

THICH NHAT HANH



For A  
Future  
To Be  
Possible  
*Commentaries  
on the Five  
Wonderful  
Precepts*

with

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*Richard Baker*

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shifted responsibility for realizing the Dharma to laypeople to some degree. There has been a general deterioration of the religion during this process, but still one can find ordinary people reciting the Buddha's name or doing *zazen*, consulting with priests about their practice, or taking part in retreats with monks. In new schools of Buddhism, such as the Rissho Koseikai, the leaders are not even ordained and function like Protestant ministers.

In our Western Mahayana centers, monks of both sexes are ordained, though the old rules of celibacy which eroded during earlier reformations are generally not observed. Benedictine rules of work have been applied and some of the centers seek self-sufficiency through business enterprise. Laypeople are in the majority and practice together with ordained monks. Theravada and Vajrayana centers have appeared in the West as well—Theravada with scarcely any deference to the monastic tradition and Vajrayana without much ordination.

It is surely time, high time, for us as Western Buddhists to take stock. To begin with the Buddha's intention: it is clear that he intended the Sangha to be more than a fellowship of people who shared common religious aspirations. As a treasure of the Way, the Sangha for him was the natural grouping that offered the only means for people to find liberation from their anguish. Moreover, the precepts, derived from formulations from the misty past in India and Persia, were for him the comportment of all followers of the Way.

With all the changes in Buddhism, its followers have remained true to this view of the Sangha as the order of Dharma and the precepts as the Sangha mode of life. Still, as

a living organism, the Sangha too is evolving. Joanna Macy has shown how Theravada monks in Sri Lanka take their turns with the spade in the Sarvodaya Shramadana, the broadly based village self-sufficiency movement of that country. Lay Western Buddhists expect as a matter of course to take responsibility for their own religious practice.

Thich Nhat Hanh, the “Thầy” or “Master” of Vietnamese Buddhism in the West, has given much thought to the Sangha treasure. His Tiep Hien Order includes monks and nuns in Europe and across the world. His peripatetic retreats provide them and lay followers with the kind of Sangha renewal the ancient sages found in their monsoon retreats. As with the original Sangha of the Buddha, the first teaching is the Vinaya, the moral way. His students learn decency with each other, and as decent people set about saving the many beings.

As a foundation for this practice, Thầy takes up the *pañca-sīla*, the five fundamental precepts of the ancient Way. He frames each of these precepts positively while maintaining their trenchant, negative vigor. His wording is true to the Buddha’s profound intention, and, at the same time, it is relevant for modern students who are ready to take full responsibility for their practice. “I vow not to kill” thus becomes: “Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I vow to cultivate compassion and learn ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants, and minerals. I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to condone any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, and in my way of life.”

Making this vow our own, we make this way of life our own, modestly assenting, "With all my weaknesses and faults, I accept my role as bodhisattva." The way of the bodhisattva is the practice of "not killing," but what is "not killing" but nurturing life *in fact* with each smile and encouraging word? And what are the other "nots" in the precepts—"not stealing," "not speaking falsely," and so on—but the intimate practice of compassion and protecting people, animals, plants, and minerals! Thây's beautiful words enlarge the scope of the precepts—and this is the goal of most Western teachers, I believe. If in centuries past, the precepts were pro forma pledges or metaphysical formulations, that time has passed. In most of our centers, the precepts are examined in classes or in orientation programs that are required for the Refuge Ceremony. With such study and with the ceremonies themselves comes a clear understanding that we are human whatever our state of realization might be. There is no perfection except the perfection in our hearts which we seek to fulfill as best we can in our families, among our friends and colleagues, and in the world. As teachers and students alike, we take the precepts to heart and apply them in our daily lives as conscientiously as possible—or we are only make-believe Buddhists who can cause widespread harm, as we have seen to our sorrow.

According to the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, when the youth Sudhana entered the magnificent pagoda of Maitreya at the end of his long pilgrimage, he found that it contained an infinite number of pagodas, each of them beautifully adorned. If he entered one of those inner pagodas, he would find that it too contained an infinite number of pagodas. Thus Sud-



hana realized—made real for himself—the Net of Indra, in which each point is a jewel that perfectly reflects all other jewels. Each being, each element of each being, perfectly includes all others. He came into his own with full awareness, as his own flesh-and-blood treasure of interbeing at last.

Like all folk stories, the sojourn of Sudhana is itself a pagoda to be entered and made real for oneself, as heroine as well as hero, as adult and even elderly, as well as youthful. It is a personalization that is not just a goal that culminates a religious pilgrimage, but it forms the dimension of each step of the way.

This “dimension of each step” is illumined by the precepts of the Buddha. What is “not killing” but the practice of the ultimate intimacy we celebrate in Sudhana, making that intimacy more and more real in fact with each nurturing smile and encouraging word. And what are the other “nots” in the precepts—“not stealing,” “not misusing sex,” and so on—but Ms. and Mr. Sudhana in this time and place showing their perennial jewels!

And what of the conspiracy of ruin that mocks the metaphors and could bring the *kalpa* of Kuan-yin and Maria and Murasaki and Bach to the flames of total devastation? Somehow we must find expedient means to make real the jeweled network within and alongside consumer exploitation and national interest. This is a step beyond the monastery walls, uncharted by the old teachers. But it is a step, a path, that the unholy alliance of greed, state ego, racism, androcentrism, and technology has made imperative. Not an easy path, certainly. I am grateful to Thich Nhat Hanh for his light and his staff that guide us.

## *The Five Precepts and Social Change*

Patricia Marx Ellsberg

After attending two retreats with Thich Nhat Hanh, I had the feeling of being “in love” with Thầy and Sister Chân Không and with a whole community and way of life. And when I vowed to follow the precepts, I felt as if I were making a commitment as serious and profound as taking marriage vows.

I have no doubt of the powerful and far-reaching effect the precepts can have on my life if I take them to heart. And yet, during the retreats I found a question persistently recurring as to the relevance of my own personal practice of the precepts to social change. In the face of massive violence and injustice in the world, what difference does it make if I follow the precepts, or even if all the thousands of people Thầy has touched with his teachings live by them more fully? How would this bring about the radical social transformations that are necessary?

I found myself uncomfortable with what I perceived to be an underlying premise of the retreat: that if enough individuals change, society will change. In my understanding, society is not simply an aggregate of individuals. It is also shaped by social structures and concentrations of power and wealth. There are vested interests that have disproportionate control and work to maintain and profit from inequality and militarism. These forces need to be challenged and transformed before there can be genuine peace or justice.

In a flash of recognition, I saw that many of the policies of my country and those of other nations are based on the flagrant disregard of the precepts. In fact, much of the evil in the world comes from the systematic—and often societally sanctioned—violation of the precepts by governments, corporations, and other institutions. Let us measure our own society's conduct by the precepts.

*The First Precept.* Think of the Gulf Massacre in this context and the glorification of the slaughter of over a quarter of a million people, many of them civilians. We live in a war economy fueled by a vast military-industrial complex and billions of dollars of arms sales. Our nuclear policy is based on the threat of mass murder, our foreign policy upon institutionalized violence. Our economy depends on the wholesale destruction of nature.

*The Second Precept.* We as Americans comprise six percent of the world's population and consume forty percent of the world's resources. Many of these resources flow to us from countries ruled by dictatorships that our government has installed, supported, and controlled. In turn they set terms of trade favorable to us, while exploiting and terrorizing their own people, with our government's covert support. This amounts to official theft, not "exchange." Most of our military might is used to control what is not rightly ours.

*The Third Precept.* Think of the energy and resources our society devotes to stimulating sexual desire unconnected to commitment or love—through advertising, pornography, and popular culture in general.

*The Fourth Precept.* Governments and politicians lie. The secrecy system exists not so much to keep secrets from the enemy as to keep the truth from the public. Our government routinely resorts to force rather than peaceful means to deal with conflict, while claiming the opposite, as in Panama, Libya, Nicaragua, Grenada, and Iraq.

*The Fifth Precept.* We are constantly bombarded by advertising for alcohol, cigarettes, caffeine, pharmaceutical drugs. Even more pernicious, our government, through its covert intelligence apparatus, is secretly but deeply involved in abetting the operators of the drug trade, as became evident in the Iran-Contra scandal.

Suddenly, during the retreat, I saw a way the precepts can be of utmost social relevance. We must hold them as a standard of behavior for nations, institutions, and corporations as well as for individuals. It is essential that we end the double standard that exists between public and private morality. We must ask of our country what we ask of ourselves.

Those of us living in a democracy have a special obligation to do all we can to move our nation along with our own lives in the direction of following the precepts. We must act individually and together to prevent the government that represents us from supporting mass murder and terrorism; stealing, lying, supporting drug traffickers, and raping the Earth. In fact, our survival, in the long run, depends on it.

Likewise, the more fully we follow the precepts, the more powerfully we can act for social change. Indeed, political work is an extension of personal life.

In the spirit of Thây's reformulation of the precepts in positive terms, imagine a world in which individuals and institutions alike act with compassion and loving kindness, where governments as well as the citizens they serve are mindful, cultivate a healthy environment, and truly protect the lives of people, animals, and plants. Imagine a time when the resources of the Earth are redirected away from killing towards the enrichment of life.

What if our President's policies conformed to Buddhist principles, Americans pledged allegiance to the Five Precepts as well as the flag, and we celebrated Interdependence Day along with the Fourth of July? Such thoughts inspire in me a Buddha smile.

## *How Societies Can Practice the Precepts*

Sulak Sivaraksa

**A**ll Buddhists accept the Five Precepts (*pañca-sīla*) as their basic ethical guidelines. Using these as a handle, we will know how to deal with many of the real issues of our day.

The First Precept is “I vow to refrain from killing.” Killing animals and eating meat, for example, may be appropriate for a simple agrarian society or village life, but in industrial societies, meat is treated as just another product, and the mass production of meat is not at all respectful of the lives of animals. If people in meat-eating countries could discourage the breeding of animals for consumption, it would not only be compassionate towards the animals, but also towards those humans living in poverty who need grain to survive. There is enough food in the world to feed us all. Hunger is caused by unequal allocation, and often those who are in need are the food producers.

We must also look at the sales of arms and challenge those structures that are responsible for murder. Killing permeates modern life—wars, racial conflicts, breeding animals to serve human markets, and using harmful insecticides. How can we resist this and help create a nonviolent society? How can the First Precept and its ennobling virtues be used to shape a politically just and merciful world? I shall not attempt to answer these questions. I just want to raise them for us to contemplate.

The Second Precept is “I vow to refrain from stealing.” In the “World-Conqueror Scripture” (*Cakkavatti Sahananda Sutta*), the Buddha says that once a king allows poverty to arise in his nation, the people will always steal to survive. Right Livelihood is bound up with economic justice. We must take great pains to be sure there are meaningful jobs for everyone who is able to work. We must also take responsibility for the theft implicit in our economic systems. To live a life of Right Livelihood and voluntary simplicity out of compassion for all beings and to renounce fame, profit, and power as life goals are to set oneself against the structural violence of the oppressive status quo. But is it enough to live a life of voluntary simplicity without also working to overturn the structures that force so many people to live in involuntary poverty?

The establishment of a just international economic order is a necessary and interdependent part of building a peaceful world. Violence in all its forms—imperialist, civil, and interpersonal—is underpinned by collective drives for economic resources and political power. People should be encouraged to study and comment on the “New World Order” from a Buddhist perspective, examining appropriate and inappropriate development models, right and wrong consumption, just and unjust marketing, reasonable use and degradation of natural resources, and the ways to cure our world’s ills. Where do Buddhists stand when it comes to a new economic ethic on a national and international scale? Many Christian groups have done studies on multinational corporations and international banking. We ought to learn from them and use their findings.

The Third Precept is "I vow to refrain from sexual misconduct." Like the other precepts, we must practice this in our own lives, and not exploit or harm others. In addition, we have to look at the structures of male dominance and the exploitation of women worldwide. The structures of patriarchal greed, hatred, and delusion are interrelated with the violence in the world. Modern militarism is also closely associated with patriarchy. Buddhist practice points toward the development of full and balanced human beings, free from the socially-learned "masculine" and "feminine" patterns of thought, speech, and behavior, in touch with both aspects of themselves.

The Fourth Precept is "I vow to refrain from using false speech." We need to look closely at the mass media, education, and the patterns of information that condition our understanding of the world. We Buddhists are far behind our Muslim and Christian brothers and sisters in this regard. The Muslim Pesantran educational institutions in Indonesia apply Islamic and traditional principles in a modern setting, teaching their young people the truth about the world and projecting a vision for the future. The Quakers have a practice of "speaking truth to power." It will only be possible to break free of the systematic lying endemic in the status quo if we undertake this truth-speaking collectively.

The dignity of human beings should take precedence over encouraging consumption to the point that people want more than they really need. Using truthfulness as the guideline, research should be conducted at the university level toward curbing political propaganda and commercial advertisements. Without overlooking the precious treasures of free



speech and a free press, unless we develop alternatives to the present transmission of lies and exaggerations, we will not be able to overcome the vast indoctrination that is perpetrated in the name of national security and material well-being.

The Fifth Precept is "I vow to refrain from taking intoxicants that cloud the mind and to encourage others not to cloud their minds." In Buddhism, a clear mind is a precious gem. We must look within, and truly begin to address the root causes of drug abuse and alcoholism.

At the same time, we must examine the alcohol and drug producing industries to identify their power base. We must overturn the forces that encourage intoxication, alcoholism, and drug addiction. This is a question concerning international justice and peace. Third World farmers grow heroin, coca, coffee, and tobacco because the economic system makes it impossible for them to support themselves growing rice or vegetables. Armed thugs act as their middlemen, and they are frequently ethnic guerrillas, pseudo-political bandits, private armies of right-wing politicians, or revolutionaries of one sort or another. The CIA ran drugs in Vietnam, the Burmese Communist guerrillas run drugs, and South American revolutionaries run drugs. Full-scale wars, such as the Opium War, have been fought by governments wanting to maintain the drug trade. Equally serious is the economic violence of forcing peasants to plant export crops of coffee or tea and the unloading of excess surplus cigarette production onto Third World consumers through intensive advertising campaigns.

Drug abuse and crime are rampant in those cultures that are crippled by the unequal distribution of wealth, unem-