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The Bodhisattva Precepts in Soto Zen Buddhism

Rev. Shohaku Okumura

Director, Soto Zen Buddhism International Center

By receiving the precepts, we become Buddhists

Since Buddhism is not an ethnic religion, no one is born a Buddhist. In order to be a Buddhist, we need to make up our minds to take refuge in the Three Treasures: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. In this way, we receive the Buddha's precepts as guidelines for our life. Originally in India, monks received 250 Vinaya precepts and nuns received 348 precepts. Lay people received 5, 8, or 10 precepts. In Mahayana Buddhism in China, monks and nuns received both the Vinaya precepts and the Bodhisattva precepts that were probably created in China.



Precepts in Japanese Tendai School

At the beginning of the 9th century, Saicho (767-822), the founder of the Japanese Tendai School, decided it was necessary to confer only the Mahayana precepts. Saicho's reason for this was that Japan was a Mahayana country and the Vinaya was not Mahayana. In the Tendai School, the Mahayana precepts were called Endon-kai (perfect and immediate precepts) which consisted of the threefold pure precept, the 10 major precepts and the 48 minor precepts. These originated in a Sutra called the Bonmo-kyo (The Brahma Net Sutra). According to modern scholars, this Sutra was composed in China in the 5th century CE and not in India.

Dogen Zenji received only the Bodhisattva precepts

Dogen Zenji (1200-1253), the founder of Japanese Soto School, originally became a monk in the Japanese Tendai tradition in 1213. Therefore, he received only the Mahayana precepts. According to his biography, Dogen had some difficulty receiving permission to practice in a Chinese monastery. This was because he had not received the Vinaya precepts which was a requirement to be recognized as a Buddhist monk in China. However, he did not receive the Vinaya precepts. To his disciples and lay students, Dogen Zenji only gave the 16 precepts that were called Busso-shoden-bosatsu-kai (the Bodhisattva precepts that have been correctly transmitted by Buddhas and Ancestors). The nature of the Bodhisattva precepts we receive in Soto Zen tradition is quite different from that of the Vinaya precepts.

The Bodhisattva precepts in the *Bonmo-kyo*

In the introduction to the ten major precepts and the 48 minor precepts, in the *Bonmo-kyo* it says,

The Vajra-brilliant Jeweled Precepts are the original source of all Buddhas, the original source of all living beings possess Buddha-nature. All beings with intent, consciousness, form, and mind – be it sentience or thoughts – are included in the precepts of Buddha-nature. This is because for every occasion there is definitely a cause, and in every

instance, it is absolutely within the permanently-dwelling Dharma Body. Hence, the ten Pratimoksha Codes arise in the world. They are precepts of the Dharma. They are received and upheld in utmost reverence by all beings of the three periods of time. For the great multitudes, I shall now speak again on the chapter “The Treasury of the Inexhaustible Precepts.” They are the precepts of all living beings; their source is the purity of Selfnature. (translated by Dharma Realm Buddhist University, Buddhist Text Translation Society, Talmage, Ca. 1982, with minor revisions by author).

And in the introduction of the ten major precepts, the Sutra says, “At that time, when Shakyamuni Buddha sat beneath the bodhi tree and attained unsurpassable awakening, he first set forth the Bodhisattva *pratimoksha*.”

Pratimoksha is the text of the precepts, and here, it refers to the *Bonmo-kyo*. This means that the Bodhisattva precepts were established as soon as the Buddha attained unsurpassable awakening and even before he began to teach. Historically, this is not true. After the Buddhist Sangha was established, Shakyamuni Buddha admonished his disciples when they made mistakes and said, “You should not do it again.” Such admonitions by the Buddha were memorized by Upali, one of the Buddha’s ten great disciples. At the meeting lead by Mahakashapa immediately following the Buddha’s death, Upali recited such admonitions. This was the source of the Vinaya precepts. The Buddha did not establish any precepts or regulations before people made mistakes. In the Vinaya text, the stories explaining why the different precepts were made were recorded. When we read these stories, we can see that the Buddhist Sangha was a gathering of actual human beings. People made all sorts of mistakes even though they aspired to study and practice the Dharma under the Buddha’s guidance.

The basic idea of the Bodhisattva precepts is different from the Vinaya precepts. This difference is pointed out in the *Bonmo-kyo* where it says that the Bodhisattva precepts were set forth when the Buddha attained unsurpassable awakening.

Dogen Zenji pointed out the same thing at the very beginning of his *Kyoju-kaimon* (Comments on Teaching and Conferring the Precepts), “The great precepts of the Buddhas have been upheld and maintained by the Buddha. Buddhas conferred them to buddhas, and ancestors transmitted them to ancestors. Receiving the precepts transcends the borders of past, present and future.”



Precept Master Koshu Itabashi Zenji,
Former Head Priest of Soto Zen Buddhism

The Bodhisattva precepts are not a collection of the Buddha’s admonitions to the monks who made mistakes and prohibitions against making the same mistakes. The precepts are the same as the true Dharma that has been transmitted by buddhas and ancestors. This is why they were called the precepts of Dharma in the *Bonmo-kyo*. The ten precepts are the ten ethical aspects of the Dharma to which Buddha awakened. They were then taught to his disciples and were transmitted by the ancestors, generation after generation.

The basis of the Bodhisattva precepts is the reality of all beings to which the Buddha awakened. In other words, impermanence, egolessness, and the interdependent origination of all things. When we awaken to the reality that we ourselves and all other things are impermanent and ego-less, we see that we cannot cling to anything. We are then released from attachment to ourselves, our possessions, and all other objects. When we awaken to the fact that each thing is interconnected to every other thing, like all the knots in Brahma’s net, we see that we are supported by everything and live together with everything. We can exist only within relationship with others. That reality is the source of the precepts. When we see the interconnectedness of all beings, we can only try to be helpful to them and avoiding being harmful to them.

Repentance

At a precepts ceremony in the Soto Zen tradition, first we make repentance by reciting the following verse, “All the twisted karma ever created by me, since of old, / through beginningless greed, anger and ignorance, / born of my body, speech and thought. / I now make complete repentance of it all.”

There is another repentance verse taken from *Samanthabhadra-sutra* that says, “The ocean of all

karmic hindrances arises solely from delusive thoughts. / If you wish to make repentance, sit in an upright posture and be mindful of the true nature of reality. / All faults and evil deeds are like frost and dew. / The sun of wisdom enables them to melt away.”

This verse clearly shows that our precepts are based on awakening to reality and wisdom of such reality.

The Three Refuges

We then take refuge in the Three Treasures: Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. The Buddha is the one who awakened to reality. The Dharma is reality itself, the way things truly are. The Sangha are the people who aspire to study and living according to the teaching of the reality of all beings.

The Threefold Pure

Next, we receive the threefold pure precepts: (1) the precept of embracing moral codes, (2) the precept of embracing good deeds, (3) the precept of embracing all living beings. These three points are the direction we walk on the Bodhisattva path.

The Ten Major Precepts

The ten major precepts are: (1) do not kill, (2) do not steal, (3) do not engage in improper sexual conduct, (4) do not lie, (5) do not deal in intoxicants, (6) do not criticize others, (7) do not praise self and slander others, (8) do not be stingy with the dharma or property, (9) do not give way to anger, (10) do not disparage the Three Treasures.

On the first precept, Dogen Zenji comments in *Kyojukaimon*, “By not killing life, the seeds of the Buddha are nurtured, and one is enabled to succeed the Buddha’s life of wisdom. Do not kill life.”

In order to nurture the seeds to actualize Buddha, we should strive not to kill. In the same way, the other nine major precepts all show the virtue of the true reality of all beings.

Zen and the precepts are one

The Bodhisattva precepts we receive in the Soto Zen tradition are also called, *Zen-kai* (Zen precepts). This means that our zazen and the precepts are one. In our zazen practice, we put our entire being on the ground of true reality of all beings instead of the picture of the world that is a creation of our minds. By striving to keep the precepts in our daily lives, we strive to live being guided by our zazen.

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In his popular *Once Born Zen* and *Twice Born Zen: The Soto and Rinzai Schools of Japanese Zen*, M. Conrad Hyers highlights. Even during the precept-bestowing assembly at Eihei-ji, which I attended in April and discussed in my previous article on this website, we attended commemorative services. Not only this, but in the week-long preparation, we performed almost all the practices Dogen lists as unnecessary, namely, incense offerings, homage-paying, . . . penance disciplines or sutra reading. But the wealth of practice performed in Soto institutions does not stop there. Soto temples offer a variety of common practices such as sutra-copying (shakyo), copying of the image of the Buddha (shabutsu), and pilgrimages in addition to meditation groups (zazenkai). Soto Zen Buddhism International Center. About the Author. Reb Anderson was ordained as a Zen priest at the San Francisco Zen Center by Shunryu Suzuki Roshi in 1970. Since then, Reb has continued to practice at the San Francisco Zen Center, where he served as abbot from 1986 to 1995 and is now a senior dharma teacher. I left the community years after receiving Bodhisattva vows from Tenshin Reb Anderson and while in the process of sewing my priest robes in preparation to be ordained as a Soto Zen Priest by Tenshin Reb Anderson. I only say this because it impacts how I "hear" this book. In a good way. The Bodhisattva Precepts are a set of ethical trainings (Śīla) used in Mahāyāna Buddhism to advance a practitioner along the path to becoming a bodhisattva. Traditionally, monastics observed the basic moral code in Buddhism, the prātimokāśa (such as that of the Dharmaguptaka), but in the Mahāyāna tradition, monks may observe the Bodhisattva Precepts as well. The Bodhisattva Precepts are associated with the bodhisattva vow to save all beings and with bodhicitta.