

Harm is Not Done

By Kokyo Henkel, 2010

In our Zen tradition we have what are called the three pure precepts, which is the way of life for an aspiring bodhisattva, a person dedicating their life to awakening to how things are, for the benefit of all beings, and for the great happiness and peace that is awakening in Buddha's way. The Buddha's disciples through the ages have laid out this path of bodhisattva precepts for us, specific practices for us to contemplate and consider taking up and living. The three pure bodhisattva precepts are embracing and sustaining standards of conduct, embracing and sustaining good qualities, and embracing and sustaining living beings. Their source is some somewhat obscure Mahayana sutras, but they are most well known to us in the great Treatise on the Bodhisattva Stages by Asanga, who was a fourth-century Indian Mahayana yogi, writer, and teacher, and the founder of what we call the Mind-Only School of Buddhism.

These bodhisattva precepts are defined like this: embracing and sustaining standards of conduct, or we might say embracing the discipline and deportment of the Buddhas, often refers to monastic guidelines. There are a lot of standards for monastic bodhisattvas, but Asanga makes it clear that there is a lay bodhisattva path, which is an essential element of the Mahayana, the Great Vehicle, in Indian Buddhism that got passed along to us in the Zen tradition. Lay and monastic bodhisattvas – it's not so much the issue of what form one's life takes, but that one is embracing and sustaining the standards of conduct for one's particular life role. This precept is about letting go of our self-centeredness which often brings harm to others, and it is often associated with the ancient teaching of the Buddha called "refraining from all harm." And embracing and sustaining good, or wholesome, personal qualities is equated with the Buddha's teaching of "do all good." This includes embracing all kinds of mental factors such as generosity, patience, enthusiasm, and presence. Embracing and sustaining living beings is a particularly Mahayana interpretation of the Buddha's teaching of "purify the mind." In the early teachings of the Dhammapada, maybe some of the earliest teachings ever attributed to the Buddha, the Buddha said, summing up the whole path of practice: "Refrain from all harm, do all good, purify the mind – this is the teaching of all Buddhas."

I think it is quite wonderful how this first pure precept is worded in the Mahayana way, not as the negative "refrain from all harm," but in the positive as "embracing and sustaining, gathering together and upholding, standards of conduct." In the Zen tradition, when the ancestors talk about this type of practice, they often pare it down to the essentials, saying things like, "just give up seeking for fame and profit" – those are the two they often emphasize. And this is the essence of the monastic precepts and also lay precepts in a somewhat different way. Seeking for more profit than we need, or taking advantage of situations to gain something for oneself, manipulating situations to increase our good reputation – just forget about such motivations, just let them go. It's not because fame and profit are bad, but just because it is a source of suffering to seek what we don't have. And, often when seeking for fame and profit, we end up harming others along the way. In the bodhisattva precepts, the emphasis is on not harming others, refraining from harming others through our self-centered activities.

Even though Dogen Zenji transmitted the precept of "embrace and sustain standards of conduct," he also wrote an essay called Refrain from all Harm, in which he tells a story of this Chinese Zen teacher named "Bird's Nest," who was called this because he lived up in a tree. There was a statesman and poet who was a student of Bird's Nest. And one time the statesman stood below his tree, called up to him and said, "Looks very precarious and dangerous up there,"

and Bird's Nest said down to him, "Looks very precarious and dangerous down there." Because that's how this life is, it's very precarious and it's dangerous to actually go about in the world outside of trees because it's so easy to get into causing harm and to forget about doing good.

One time this statesman came and asked, "What's the great meaning of Buddha's teaching?" In ancient China people were always asking this question. And his teacher said, "Refrain from all harm, do all good." And the statesman said, "Though this is so, even a three-year old child can say that." And the teacher said, "A three-year old child may be able to say it, but an eighty-year old person cannot practice it." And the statesman bowed in thanks for this response.

Dogen comments on this story in his usual unusual way. Dogen is commenting on "refrain from all harm" in the Zen tradition and he says various things like: "Since the family of Buddhas arises from conditions, thus conditions arise from the family of Buddhas. It is not that harm does not exist, it's just that it is not done." The title of this essay is in Japanese *shoaku makusa*, which means literally "do not do all harm," but it could also be read as "all harm is not done." Dogen says, "It is not that harm does not exist, it's just that it is not done. Harm is not empty, it is not done, harm is not form, it is not done. Harm is not not done, it is just not done." In Zen we have the practice of non-doing, the *zazen* of non-doing, non-action, which doesn't literally mean that you don't DO anything, but just that YOU don't do anything. But in this case, it is that harm is not done; it is not created by itself or another. So if we don't do harm or make harm, it doesn't exist on its own. I think there may be religious debates about this topic – is there truly evil in the world? According to Dogen's understanding, there is not inherent evil in the world. If it isn't done, then evil doesn't arise.

So the practice is not doing harm, which might sound at first like trying to refrain from causing harm, but in this Zen way it is more a matter of understanding that harm is not done, it is not created, it is not made, and therefore don't make it. The Zen tradition emphasizes that by understanding that harm is not done, and doesn't really exist in any substantial way, only appearing by the creation of our own mind, then we actually live in the conventional world in such a way that harm is refrained from. This might be hard to follow, but this is the logic that will be woven through all the Zen bodhisattva precepts. There is a conventional practice of just stopping, just refraining from harm, when you have an urge to yell at somebody. And then there is this deeper level of actually returning to *zazen* mind, the mind that actually knows that harm is not a real, substantial force in the world, it is just a moment-to-moment arising, dependent on the mind. So if the mind does not make harm, harm is not made, harm is not done. The Zen approach to precepts is to actually understand that in the mind of stillness, the mind that is dropping off moment to moment in *zazen*, that harm is not done, and by realizing that, we don't cause harm in the world, because motivation for harm comes from belief in substantiality.