Stick to Your Precepts

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When the Buddha set out the precepts for the monks, he would often give a long talk about his reason for the precepts. The reasons came into three sorts. One is that they were inspiring to others. Two is they’re good for peace within the community. And three is they’re good for battling your own defilements. The same principles apply to the precepts as well. You stick with the five precepts, the eight precepts, and it’s inspiring to other people. I often tell Thais whose English isn’t very good, “This is how you teach Buddhism to people in America, by holding to your precepts.” Secondly, it’s good for the peace within the community. And then thirdly, it’s good for training your defilements, taming your defilements. So when you hold to the precepts, it’s good all around. When you break the precepts, for whatever reason, it can damage any of those three things. Sometimes you have the belief that nowadays certain things that were popular in the Buddhist time or admired in the Buddhist time are not admired now, so we should change some of the precepts or come up with exceptions. But it wasn’t always the case that the Buddha would just go along with about everybody. There was the story of the community where the monks were extremely friendly, as the laypeople said. The monks were the first to say, “You are welcome. Come, you’re welcome.” They were the first to smile, the first to go out of their way, to be friendly and ingratiating and doing all kinds of things to please the laypeople. There was a monk who was very well behaved, very restrained. He came to that city one time and the laypeople made fun of him. “Who is this weakest of weaklings, this most snobbish of snobs? He’s not like our friendly monks.” So the monk reported this to the Buddha, and the Buddha called in the monks from that city and gave them a good lecture. In other words, you don’t bend the precepts just to please people. If you’re going to be inspiring to people, you want to be people who have good eyes and appreciate what really is honorable, what really is good. As for people who don’t appreciate that, you just have to let them go. If you break the precepts to please people, it’s bad for the community and it’s bad for your own training. Because once you break the precepts to please people, they’re going to expect the other people to break the precepts as well. That’s one thing. Secondly, there’s the question of trust. I know in my time with the John Fuan, one of the things that gave me the greatest sense of security was that he always stuck by the precepts. And there was pressure even in Thailand, where people know the precepts and have an Asian culture, but they didn’t like certain things, certain rules that the monks held by. And I know I had to fight off certain things that laypeople wanted to do in the monastery that were not right. And I always knew I’d have a John Fuan’s backing. So this is one of the ways in which a teacher becomes trustworthy, is by holding the precepts. And the same holds for a student. If a student breaks the precepts easily just because a layperson makes a funny face or complains, the teacher doesn’t have a sense of trust for the student. That’s bad for the community. Then finally, for your own training, how seriously do you take the precepts? The Buddha said that one of the marks of the sangha that inspired the asuras was that just as the sea wouldn’t overcome its boundaries, monks wouldn’t overcome the boundaries set by the precepts, even if their life was at stake. So the precepts are a serious part of the practice. They’re part of your meditation. I’ve told you before, at that time, at the end of a retreat, people asked Ajahn Suwat, “The retreatants going back into lay life, how should they carry their meditation into daily life?” And he started with the five precepts. Some of the people got upset, thinking that he was looking down at laypeople, that they weren’t capable of meditating in daily life and all they could manage was the lowly precepts. But that wasn’t the point he was making. The point was that if you hold by the precepts, you’re learning mindfulness, you’re learning discernment. Mindfulness in keeping the precepts, and mind discernment in learning how to apply them wisely. For instance, how do you hold the precept against lying without divulging damaging truths? Well, there’s a skill. You can develop that skill. How do you live in a world where there are pests without killing them? There’s a skill. And by developing that skill, you’re developing your discernment among the monks, among the protocols. And Ajahn Mun made heavy use of the protocols in his training of the monks—the duties you have in cleaning your hut, the duties you have in looking after your teacher, the duties you have in looking after the place where the monks all eat their meals, the duties you have when you go to a place, the duties you have when you’re leaving a place. All these things require that you’re very scrupulous. And being scrupulous is a really good aid in developing mindfulness. Many times the way he would teach these things was not through telling you what to do, but by forcing you to be observant. There’s that story about Ajahn Lee staying with Ajahn Mun. One of his duties was to clean up Ajahn Mun’s room every day. And Ajahn Mun was always complaining that things weren’t in their right places. But he’d never tell Ajahn Lee where the right places were. So one day, Ajahn Lee got an idea. Ajahn Mun was living in a hut that had banana leaf walls. And so he posted a hole in one of the walls with his finger. Then after he’d cleaned up the room and Ajahn Mun went into the room, Ajahn Lee went to peek. And I’m pretty sure Ajahn Mun knew what was happening. He looked around. He changed this, changed that, put this here, put that there. Ajahn Lee took note of everything. And then the next day, when he cleaned the room, he put things in the places where Ajahn Mun had put them. And then he went out and peeked through the hole again. Ajahn Mun went into the room, looked left, looked right, didn’t see anything that he had to move. So he sat down and said his chants. And Ajahn Lee felt very, very gratified. And Ajahn Fuan was the same way with me, although his hut didn’t have banana leaf walls, so there’s no way he could poke holes in them. So I had to be observant when he opened the door to his room. And I looked in to see where things were. So when the time came, when it came for me to arrange the room, I had an idea of where he wanted these things. Again, it was all training in being scrupulous, being observant, i.e., developing your powers of mindfulness and discernment. And, of course, when you’ve been holding by the precepts and you can look back on your behavior for the day and there are no lapses, it’s a lot easier for the mind to settle down and to get into concentration. So even when it’s unpopular, hold by the precepts. They’re your training. We live here in a monastery that’s way away from the rest of Thailand. In a sense, we’re kind of like a moon colony. And one way we may maintain a sense of connection with the moon is to hold by the precepts. The connection with the tradition that we’re training in is by holding to the precepts wherever we go. That connection is like being rooted. If you cut your root, you know what happens to a tree when its root is cut. So protect your precepts with your life, as the Buddha would say. They’re basic to the practice.

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