

How to refrain from killing life

1. SEE AND ACKNOWLEDGE KILLING

First, we remember all living beings who have been and are being killed, and we invoke their names. We see that we are not separate from all killing throughout space and time. As we realize that we are not separate from all killing, we acknowledge full responsibility for all of it. Wendy Johnson of Green Gulch Farm has written the following prayer that shows us how to see and acknowledge killing:

“We welcome you we invite you in we ask your forgiveness and your understanding. Listen as we invoke your names, as we also listen for you: Little sparrows, quail, robins and house finches who have died in our strawberry nets. Young Cooper’s Hawk who flew into our sweet pea trellis and broke your neck. Numerous orange bellied newts who died by our shears, in our irrigation pipes, by our cars, and by our feet. Slugs and snails whom we have pursued for years, feeding you to the ducks, crushing you, trapping you, picking you off and tossing you over our fences. Gophers and moles, trapped and scorned by us, and also watched with love, admiration, and awe for your one-mindedness. Sowbugs, spitbugs, earwigs, flea beetles, wooly aphids, rose suckers, cutworms, millipedes and other insects whom we have lured and stopped. Snakes and moths who have been caught in our water system and killed by our mowers. Families of mice who have died in irrigation pipes, by electricity in our pump box, and by predators while nesting in our greenhouses. Manure worms and earthworms, severed by spades, and numerous microscopic lifeforms in our compost system who have been burned by sunlight. Feral cats and raccoons whom we’ve steadily chased from the garden. Rats whom we’ve poisoned and trapped and drowned. Deer, chased at dawn and at midnight, routed by dogs, by farmers, by fences and numerous barriers.

“Plants: colored lettuces, young broccoli, ripe strawberries and sweet apples, all of you who have lured the animals to your sides, and all plants we have shunned: poison hemlock, pigweed, bindweed, stinging nettle, bull thistle. We call all plants we have removed by dividing you and separating you, and deciding you no longer grow well here. We invoke you and thank you and continue to learn from you.”

2. FEEL THE PAIN OF KILLING

Second, having remembered all living beings who have been and are being killed, we now imagine exchanging places with them. We try to feel what it is like to live their lives, and we feel respect for their dignity. We may study their anatomy, physiology, and behavior closely so that we have a deeper and more intimate sense of their way of being alive. Slipping back into our own bodies, we feel compassion as we open to the pain inherent in any situation where killing arises. We may choose to write about these feelings. Barry Lopez shows his respect and compassion for all living beings as he writes about his care for animals killed on roads:

“A few miles east of home in the Cascades I slow down and pull over for two raccoons, sprawled still as stones in the road. I carry them to the side and lay them in sun shot, windblown grass in the barrow pit. In eastern Oregon, along U.S. 20, black tailed jackrabbits lie like welts of sod—three, four, then a fifth. By the bridge over Jordan Creek, just shy of the Idaho border in the drainage of the Owyhee River, a crumpled adolescent porcupine leers up almost maniacally over its blood-flecked teeth. I carry each one away from the pavement into a cover of grass or brush out of decency, I think. And worry. Who are these animals, their lights gone out? What journeys have fallen apart here? I do not stop to remove each dark blister from the road. I wince before the recently dead, feel my lips tighten, see something else, a

fence post, in the spontaneous aversion of my eyes, and pull over: I imagine white silk threads of life still vibrating inside them, even if the body's husk is stretched out for yards, stuck like oiled muslin to the road. The energy that once held them erect leaves like a bullet, but the memory of that energy fades slowly from the wrinkled cornea, the bloodless fur. The raccoons and, later, a red fox carry like sacks of wet gravel and sand. Each animal is like a solitary child's shoe in the road. Once a man asked, Why do you bother? You never know, I said. The ones you give some semblance of burial, to whom you offer an apology, may have been like seers in a parallel culture. It is an act of respect, a technique of awareness. In Idaho I hit a young sage sparrow thwack against the right fender in the very split second I see it. Its companion rises from the same spot but a foot higher, slow as smoke, and sails off clean into the desert. I rest the walloped bird in my left hand, my right thumb pressed to its chest. I feel for the wail of the heart. Its eyes glisten like rain on crystal. Nothing but warmth. I shut the tiny eyelids and lay it beside a clump of bunch grass. Beyond a barbed wire fence the overgrazed range is littered with cow flops. The road curves away to the south. I nod before I go, a disconcerted gesture, out of simple grief."

3. ACT TO PREVENT KILLING

Third, we vow to act to prevent killing. This vow reminds us of our intention to make every effort in each moment to help and protect all others, which is the heart of **all our ethical principles**. Our vow to prevent killing is the most powerful expression of our appreciation and gratitude for the non separation of the lives of others and our own precious life. This vow attunes us to the quality of our own mental activity as we ask ourselves in each moment: Am I really acting with the benefit of all others in mind, joyfully connecting with all life? Or is something more insidious going on? Even thinking of intentionally

killing violates our vow to refrain from killing life. At times when we feel no impulse to kill, this vow seems effortless. At times when we feel that we need to kill, this vow seems impossible. As impossible as it may seem, we never forget that there is nothing more important, nor more beneficial to all others, than examining our own impulse to kill. We may know that life is not killed — life goes on being life. Nevertheless, for the benefit of all others, we practice remembering the precept: No killing life. Remembering this precept at all times keeps our hearts open to whatever painful dilemmas may be involved in supporting our lives. Recognizing that we are not separate from killers, we don't self-righteously condemn them; we ask only how to help ourselves and others realize compassion and reverence for life.

“This precept of not killing life is not about restraint, but rather about liberating our actions from delusion. It is concerned with awakened mind, which needs no restraint at all: what it needs is a more and more complete and unfiltered expression in this world. This precept is a cry to unleash our full potential as living beings.”

SOURCES

This guide to how to refrain from killing life was rendered by Nathan Strait nathanstrait.com on the 5th of February of 2014. It is a meditation on the first grave precept found in [the ethical principles of bodhisattvas](#). Wendy Johnson's ceremony from Green Gulch Farm, partially quoted above, can be found in the book *Earth Prayers: From Around the World*, edited by Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon, San Francisco: Harper, 1991; it is partially reprinted in the chapter on the first grave precept in Reb Anderson's book *Being Upright: Zen Meditation and the Bodhisattva Precepts*, Berkeley: Rodmell Press, 2001. The concluding quotation above is also from Reb Anderson's book. Barry Lopez's words come from his essay *Apologia*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998.