

Essentials on Observing and Violating the Fundamentals of Bodhisattva Precepts

Wŏnhyo's Nonsubstantial Mahāyāna Ethics

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Making distinctions to create ethical categories and judging human actions based on these categories are generally thought to be major functions of ethics. Understood in this manner, ethics could be at odds with the commitment of Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions to the nonsubstantial nature of entities. To create precepts means to generate ethical categories. However, if entities are empty, precepts as well as the idea of observing precepts can contradict the basic position of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

In the *Essentials on Observing and Violating the Fundamentals of Bodhisattva Precepts* (Posal kyebon chibŏm yo'gi), an excerpt of which is translated here, the Korean monk-thinker Wŏnhyo (617–686) addresses the different layers involved in understanding bodhisattva precepts and their observation and violation. In this work, Wŏnhyo discusses the three categories of observing and violating bodhisattva precepts: first, major and minor offenses; second, the profound and shallow understandings of observing and violating precepts; and third, the ultimate way of observing and violating them. In discussing bodhisattva precepts on these three levels, Wŏnhyo emphasizes the complexity involved in interpreting precepts. He does not merely identify precepts, or only focus on the importance of observing them. Instead, Wŏnhyo discusses the contexts in which the observation of precepts and the bodhisattva's actions take place and demonstrates the multifaceted nature of human activities and the ambiguity of ethical categories and judgments. The ideal of bodhisattva ethics for Wŏnhyo lies in understanding one core of Buddhist teaching: emptiness of entities. Ethical standards created

through bodhisattva precepts cannot be an exception from the fact that things do not have self-nature. By underscoring the true nature of precepts as empty, Wŏnhyo demonstrates the provisionality as well as the vulnerability of the border lines that define ethical categories.

Wŏnhyo begins the *Essentials* by bringing the reader's attention to the problems of employing binary opposites in the construction of ethical codes. Distinguishing right and wrong is one basis of ethical behavior according to conventional wisdom. In Buddhism, moreover, knowing right from wrong and thereby creating good karma that results in pleasant rewards is the basis of Buddhist codes of behavior. Wŏnhyo, however, says that to distinguish right and wrong is easy whereas to consider their real impact is not. With the examples he provides of multiple contexts and the complexities of human existence, Wŏnhyo argues that no fixed rules can ground the ethics of the bodhisattva. For example, one can learn the Buddhist precept to abstain from killing, and thus know that killing is wrong. However, when the action of taking lives takes place in various situations in life and thus is contextualized, the precept against killing, as well as every other precept, is subject to multilayered hermeneutical analysis.

In the section on the shallow and profound understandings of precepts, Wŏnhyo discusses the ambiguity of ethical judgment in the context of real life by employing the "four cases" as examples. The first major precept, praising oneself and disparaging others, does not offer an absolute ethical standard as it is. Judgment of an action as either meritorious behavior or offense of this precept is based not just on linguistic expression of the precept but also on the context in which it takes place, as well as the agent's intention for that action. In this manner, Wŏnhyo understands precepts as neutral statements that do not have their own intrinsic value.

In the final section, on the ultimate way of observing and violating precepts, Wŏnhyo establishes a philosophical ground for his discussions in the previous two sections, envisioning a nonsubstantial ethics of Mahāyāna Buddhism as opposed to a rule-bound ethics. For Wŏnhyo, bodhisattva precepts are not merely rules and regulations that maintain order and train practitioners. Instead, realizing and accepting bodhisattva precepts themselves make up the embodiment of Mahāyāna Buddhism in its entirety. Ethical awakening encompasses the ontological status of being as understood in Mahāyāna Buddhism. Conventionally, violation of a precept stands in opposition to its observation. Recovery from this commitment of violation generally takes the steps of realization of one's fault, acceptance of appropriate measures to compensate the violation, and resolution for a firm observation of the precept to avoid further offenses. Wŏnhyo warns against such an understanding of precepts, because a mere acceptance of one's offense and accompanying repentance, followed by renewed efforts to keep the precepts, can create a danger of substantializing the act of violation. Here lies the salient point of Wŏnhyo's Mahāyāna ethics: the practitioner must understand the nonsubstantial nature of precepts. Violation of the precepts does

not have a substantial reality. Hence, a genuine awareness of the meaning of violation not only includes realization of the mistake made by the act of violation but, more important, the emptiness of the violation itself. Violation is nonsubstantial and so are the violated (precept) and the violator. In this context, Wŏnhyo makes a radical statement that if one fails to see the non-substantial nature of precepts, observing precepts on the phenomenal level results in violating them on the ultimate level.

When not properly contextualized and spelled out, the Mahāyāna emphasis on emptiness in ethical discourse can be subject to serious misunderstanding. Wŏnhyo criticizes such misunderstanding as “being stagnated with nonbeing.” The nonsubstantial nature of precepts, the emptiness of their observation and violation, does not negate their conventional existence. In the *Essentials*, Wŏnhyo takes efforts to reveal both noumenal and phenomenal, or ultimate and conventional, aspects of precepts. On their ultimate levels, precepts do not exist because they are empty by nature; on their conventional levels, to observe precepts is the basis of Buddhas and bodhisattvas. These two levels cannot be separated.

Wŏnhyo's views on bodhisattva precepts appear in three of his extant works including the *Essentials*. In all three works, Wŏnhyo pays attention to the nature of Mahāyāna Buddhist ethics that distinguishes itself from the Vinaya tradition of early Buddhism. In the opening passage of *Posal yŏngnak ponŏpkyŏng so* (Commentary on the *Sūtra of Bodhisattvas' Bead Ornamented Primary Activities*),¹ Wŏnhyo discusses the noumenal and phenomenal reality of precepts through the simile of the ocean and the sky as representing the doctrines of the “two levels of truth” and the “middle path.” As there is no path in the sky, so there are no prefixed ways to master the middle path. However, the nonexistence of set rules does not deny the existence of a path for the practitioner to follow. The nonexistence of a set path means that anything can be a path, and the nonexistence of a specific gate opens up the possibility for anything to be a door to Buddhist practice. Following this logic, the demarcation between precepts and nonprecepts, rules and nonrules, is blurred.

In the *Pŏmmanggyŏng posal kyebon sa'gi* (Personal Records on the Chapter on the Bodhisattva Precepts in the *Sūtra of Brahma's Net*),² Wŏnhyo's third work on bodhisattva precepts, he explains the relationship between each knot and the entire net in Brahma's net as another example of phenomenal and noumenal aspects of precepts. The net is one as it is, but it consists of diverse knots. Not only does each knot depend on other knots for its existence, the very diversity of knots in the net demonstrates the different appearances (or forms) in the phenomenal world, which cannot be

1. *Posal yŏngnak ponŏpkyŏng so* (Commentary on the *Sūtra of Bodhisattvas' Bead Ornamented Primary Activities*), in HPC 1:586a–604a. (HPC refers to *Han'guk Pulgyo chŏnsŏ* [1979–2001])

2. *Pŏmmanggyŏng posal kyebon sa'gi* (Personal Records on the Chapter on the Bodhisattva Precepts in the *Sūtra of Brahma's Net*), HPC 1.498a–523b.

regulated by any set of rules to explain their existence. In the *Essentials*, Wŏnhyo elaborates on the differences between appearance and true reality of precepts by discussing different contexts in which the same action could be judged as either observation or violation of precepts.

The nonduality of form (phenomena) and emptiness (noumenon) is the ground of Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy. When this idea is applied to ethics, it cannot but destabilize conventional ethical discourse. Wŏnhyo's discussion of bodhisattva precepts problematizes the basic assumptions of normative ethics. It problematizes ethical categories by showing the provisional nature of precepts and revealing the limits of binary oppositions commonly employed in ethical discourse. By so doing, Wŏnhyo reconceptualizes the function of ethics.³

Translation

The bodhisattva precepts are a ferry that turns the currents around and sends them back to their origin. They are the essential gate in rejecting the wrong and selecting the right. Characteristics of the right and wrong are easy to get confused and the nature of merits and offense is difficult to distinguish. A truly wicked intention can take the appearance of rightness. Or a contaminated appearance and lifestyle can also contain genuine purity at its inner core. Or a work that seems to bring at least a small amount of merits might turn out to cause a great disaster. Or someone whose thoughts and activities seem profound might turn out to violate simple and minor things. Because of this, unrefined practitioners, or *Śramanas*, who are wrapped in personal desire have long followed only the traces [of sages], considering them truly right. Their practices continue to debilitate the profound precepts [of the Buddha] and pursue degraded activities. Because of this situation, by removing the degraded activities, one should pursue the perfection of the profound precepts; by dispelling the mode of imitating the traces, one should follow the truthful. Worrying that I might be forgetful of this, I summarize here the essential teachings [of bodhisattva precepts]. If anybody concurs with me, take a close look at the details and resolve doubts.⁴

3. The translation that follows is based on HPC 1.581a–585c. The text is also included in T. 45.1907.918b–921c (T refers to *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*. [A standard collection of the East Asian Buddhist canon compiled in Japan] Takakusu Junjirō, Watanabe Kaikyoku, et al. (eds.), 100 vols. Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924–1932).

4. Wŏnhyo's discussion is based on *Pusa jie ben* (On Conferring Bodhisattva Precepts, T. 1501.24.1110–1115). This text contains excerpts from the *Yogācārabhūmi-śāstra*. Even though the *Essentials* can be categorized as a commentary in its style, in this work Wŏnhyo does not offer line-by-line comments on *Pusa jie ben*, which he mentions only rarely. Instead, he develops his own arguments on the nature of bodhisattva precepts and of observing and violating them.

I will discuss three issues that are essential in understanding the observation and violation of precepts: the first is the major and minor precepts; the second is the shallow and profound understandings; and the third is the ultimate way of observing and violating precepts.

1. The Major and Minor Precepts

Discussions about the major and minor precepts are divided into two parts. The first part is a general discussion about the major and minor precepts, and the second part reveals individual differences....

Let us take the first precept of praising oneself and disparaging others and discuss its appearances. There are four distinctive cases related to this precept.⁵

If one praises oneself and speaks ill of others for the purpose of generating faith in the minds of others, this creates good merits and is not an offense. If one praises oneself and speaks ill of others because of the idle mind or a morally neutral state of mind, this is an offense but not an affliction. If one praises oneself and speaks ill of others because of love or anger for someone, this is affliction, but not serious offense. If one praises oneself and speaks ill of others because one covets benefits and pursues respect, this is not light but serious offense....

2. The Shallow and Profound Understandings

Following the discussion of the aforementioned precept of praising oneself and disparaging others, now I will elaborate on the shallow and profound understandings of observing and violating the precept. The *Sūtra of Brahma's Net* says, "[Bodhisattvas should] always receive disparagement and humiliation in lieu of sentient beings; in doing so, bodhisattvas take responsibilities of bad happenings and transfer good merits to others. If one praises and promotes one's own meritorious behaviors and hides other's good deeds, and by doing so causes others to receive ignominy and disgrace, this is a major offense (Skt. *pārājikā*)."⁶ What would it mean to consider shallow and profound understandings in the context of the discussion above?

When the person of lower dispositions hears this statement, the person naïvely follows linguistic expressions and understands that to disparage oneself and praise others will definitely create meritorious rewards, whereas to praise oneself and disparage others will be an offense. A person who understands in this manner will flatly follow the linguistic expressions and

5. The *Pusa jie ben* contains a discussion of four major precepts and forty-four minor precepts. The four major precepts are (1) the precept on praising oneself and disparaging others; (2) the precept on being stingy about the correct dharma; (3) the precept on not accepting repentance because of anger; and (4) the precept on slandering the correct dharma.

6. *Fanwang jing* (Sūtra of Brahma's Net), T. 24.1484.1004c.

want to practice good deeds; however, good deeds in this case are few and offenses are many. If the person wishes to eliminate the offense, she or he gets rid of one offense by eradicating three good deeds. This is called the offense by the one who has a shallow understanding.

When the person of higher dispositions hears this statement, the person gives a weighty thought to its meaning. Understanding that when one corner is lifted, the other three corners follow, when one passage is mentioned, the person understands all four different cases and makes a judgment based on them. In this manner, evaluation is not biased, no good rewards are deserted, and at the same time no offense is made. This is called "the virtue of observing precepts of those who have profound understanding."

The aforementioned four different cases are as follows. In some situations, to speak ill of oneself and praise others results in merits and to praise oneself and speak ill of others results in offense. In other cases, speaking ill of oneself and praising others turns out to be an offense whereas praising oneself and speaking ill of others is a meritorious deed. There are also situations in which either disparaging oneself and praising others or praising oneself and disparaging others becomes either an offense or meritorious behavior. And yet there are situations in which neither disparaging oneself and praising others nor praising oneself and disparaging others turns out to be either meritorious behavior or offense.

The first is a case of a person with a deep sympathy for sentient beings. If such a person feels a deep sympathy for sentient beings receiving disgrace, wishes to transfer the disgrace of others to herself or himself, and thus transfer to others the credits she or he deserves, in this case, by this action, the person disparages herself or himself and praises others, which is meritorious behavior. However, if the person makes others receive disgrace so that she or he would earn credits for those activities, the activity is interpreted as the case of praising oneself and disparaging others, and is an offense.

The second is a case of a person who is aware of the trends in her or his time that people hate those who praise themselves and speak ill of others and respect those who humble themselves and who speak highly of others as a man of high quality. This person thinks that if she or he disparages others, others will hurt her or him, but if she or he praises others, they will in turn benefit her or him. With this reasoning, if the person disparages herself or himself and praises others as a means to get a high evaluation of herself or himself, this is a major offense. If someone praises oneself and is critical of others in an attempt to correct others who are attached to nontruth and by doing so to establish the teachings of the Buddha and benefit sentient beings, this is a great meritorious deed.

The third is the case as follows: Suppose there is a person who has a strongly deceptive nature. In an attempt to deceive people in the world, this person despises others' strong points and covers up his or her own weakness. For this purpose, the person employs deceptive language: she or he speaks ill of herself or himself by criticizing her or his good quality of small size as if they

were defects and praises others' weakness as if they were their strong points. By doing so, the person promotes her or his many shortcomings as if they were virtue, and suppresses others' strong points as if they were failings. Also, suppose there is a person whose nature is straightforward. Wishing to lead people in the world to the right path, with the knowledge of how to distinguish the good from the evil, the person removes offense, cultivates merits, and speaks honestly without covering. When the person notices vice in herself or himself, she or he will definitely denounce it; when the person hears the good deeds of others, she or he makes sure to praise it. The praise and disparagement and the advertisement and suppression of the first person are the offense of deception and flattery. The praise and disparagement and the promotion and condemnation of the second person merit the rewards for sincerity and honesty.

The fourth is the case of a person of supreme integrity whose character is unprejudiced, flexible, and whose spirit is tolerant, embracing, and undistorted. Because this person has limitless capacities in these aspects, the person puts disaster and good fortune together, making them one; without making distinctions between the subject (self) and object (others), the person makes them nondual. The person's spirit always stays in happiness. Staying in such an ambience, the person neither disparages herself or himself nor praises others. Nor does she or he promote herself or himself or suppress others. And suppose there is a person with low integrity whose nature is dull, who is not capable of distinguishing right from wrong, and who cannot tell beans from barley. The person is not attentive to what makes good or what makes evil. Because the person's thoughts constantly stay in confusion, the person forgets both love and hatred, and does not humble herself or himself or beautify others. The person does not promote herself or himself or disgrace others. This person, however, commits the offense of confusion of the low integrity whereas the earlier case creates merits through the simplicity of high wisdom.

This is what is meant by evaluating offense or merits through four cases. The first two cases demonstrate the situation in which seemingly meritorious behaviors can turn into serious disasters, and the act of offense can eventually result in great goodness. The latter two cases are examples in which deceptive language and compassionate concern for others do not differ in appearance, and the activities of those who have high integrity and base stupidity look the same. Therefore, practitioners should know that the essentials of observing and violating precepts definitely lie in closely examining the gain or loss of one's own action, and they do not lie in judging the virtue or vice of each movement of others. This is the meaning of the shallow and profound understandings of observing and violating precepts.

3. The Ultimate Way of Observing and Violating Precepts

The third issue is the clarification of the ultimate observation and violation of precepts. Based on the previous discussion, the nature of light and

grave violations and the character of shallow and profound understandings should be understood. However, if one does not truly understand the characteristics of precepts, and, also, in dealing with offense and non-offense, if one does not leave the two extremes, one will not be able to ultimately observe and not violate the precept; nor is it possible for the person to attain the perfection of pure precepts. Why is this so? Precepts are not produced by themselves, but exist based on various causal conditions. Because of that, precepts can never have their own characteristics. Following causal conditions is not precepts; however, without causal conditions there are no precepts. If these two situations are excluded and since the middle cannot be attained, if one searches for precepts in this manner, precepts can never exist. Although it is not possible to say that the self-nature of precepts exists, the precepts do exist through multiple conditioned causalities. This is not the same as talking about the hare's horns because they do not have causal conditions.

The characteristics of offense are based on conditioned causality; so are those of precepts. The characteristics of precepts and offense are based on conditioned causality, and so are characteristics of human beings. Based on this understanding, if someone considers that because a precept does not exist [without conditioned causality], precepts do not exist at all, such a person will lose precepts forever, even though the person does not violate precepts by thinking so. That is so because the person denies the phenomenal existence of precepts. Also, based on this understanding, if someone claims that precepts do exist, even though that person is able to observe precepts, by observing precepts, the person violates them. That is so because the person violates the true characteristics of precepts.

When bodhisattvas practice precepts, it is not like this. Even though bodhisattvas do not calculate as if there were the subject who observes precepts and the objective precepts that need to be observed, nor do they deny the phenomenal existence of precepts, and therefore they do not make the great mistake of losing precepts. Even though bodhisattvas do not believe that there are no distinctions between violation and nonviolation of precepts, they do not deny the true nature of precepts; thus they forever save themselves from violating even the minute precepts. In this manner, employing astute skillful means and profound wisdom, they forever forget about the three wheels of [the donor, the recipient, and the gift], do not fall into the two extremes, and achieve the perfection of precepts.

A scripture says, "Both violation and nonviolation cannot be attained, and therefore one completes the perfection of precepts."⁷ The *Bodhisattva Precepts* says, "precepts and their lights [i.e., the merits earned by observing precepts] come from their sources. They arise through conditioned causality, and not without causes. They are neither forms, nor mind, neither being, nor nonbeing, nor the law of causality. But they are the original source of

7. *Mahā-prajñā-pāramitā-sūtra*, T. 8.223.218c–219a.

Buddhas and the ground of bodhisattvas.”⁸ Precepts and their lights are mentioned here to demonstrate that they are not two different things. That is because clarity and convolution are one taste; therefore through the merits of precepts the true nature of precepts is revealed.

Precepts do not have self-nature; they are always created through other conditions. Hence it is said that there are conditions. When the conditions are mentioned, this does not indicate that something exists to become the cause of precepts; instead it means that things arise through causes. Hence it is said that the causes are not inexistent. The nature of precepts whose causes are not inexistent is neither material reality nor thoughts in one's mind. Hence it is said that precepts are neither form nor the mind. Even though they are neither form nor the mind, the precepts cannot be attained if separated from either form or the mind. Even though precepts cannot be attained, this does not mean that they do not exist. Hence it is said that precepts are neither being nor nonbeing. Even though precepts are not inexistent, separated from their results, their causes do not exist; separated from causes, the results are inexistent as well. Hence it is said that precepts are based on the law which is neither of the causes nor of the results. The nature of the causes of precepts cannot be attained; however, the merits of all Buddhas are necessarily based on the cause of precepts. That is why it is said that precepts are the original source of all Buddhas. The nature of the results of precepts cannot be attained; however, precepts necessarily require bodhicitta as their cause. Hence that which is produced by the results of precepts is the foundation of bodhisattvas.

Question: If the characteristics of precepts are so profound and difficult to understand, it will be difficult even to understand them. How can one practice them? Only mahasattvas might be able to practice what you have so far explained, but it does not seem relevant to the novice who has just elevated the mind to practice.

Answer: A passage in a scripture answers precisely the question you raise. It is said: “When bodhisattvas first arouse their mind to practice, they should always follow the law of the unattainable. Based on the law of the unattainable, bodhisattvas practice giving and precepts. Based on the law of the unattainable, bodhisattvas also practice the rest of the six perfections, including wisdom.”⁹ The passage means that in practicing the six perfections, if one has not been practicing them, it is not possible to practice. If

8. *Fanwang jing*, T. 24.1484.1004b. The passage “precepts and their lights [i.e., the merits earned by observing precepts] come from their sources” literally means “precepts and their lights came from the mouth.” In the introductory section of the bodhisattva precepts of the *Fawang jing*, the Buddha says to the gathered assembly that he will teach them precepts to follow. The Buddha then explains that he has himself embodied the precepts practiced by Buddhas by memorizing them, and through this embodiment of precepts, he is capable of articulating the precepts he will teach in this *sūtra*.

9. *Mahā-prajñā-pāramitā-sūtra*, T. 8.223.373c.

bodhisattvas do not practice them now because of their difficulty, it will also be difficult to practice them in the future. If a long time passes by like this, it will become more difficult to practice. Therefore, if one begins practice, being aware of the difficulties involved in it, practice will gradually be increased, and eventually difficulty will be transformed into ease. This is called the great will that initiates a new practice and achieves it. The ultimate way of observation and violation has been clarified. . . .

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