

BEAUTIFUL FREEDOM OF THE HEART:  
The Five Wonderful Precepts and Me

by Tanya Shaffer

I take decisions very seriously. Too seriously. I'm a Libra, and I weigh everything endlessly, back and forth, back and forth, forever and ever, world without end, until at the last possible second I do exactly what my first impulse dictated I should.

Two years ago, at the end of a two-month jaunt through Europe, I found myself at Plum Village, the Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh's Buddhist community near Bordeaux, France. It was the last stop on a trip that I later came to call "Nudism to Buddhism," since IT began with a visit to my father and stepmother at a nudist colony on the French Riviera and ended up at Plum Village. The impetus for the trip was a devastating break-up, which sent me running across the world in the vain hope that I could stay one step ahead of my pain.

Surrounded on all sides by fields of grapes and rows of six-foot-tall sunflowers nodding their sleepy heads in the mellow, baking sun, Plum Village was the perfect place for me finally to rest. By the time I got there both body and mind had worn themselves out; I simply couldn't keep running. So I sat down for the first time in thirty years of charging headlong through life, and attempted to be quiet.

It was on my second or third day at Plum Village that I first heard the notion of formally "taking the five Precepts," a sort of Buddhist code of ethical conduct. I had actually been thinking about the Precepts all summer. I'd read "A Path With Heart" shortly before leaving on the trip, and the chapter on the Precepts had roused my interest. All summer I'd made a concerted effort to live by the Precepts, and I couldn't decide whether I was proud or disgusted with myself for spending hundreds of "extra" dollars on train fares by refusing to lie about my age to ticket-sellers who assumed I was under twenty-six.

At Plum Village the Precepts were made much of. Every week five retreatants each told a personal story about how a particular precept had challenged or assisted them during the previous year. Their stories were widely divergent and astoundingly intimate-- from the man who reconnected with a child he had fathered twenty years before, to the young woman who realized that she lied compulsively to avoid unpleasantness I found these presentations among the most moving and enlightening parts of my experience at Plum Village.

At the end of every week there was an opportunity for those who wanted to to take the Precepts in a formal group ceremony and receive a Precept Supporting Certificate and a Dharma name. The notion of "taking" the Precepts in a ceremonial way was unfamiliar to me. I'd assumed they were like the ten commandments-- just sort of there to be followed. But the moment I heard about the ceremony, I thought, "I want to do that." Then my Libra part kicked in, and I was consumed by the agony of indecision. Thich Nhat Hanh's version of the Precepts is elaborately worded and quite strict. I've always had a very strong sense of the power of words, and I didn't want to invoke them, especially in a sacred setting, unless I had a pretty good idea that I both wanted to and could deliver on what I was promising.

The first step in my decision-making process was to try to get absolutely clear on what I would be promising. Boiling down Thich Nhat Hanh's version and combining it with what I remembered of Jack Kornfield's, I came up with this:

1. Don't kill.
2. Don't steal.
3. Don't sleep around.
4. Don't lie.
5. Don't get drunk or strung out on drugs.

Or, on the flip side, this:

1. Practice compassion.
2. Practice generosity.
3. Practice sexual responsibility.
4. Practice truthfulness and deep listening.
5. Practice mindful consumption.

Next I wrote my version and Thich Nhat Hanh's version into my notebook and studied them obsessively, trying to imagine what it would mean to live them to the letter, no fudging. I wanted to understand not just their surface, but their deeper meaning. After too many hours staring at black ink on a white page, I had boiled them down to essentially this:

1. Honor others.
2. Honor others.
3. Honor yourself and others.
4. Honor others.
5. Honor yourself.

Of course, when honoring others you are also honoring yourself, because bringing suffering to others inevitably brings suffering to you, via the laws of both instant and long-term karma. And supposedly there's no separation anyway. At this point it was one a.m. and I was under the covers writing with my flashlight so as not to disturb my fellow retreatants. I decided to sleep on it-- at least until the gong rang at 5:45.

The next day I started asking the nuns and monks and other retreatants about what it really meant to take the Precepts. What level of commitment was involved? What would happen if you broke one? They told me they were intended to be guidelines, not hard and fast rules, and that taking them represented an intention to try, rather than an unbreakable vow. They said it would be impossible to keep them 100%-- we all kill bugs, for example, simply by stepping in the grass. The Precepts represent an ideal, an aspiration.

I found this confusing. If you don't genuinely intend to keep them, I thought, what's the point of making the vow? And the version I'd be taking would not be my version, but Thich Nhat Hanh's. His Fifth Precept contains the words, "I am determined not to use alcohol or any other intoxicant..." If I say I won't drink alcohol and I drink alcohol, I've broken my word, nothing

complex or ambiguous about it. And I didn't want to give my word if I was going to break it. If I take them, I decided, then I take them for real. I decided not to take them.

Two days later I thought maybe I'd just take some of them: start small. The sticking points for me were number three and number five, the one about sexual responsibility and the one about drugs and alcohol. My reasoning on number five was relatively simple: I'm not an alcoholic, and I've never had a drug problem, so I don't feel that drugs and alcohol pose a threat to my well-being. If I feel like a glass of wine with dinner now and then I want to be able to have it without guilt. After all, what's wrong with a little measured push toward relaxation? No one would fault you for a hot bath. The world's hard enough.

Thich Nhat Hanh's version of number three includes the language "I will not engage in sexual activity outside of a long-term committed relationship." Well God, yes, that's absolutely what I want, I thought, but I've just ended a long-term relationship. I'm a single person in the world again. Is occasionally seeking physical comfort from loneliness a crime? And what constitutes sexual activity? A kiss? I decided to take numbers one, two, and four, and hold off on numbers three and five.

The next day I awoke thinking about the role alcohol had played in my life over the past couple of years. The man I'd recently split up with had been a fairly serious drinker. Over the previous years I'd spent many a night "partying" at his friends' houses until three in the morning, eventually crashing on someone's bed amidst the coats and purses until he woke me up to go home. Beyond the occasional glass of white wine, I've never had much of a taste for alcohol, but I'd downed a lot of drinks I didn't really want, simply to ease the tedium of those endless hours of blaring music, banal conversations, and come-ons from his inebriated friends. It had never occurred to me until this moment to wonder why I'd done that. If I hadn't drunk at those parties, I might have had to face the fact that I didn't want to be there. And if I'd acknowledged that to myself, I might have been forced to face the painful knowledge that the relationship I was clinging to so desperately wasn't meeting my needs. These thoughts haunted me throughout the day, and I began to waver on number five.

A few days later my preoccupation had shifted to sexual responsibility, Precept number three. "What would it mean to live by you?" I asked number three. "How would it affect my life, my work?" As I asked these questions, I saw the issue enlarge and become not just about whom I chose to have sexual relations with, but about how I used my sexual energy in the world. How many times had I used the fact that I was an "attractive woman," by some kind of mainstream societal standard, to manipulate a situation, from weaseling out of a traffic ticket to getting a job? How had I subtly manipulated the hearts of men whom I was not seriously interested in, simply so that they would do things for me, like fix my computer or my car? Asking myself these questions and attempting to look their answers in the face became so excruciating that I decided to put them aside for a few days.

When I returned to the question a couple of days later I found this phrase rising clearly within me: "I just want to be myself." I saw, then, that while I'd felt tremendous shame when I realized the ways I'd used my sexuality to manipulate situations, I was not purely the villain in those situations, but also, in some sense, the victim. Surely my behaviour had come from my own fear, pain, and confusion. If I used my sexuality in unwholesome ways, it was also closely

related to how I'd been taught by society to empower myself as a woman, and to the behaviour that had been reinforced throughout my life. If I'd trusted in the acuity of my mind and the sufficiency of my abilities, I'd have had little need for interacting in ways that diminished myself and others.

My attention turned to my work as an actor, an arena where my sexuality is frequently treated as a commodity. What does it do to me and to the world, I wondered, when I head out to a commercial audition wearing a mini-skirt and heels? A memory sprang vividly to mind of a film audition where the casting director asked me to pin back my t-shirt so that my breasts would stand out. Was that a path with heart? And yet those very commercial and film roles provided the financial sustenance that enabled me to do the lower paid theatrical work that I cherished. Would it be better for me and the world if I were waiting tables?

And is there a place for enjoying and perhaps even flaunting your own sexuality, in a free and joyful way? It occurred to me that the flipside of the woman who manipulates situations with her body because she doesn't trust the world to respond to the power of her mind is the woman who creates her own image, flaunts it and enjoys it-- who takes the world's objectification of her and turns it on its ear by saying, "I'm beautiful, and I'm strong, too, and I will present myself in whatever way pleases me."

No, I thought, obviously I'm not going to go home and decide henceforth I wear nothing but baggy sweats. But that's not the point, is it? It's really about mindfulness-- watering the seed of awareness that's been there, buried, for a long, long time.

So here it is, I concluded: Unless you choose to live as a nun or a monk (and probably even then), life is a bubbling cauldron of contradictions. You want to honor yourself and others; you want to live in the sacred, but you don't want to become humorless. You want to lead a virtuous and wholesome life without becoming moralistic or dogmatic. It seems to me that the only response to ambiguous situations is a true, deep listening to yourself. When I look back on my own experience, I feel quite sure that in some deep part of myself I always knew the exact truth of my situations, even when I was very young. That's why my first impulse at decision-making is usually the one I come back to in the end. It's there, but I have to fight through all the junk I've layered on top of it to get back to it. Listen to the true voice! That should be the one and only Precept, and of course it is: mindfulness.

And all at once I realized that if the goal of the Precepts was in fact to build mindfulness, rather than to dictate an exact course of action, they had begun to do their work even before I'd taken them. The act of pondering the decision already had caused me to reflect more deeply on the implications of my behaviour around alcohol and sexuality. I hadn't even started in yet on mindful speech!

You can probably guess where this story ends, or rather begins. I took the Five Precepts, just as my very first impulse had dictated that I should. Listening to them being read aloud, I suddenly realized with my entire being how deeply I wanted a guiding spiritual principle for my life. As I took refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, I thought, "these things are 2,500 years old-- maybe they have more wisdom than I do." I felt how thin my objections really were, just

fearful words circling in my head, and how deeply I wanted to live the heart of what the Precepts represented. I felt I could use that foundation, that guidance.

"I've lived without them all this time," I thought, "Has it really been so great? Why not give myself over-- try something new?"

As Sister Chang Khong asked, after each one, "Do you make a deep aspiration to uphold this Precept?" I heard a deep inner voice responding in tandem with my own outer one: "Yes, I do."

I was given the Dharma name "Beautiful Freedom of the Heart."

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