenever I lost that easeful breath.

And then became a question, why should I abandon the easeful breath? Why should I give this up? What's more important? And is it more important than these other things? If there's important, I need to take care of things. Can I do it better with an easeful breath?

Can I do better at being centered and quiet and not caught up in anxious or tight or pushing? And one of the things we start seeing is that when we want to cause harm in the world, when we want to intentionally, deliberately harm others with our violence, with killing even, that chances are pretty high that we are losing that easeful breath. To kill living beings is to kill something inside of ourselves. To kill living beings with hostility, with anger, even with fear, means something profound has been shut off, shut down, limited in ourselves. And the art of a Buddhist life, an art of a liberated life, art of life as we mature in this practice, is to stay close to that place of ease, of peace, of well-being. Don't sacrifice it for anything.

And learn how to be in the world. Learn how to respond in the world. Learn how to care for yourself. Learn how to care for others. From this place of having an easeful breath, a breath that's assuring and reassuring, breathing with is nourishing. It's a breath, happy, happy, easeful.

So to become attuned, aligned, in harmony with the natural way the body can breathe easefully is one of the great gifts of meditation. And it has a direct bearing on the ethical life we live. And so I find it quite wonderful that the first precept is, do not kill breathing beings. And because they don't want to be killed, that doesn't make them happy. Just like I wouldn't make it happy for you to be killed. So don't do to others what you wouldn't want happen to yourself.

And maybe also you'll understand that to act with violence, to act with hostility is a profound, is a very significant way to limit yourself, maybe even to destroy something in yourself. That you wouldn't destroy if you stayed with your easeful breath, that you wouldn't destroy if your life was motivated in this way that the ease, the peace, and the inner life is not sacrificed. Because then we'll live in the world in a way that's wholesome and ethical. So it isn't that you're required to follow the first precept, that this is a commandment. What's inspiring here is the guidance, the guidelines for how to live arise out of the deep, calm, easeful, connected sensitivity that can come from being centered, calm on ourselves that for many of us begins in meditation today, and then we bring that into our life.

And the precepts then become an expression. Living by the precepts becomes an expression of that ease, not a reason for more attention. So may you live by the first precept, may you love the first precept, may it be dear to you. And may the first precept be an outgrowth, right? Of the practice of mindfulness or breathing. Thank you.