

Training in the First Precept

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Good morning. I also have some announcements. Is this loud enough? Good. I think so, right?

So this Tuesday evening, I'm having a conversation with... Mosen Modami, Modani, who is one of the Alcinian Columbia University students who was detained and almost deported back in April. And it's a little bit of, I don't know, irony or odd thing that he should have been arrested for being involved in terrorist activities. When he was the president of the Columbia University Buddhist Association. And he was very active, probably the most active person on campus, to build bridges between the Jews and the Palestinians there, and was loved and valued a lot by the Jews on the campus and was not participating and actually denounced some of the more strident, violent kind of language against Israel that was going on at that time. He's a wonderful practitioner, a wonderful person involved now with engaging and exploring and developing more peace bridges around the world.

So I'm going to be having a conversation with him for Sati Center on Tuesday at 6 p.m. So you might want to go onto the Sati Center website and you'll find the link there. And you have to register in order to get the Zoom link for it. And I've had a few conversations with him, and he's a very, very interesting man. So I hope that what he has to offer the world will come forth on that conversation. Yes. It will be recorded. Yeah, it should be recorded. It'll be his choice whether we post it and maybe that's a choice he makes afterwards.

And so the second is that on the next evening and Wednesday evening here, I will be teaching a five-week intro to a meditation course. And these days I do that once a year. For many years I did three times a year. I love doing them. But with my schedule and things, I don't do it so often. And I delight in offering it.

And if you've never had the instructions the way that we do it here at IMC, and even if you have, you might be interested to come. And I believe that starts at 7 p.m. on Wednesday evening for five weeks. So... So last week I talked about the *Four Noble Truths* as one of the central core teachings of Buddhism, teachings of the Buddha. There's an ancient analogy used for those teachings. Apparently in India, the footprint of an elephant is the biggest footprint of any animal walks there. And so all the other footprints of all the other animals can fit inside of the footprint of the elephant.

In the same way, then, all of the Buddhist teachings can fit inside the *Four Noble Truths*. They're that important. They encompass everything. Yes, it's not working outside there. The volume, can we turn the volume up a little bit more? Let's see. Is it coming out of those speakers there, as far as you know?

It's all right. It's on, so it needs to be, the volume needs to be louder. But there's a volume, I think there's a volume set there. That's better? Great, thank you. So today I want to talk about another centrally important kind of primary aspect of Buddhist practice, and that is the practicing with the precepts, practicing the practices of virtue or ethics. And the first one can be seen as important as the *Four Noble Truths*. It's kind of like the orienting, maybe in some ways, maybe more important than *Four Noble Truths*, because there's a way in which it can provide the whole motivation, the whole context for all of what Buddhism is presenting. And maybe instead of thinking of it as a footprint of the elephant, maybe it's the elephant.

And the First Noble Truth, the first precept for lay people is worded in a particular way. And this is one of the things I want to highlight today. It's called a training precept. And the way that it's usually presented is not, never said you should do this. The way it's presented and taught that it's something that you would say for yourself in the first person. So the motivation to live this way comes from you.

It's a choice you make, not a choice that's made for you. And so the way it's usually worded in that first-person statement is I undertake the training precept. So the word training is important here. And so it's often said in English that the five precepts, five ethical guidelines, are not commandments. There's no one in Buddhism that has the moral authority to make a command or have a moral judgment about you, that this is how you have to or should be living. And that's very challenging for some people.

Some people want that from their religion. Some people want to be in moral judgment of others. They want to have a reference point for being able to do that, with no great clarity of what is right and wrong. But what's being offered here is the idea that here, the first precept, which is usually defined as not killing, is offered as a training precept. It's something we train

to be able to do rather than something that we commit ourselves 100%, I will never kill again. That's challenging.

I mean, shouldn't we all commit not to kill? And maybe it's so challenging that to require that of people just creates so much strife and challenge and it's a recipe for moral judgment of each other. It's a recipe of being righteous about what we think is right and wrong and condemn people who cross that line and do what we think is not right, according to this hard, fast idea of what not killing is. But if it's a training rule, then we can share everyone on. You can do it. You can learn how to do it. You can find a way. You can dedicate yourself to this.

And maybe you don't always know how to do it. Maybe you have questions and challenges. Maybe you even fail sometimes. And that's the nature of training. If you're training to learn a sport, a musical instrument, training to learn a skill, a job skill, you're not expected to be able to do it right from the very first time you start learning to do it. It takes practice to get it.

And so here, the emphasis is training. And it's training in, as I said, it's usually called not killing. And it's probably broader than that. Because the word that's translated as killing, *atipāta*, literally means to strike out, to somehow throw down, wrestle with someone, fight with someone, hit someone, to strike out. So some people will limit it to killing, and some people will expand it to be any form of physical violence at all. That this is a precept, don't be involved in physical violence.

And in ancient India, it's a good reason to see it more broadly. Because the first precept, it turns out that in the other religions of the time of the Buddha, in Jainism and what was the precursor for Hinduism of the time, they also had five precepts. And their first precept was *ahimsā*, which is non-violence, non-harming. And so chances are that this was just a different way of saying the same thing in Buddhism, that we don't, we're not involved in actively doing physical harm to anyone. And we're training ourselves to do that. And the question is, does this only involve not killing human beings?

Or is it involved killing any life? And the way that it's worded, the word that what we avoid killing is usually it's translated as living beings, I'm kind of touched that the literal meaning, more literal, is breathing beings, breathing life. And somehow that makes it more visceral for me, or, you know, I'm one of those. I breathe. And in Nepali, it's *pāṇa*. Some of you know the Sanskrit word *prāṇa*. So that's the word. It's used both for breathing and for meaning of life itself, living life.

And... And so there's all kinds, it turns out that it's a very simple statement. I undertake

the training precept to abstain from attacking, killing, harming, living life, living beings. And it's a very simple statement. It's kind of presented kind of categorically, abstain from this is what I'm going to do, or I'm going to train to do this. But part of that training, and this is one of the important things I want to get across today, is not following a rule, but engaging in a process of deep contemplation, deep reflection, to engage and think about to become ethical thinkers.

To become someone who's considered, considers, and contemplates, how do I lessen harm? How do I avoid causing harm in the way I live my life? And there's a lot of questions that we need to answer. Um... So, you know, so if we now look at the rules for Buddhist monastics, that's where it's a very legalistic document because they're kind of a legal community in their own right. And they have a lot of ways in which they have to decide how to live together harmoniously. So they have a lot of rules and they have ways of adjudicating the rules.

And very clear case studies that they use for understanding what's right and what's wrong. So they provide a lot more detail than the Buddha ever provides for lay people, partly because lay people didn't form the same bounded, committed community as the monastic. And so the Buddha had no authority to tell lay people what's up, what you should do. But we could say, train if you're interested. If you're interested in training, then what does training entail? And I'd like to suggest, in terms of these precepts, entails becoming an ethical contemplator, contemplative who thinks about these questions and questions.

It's not like just being an automatic pilot. But really reflect deeply. And so I'll try to give you some sense of why that's the case. First, looking at the monastic rules, this precept of not killing is only relevant, it only has to do with killing that's done knowingly with thought. In Western jurisprudence, it would be intentionally, but they don't use that word in *Pāli*. They use the word with thought, with thinking about it, or knowingly.

And then the case studies of the monastic life, there was stories of someone who, I think, tossed something over a side of a cliff without knowing what was below, and it killed someone. Right. And so the question was, did he act, is he now guilty of murder? Because if he was, the rule, that's one of the most serious rules a monastic could break. If they break that rule, they're no longer a monastic and they can never become a monastic again. And that's the greatest ruling that the Buddhist monastic community to make, for a monastic, because they don't do jail.

They don't do... That's for the government to do. But for the monastic, that's what... And so the Buddha said, no. It was not done knowingly. We can say it was not done with intention. And maybe it was done stupidly. And that should be taken into account somehow. But it has

to be done knowingly.

And the other question is... Does it apply only to humans or does it also apply to all living beings the way the word works, that words works? And what does that mean? Does it all equal? Does it all have equal value? Is it killing human being that means the same as killing an animal or killing an insect? Is that, you know, that has no different, no differentiation? And now if we look at the monastic rules, the monastics, it's absolute. Right? That monastics cannot be involved, not only not in killing human beings, but any involvement with a human being getting killed.

They can't encourage people to kill. They can't encourage people to commit suicide. They can't even get close to that. However, killing an animal, they're also not allowed to do. But what's the consequence of killing an animal? You have to go find another monk and confess. That's all. That's very different from losing your status as a monk.

A confession, you know, it's kind of like easy to do, you know. It's okay, and I killed the animal, and okay, that's unfortunate. So exactly what that means, I can't tell you, but it suggests something like that the value of life varies little bit by what kind of life forms it is. Or the severity of the kind of way it hurts our hearts or violates the human conscious is somehow different depending on what life form it is. And that's important for lay people, because lay people don't live the very special protected life of a Buddhist monastic, where they don't have to be involved in all kinds of decisions that lay people have to make. They're not asked to farm. They're not asked to take care of cattle and sheep and milk.

And they're not asked to protect the country from the invasion of other people. You know, other people. They're not asked to... you know, to be the police and protect people from harm that we do in our communities to each other. They're not asked to, you know, they're not expected to do all kinds of things that would put them in situations where they have to make a decision between life and death. Or if they do, they live in situations where they can just step away, not be involved. If there's a termite eating their wooden little cabin...

They would just be there and just stay until it falls apart or just move out and let it rot. I've known Buddhist monastics who shared little huts in Thailand with poisonous snakes. And they tell stories of sitting there with a snake. But, you know, I mean, they're not going to kill the snake. They're not going to harm it. It has just as much right to be there as they do. So, you know, I guess they could move out, but, you know.

So they live with very different orientation of life than lay people do. And it's consequential. If a termite eats your wooden house, you know, what do you... Oh, well, I'll just move out and

someone else will provide me with another house, which is what happens to monastics. But for us, you know, who's going to provide us with the house? You know, while we still have the mortgage to pay. You know, and then can we take care of our family properly without, you know, the roof over our head?

And so do we then come in with the termite people to gas the house and kill all the termites? Isn't that violating the rule? It's not a rule. It's a training. So the question is, how do you train with us? And part of the training is you stop to think about it. You consider it carefully.

You consider, is this really what you want to do? Is this really what's necessary? What are the consequences one way or the other? What are there alternatives to automatically bring in pest control and poison to get rid of the termites? Are there other options? Yes. Training means that you actually stop to consider and wonder and look.

And yeah, I would prefer not to kill. Are there other ways? I'd prefer not to use a poison that might have secondary effects. It's going to make other animals sick or die, or make other people sick maybe and even die, the way these pesticides spread out into our world. And are there other ways? And so, you know, maybe there are. And so maybe they're more expensive.

And then the question is, what's the inner way on the heart scale? All the conditions, all the factors, all the consequences we can imagine. Where does that scale tip? Right. You know, if it's, if the, if the, if the, if the turns out that the, the way that gets rid of termites without killing them, but just somehow or other invites them to, into a nice little, you know, car truck that's going to drive them off to a better place, you know, and it's even cheaper than using the gas to gas them out. Of course, then it feels kind of virtuous. Look at that. Yeah.

But what if it's twice as expensive to do that kind of a fantasy way? Well, well, where does that happen on the heart scale? And that's when what we put on the heart scale has a lot to do with the other training we do in Buddhism, meditation. Meditation settles us, calms us, brings a certain kind of inner peace to us, a kind of intimacy and a deeper attention to ourselves. That gives us a reference point for what the impact of our actions have on ourselves. And so if you want to get rid of those termites, because you're really angry, you hate termites.

And this just gives you a chance to arouse that hate, arouse that anger, that fury, and you are just going to gas them out of existence. If you're sitting and meditating a lot, to feel the surge of that kind of red-hot anger, hatred, feels like a kind of violence to yourself. It is a violence. It is a way of harming oneself. The commitment or the training not to harm living life, not to

attack it, includes yourself. And if you really sit and meditate, you'll get a different reference point.

And for what you're willing to do in this world, because maybe you're not willing anymore to do this thing to yourself that maybe hatred does, maybe fear does, maybe strong desire does. There's a way in which craving, clinging, does something negative to ourselves. And this ties to the *Four Noble Truths*. The *Four Noble Truths* have no pronouns associated with them. The truth of suffering, the truth of the cause, the possibility of ending it, and the way to end it. So we say, I like to say in Buddhism, we stop for suffering, but not just our own.

There's no reason that our concern is only our own suffering. It's also for the suffering of others. It's not just suffering of others, but also as our own. Right? And underneath all that, we begin seeing that craving, clinging, this powerful form of attachment is a form of suffering. It is in itself a form of suffering. Is itself a form of self-harm?

And I don't want to convince anyone that's the case. What I want to suggest is as we settle, get calm and peaceful, we start getting a whole different reference point for how we want to live. That we don't have if we're spinning and caught up in our thoughts and our desires and our to-do lists and all the busyness that human beings can be caught up in. So when we put all the factors, all the conditioned situations carefully on the scale in our heart, and the heart itself is part of that is on the scale, where do things move? Well, if it only costs twice as much to gently, lovingly, usher the termites out on this fantasy truck to a nice retirement home for termites. For the heart's sake, for my heart's sake, I'm willing to pay that.

The cost is so much for me to kill. I feel it. I know it. Even to call up the company to tell them to come and kill the termites, it does something, it kind of twists my heart in a funny way. I never knew this. I'm just so busy going on to the next thing, so concerned with my thoughts and ideas that I never asked my heart what's happening there. But with this meditation, we have a different connection to something.

So we put everything out on the scale, in a sense, all the different factors, and how does it tip? Which direction does it go? And maybe one day it goes one way, one person it goes one way to scale, someone else it goes the other way. Someone might decide to fumigate their home, someone else will decide not to. Is one person being ethical? Is the other person being unethical? Is it our job to hold others in moral judgment for what they did?

Yes. With that question of the termites or anything else here. Well, if we look at ourselves deep inside and ask, what's happening in our heart when we have moral judgment of others? Does it make your heart sing? She's like, ah, this is like, wow, this is like, I'm ready to smile

and just be so delighted and it just feels so good. I hope not. Yeah.

But, you know, this reference point of a subtle, quiet, peaceful, intimate connection to your heart, to some inner sensibility, happens when you cast moral judgment. Why are you doing it? What's motivating it? What does it do for you? That's kind of the training we're involved in, in the ethical training in Buddhism, asking these questions, stopping and looking. What's happening here? Right.

I don't think the Buddha had any kind of idea to cast moral judgment on people. But he did encourage that we really look deeply at what is wholesome and what is not wholesome, at what is healthy for us and look not healthy, and to encourage people to live in a healthy way. For the Buddha, it was very clear that it was unwholesome, unhealthy to be involved in killing. And so he encouraged all of us to encourage our friends to live a wholesome life and not do things real unwholesome. But even there, how do you know what's wholesome and unwholesome for someone else? If the termites are eating away the wooden house and you have young kids and you're barely surviving and if the house is going to collapse...

And you're out in the street, you know, and you have a mortgage to pay, and all these things take care of, and it's winter, and you can't afford to go to a hotel. I mean, is it wholesome to just simply let the termites live? Is that the wholesome thing? And your friends tell you, don't kill, because that's unwholesome. It's not for us to decide. Right. It might be given the most wholesome, the most healthy thing to do out of care and compassion and kindness and wisdom for oneself and one's family.

It might be to regrettably have to poison, to kill the termites. There's something, might be something more, to not do that is even more unwholesome. There might be some unwholesomeness with killing termites. But it's more unwholesome, more unhealthy, to abandon the well-being of the whole family unit this kind of way. So who's to say how any individual should move in this direction? I don't know. Maybe there are times we do. But I think that as a society, we spend too much time in moral judgment of each other.

Is there an alternative? One of the alternatives that I think is really wonderful... is to take on the precepts as trainings. To take these on as things, ways to reflect deeply, get to know yourself deeply, consider consequences deeply. Part of the training is to look for alternatives to violence, look for alternatives to killing, even animals. To consider deeply what's going on. The same thing with euthanasia.

Assisted suicide, dying with dignity, they call it now sometimes. There are some Buddhists who would say that that's not allowed, so-called allowed. Who are they to say it's not al-

lowed? But how do we engage this topic? What do we think about it? People will often come to me and ask me the ethical question, is it okay to euthanize my pet? Right.

I've had people, I've been asked to come to people's homes when they were dying, or if they were quite sick, and wanted my opinion about assisted suicide. I really don't want to be in the position of answering those questions. What I love and cherish is that there's a deep process of reflection. And if I can be part of that reflection, looking at the conditions, all the different factors that go on the scale... and introduce some lovely considerations in that, like compassion, and love and things like that. And that's the extent in which I want to be part of that. I'd rather not make it, I don't want to be offering a moral judgment what should or shouldn't be happening.

And so I've offered sometimes to be with people even depending on what their decision is. But I don't want to be part of that. I don't want to beat the decider and be the one who feels they know. So in Buddhism, the first precept is not to kill, not to attack, not to cause harm. It's part of the Indian subcontinent, a huge orientation that it has from ancient time towards *ahimsā*. It's a beautiful thing that was introduced to the West in a very powerful way, this word *ahimsā*.

By Gandhi and through Martin Luther King, and has done a tremendous, has a tremendous power, this movement of *ahimsā*. I think it touches something very deep in the human heart. It can be very inspiring, but it only has real value if we take it seriously enough to train with it, to reflect on it, to do the difficult work of... figuring out how to make it work, figuring out how to live that way, how to do it wisely, cleverly, how to do it appropriately. And so Buddhism offers a training around this, not a commandment. So those are my thoughts for today.

And in a few minutes, we have a few more minutes, and we have the tea. So it might be nice for you to introduce yourself to some other people here and say hello and... and maybe share a little bit, not what you think about this precept of not killing, but the main theme of today is what do you think about that ethics is a training? What does that mean for you? Did that touch something or evoke something interesting? And what did that do for you?

So if you would, if you want, if you can just sit quietly, if you don't want to talk, you can also leave. But if you could turn towards maybe two people next to you and look around, make sure no one's left alone, and say hello. And then I'll ring the bell.