

# Do Not Disparage the Triple Treasure

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I had a brief thought after a difficult practice discussion about not really being able to offer anything meaningful or helpful for people, and what immediately popped into my head was the last precept: a disciple of the Buddha does not disparage the triple treasure—Buddha, Dharma, Sangha. With that negative thought, I had actually been disparaging my own Buddha nature. And it occurred to me that we never talk about this precept very much; I've never heard or read a real teaching about it. [It isn't even covered in Rizzetto's book.] In any event, we have not said much about it in our teachings here. It seems straightforward enough, as though it really doesn't need any explanation: don't say bad things about the Buddha or his teachings or about the sangha. Maybe most people think there is nothing much to it. But it is the final precept, an important position in the order, and it is not just an afterthought.

As I continued seeing people in practice discussion, I got clearer and clearer about its importance, and that is what I decided to talk about. First of all, I talked a bit about the meaning of this word *disparage*, which means to belittle, demean, criticize, or dismiss. Then I talked about the first of the three treasures, and the obvious application: don't disparage the Buddha, our great teacher. But going beyond that simple view is a more subtle practice point. *Where is the Buddha?* Sangha members responded: everywhere, including in yourself. I said if you realize that every single being, including yourself, is on the path of Buddhahood, and is in fact a living Buddha, who is it that you must not disparage, belittle, demean, criticize, or dismiss? Time after time I see people struggling with this issue, convinced that they are lacking something essential, that they are insignificant, that they can't figure out what they should be doing, or worse, that whatever they are doing is somehow wrong or inadequate. This is *all* disparaging the Buddha, their own Buddha-nature. It is a source of suffering, and it prevents us from living wholeheartedly *as Buddha in our own lives*. Then too, sometimes we disparage the Buddhas around us, dismissing, criticizing, or demeaning them, even if only in our minds. We weigh one person as more important than another, treat people differently based on our appraisal of them, and so on. Sometimes we think of self-criticism as something noble, something that shows our humility. This is particularly pernicious in many spiritual traditions. When you deny your own Buddhahood, you diminish yourself and create a crippling set of limitations that you then live by. When you deny the Buddhahood of others, you are simply failing to recognize *their true nature*. This is not considered virtuous or noble in Buddhist teachings. Yet we have many cultural habits and conditioning around this, so that it becomes the expected norm to put oneself down, a kind of badge of honor. It is also an expected norm to criticize others as a way of bonding. This is also disparaging the Buddha.

Then I talked a bit about the second treasure, the dharma, and its two, congruent meanings: as the teachings of the Buddha, and as the manifestation of phenomena, reality, or truth. So the obvious sense is that a disciple of the Buddha does not disparage the Buddha's teachings, reflecting a kind of sincerity about engaging the practice wholeheartedly. But once again, when we look more deeply, we see that this precept also applies to all phenomena in our human

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experience. We are constantly making judgments about the worthiness or its lack in a situation, or a circumstance in which we find ourselves, dismissing some as unworthy of our attention, and making others a big priority. Much of the time we are simply unaware of what our own existence actually is. Yet, for a true disciple of the Buddha, everything we experience manifests as the teaching of *life as it is*. So one issue raised at this point was this: it seems we always have to make choices about how we spend our time, who we will be with, what we will do, is this wrong? I pointed out that making choices is not the same thing as disparaging. As Joko said, we are always making moment to moment choices. The issue is whether we are awake when we make them, and whether there is a subtle dismissal or criticism or judgment of worthiness involved. There is a difference between discernment and judging. It is a good practice point to look at those choices and how they are motivated, conditioned, or habituated.

It is the same when we look at the third part of the precept, *a disciple of the Buddha does not disparage the sangha*. In the Buddha's time, there were many teachers competing with each other, and often speaking dismissively of each other. Students and disciples would criticize even the other followers of their own teacher. This leads to division and destruction in the community of practice, not to health and well-being. So in the most obvious interpretation of this precept, we do not disparage those in our own practice community. At a deeper level, we are connected intimately with each other in our small sangha, and we are connected more widely with our other sitting groups around the world, and with all Zen Buddhists, with our families and friends and colleagues, and in a larger way, with all beings. These relationships are not to be dismissed or disparaged, they are the very connections we need in order to survive and thrive. Yet we constantly pick and choose, defining some relationships as more important and becoming impatient or critical of others. Every being in our lives is our teacher, and every single one is deserving of our respect and care.

So in a way, this precept actually completes and includes all of the precepts that come before it. It invites us to look deeply and carefully, to live wholeheartedly and generously, and to practice tirelessly. We want to clarify the myriad ways that we do disparage the three treasures that offer us an abundant, rich, and boundless life, both in obvious ways, and in ways far more subtle—the ways that we and others often secretly approve of. These can be treacherous waters, and so we work together in support of the full expression of our deepest wisdom and compassion. That is the path to an ethical Buddhist life.