

# Exploring The Zen Precepts

This note reflects an exploration of the precepts in Zen Buddhist practice, using as a text, “**Waking Up To What You Do - A Zen Practice for Meeting Every Situation With Intelligence and Compassion**,” by Diane Rizzetto (Abbess of The Bay Zen Center in Oakland California).

Buddhist precepts constitute a core set of guidelines for living. The precepts have found no fixed form of expression, and vary in detail according to the context in which they are expressed. The guidelines for living in a monastic community are bound to be differently expressed from the guidelines for those who live in lay communities. Place and time will have a similar impact. The precepts inherited from ‘medieval’ Japan find a different expression in the 21st century culture of the West.

The precepts are sometimes likened to The Ten Commandments. This is a useful way of understanding their role in guiding behaviour, but it would not be accurate to see the precepts as rules of a kind similar to the Judaeo/Christian commandments. The precepts express intentions, rather than defining rules. To sign up to the precepts, to receive them, is to vow to honour their intentions.

Set out below is a conventional version of the Zen precepts from San Francisco Zen Center. Alongside I have summarised a number of interpretations and transformations, including those from Diane Rizzetto’s book (she doesn’t cover all of them).

<b>A List of The Sixteen Traditional Precepts in Zen</b>	
<b>SF Zen Center Version</b>	<b>Comment with Diane Rizzetto’s (DR’s) Transformation</b>
<b>The Refuges</b>	
I take refuge in Buddha.	<i>Not in DR.</i> To take refuge is to flee to shelter. Here that shelter is provided by Buddha, the teacher; Dharma, the teaching; Sangha, the community of ‘students.’
I take refuge in Dharma.	
I take refuge in Sangha	
<b>Pure Precepts</b>	
I vow to refrain from all evil.	<i>Not in DR.</i> The Pure Precepts manifest the aspiration of the community of ‘students’ to do no evil, to do good, and to live for the benefit of all beings.
I vow to make every effort to live in enlightenment.	
I vow to live and be lived for the benefit of all beings.	
<b>Grave Precepts</b> <i>In Diane Rizzetto’s order</i>	
I vow to refrain from false speech.	There is no need to hide the truth. See and act in accordance with what is. Do not lie or deceive others. Be honest. Take up the way of speaking truthfully.
I vow not to praise self at the expense of others.	There are no victims or perpetrators. Acknowledge responsibility for everything in your life. Do not blame or criticise. Be kind. Take up the way of speaking of others with openness and possibility.
I vow not to slander.	There are no winners or losers. Give your best effort and accept the results. Do not compete or covet. Be humble. Take up the way of meeting others on equal ground.
I vow to refrain from intoxicants.	There is no need to hide <i>from</i> the truth. Embrace all experience directly. Do not cloud consciousness. Be aware. Take up the way of cultivating a clear mind.
I vow not to take what is not given.	There is no scarcity of resources. Give and ask freely, and accept what is needed. Do not steal. Be generous. Take up the way of taking only what is freely given, and giving freely all that you can.

I vow not to misuse sexuality.	There is no scarcity of love. Give and accept affection and friendship without clinging or desire. Do not misuse sexuality. Be love. Take up the way of engaging in sexual intimacy respectfully and with an open heart.
I vow not to harbour ill will.	There are no mistakes. See everything as an opportunity. Accept what is. Do not rage, resent, or seek revenge. Take up the way of letting go of anger.
I vow not to kill.	There is not separate self. Live in harmony with all life and the environment that sustains it. Be grateful. Do not kill. Take up the way of supporting life.
I vow not to be avaricious.	<i>Not in DR.</i>
I vow not to disparage the Three Treasures.	<i>Not in DR.</i>

Rizzetto offers this quote from the Dalai Lama:

“There is only one important point you must keep in your mind and let it be your guide. No matter what people call you, you are just who you are. Keep to this truth. You must ask yourself how is it you want to live your life. We live and we die, this is the truth that we can only face alone. No one can help us, not even the Buddha. So consider carefully, what prevents you from living the way you want to live your life?”