

## *How to refrain from stealing or taking what is not given*

Others can get upset if we steal their stuff. Others may even be harmed if they don't have stuff that they need to live well. Since the heart of **all our ethical principles** is our vow to act in each moment to help and protect all others—which includes, at the very least, to refrain from upsetting or harming them—we want to learn how to refrain from stealing or taking what is not given.

“Stealing is basically taking what is not given, either without the knowledge or without the consent of the owner. Examples are shoplifting in the market, burglary, pick-pocketing, etc. Robbery is taking by force what is not given, either by snatching or by compelling another to hand over their property under threat. Cheating is using deceptive means for material gain, such as when shopkeepers use false weights and measures. Fraud is making false claims or telling lies in order to gain possessions belonging to someone else. Coercion or embezzlement happens when an unethical official (or employee) misappropriates an item, exerts control over the item, or asks for a bribe.” Stealing can take many other forms, such as taking credit for products that someone else has produced or copying products that someone else is trying to sell. We can even steal from ourselves, such as by using our time or our financial savings for short-term pleasure rather than for our long-term well-being. How do we prevent this?

### **1. SEE AND ACKNOWLEDGE THE NEEDS OF ALL OTHERS**

First, we remember that all living beings need stuff so that they can be—most living beings need water, nutrients, light, and space in amounts appropriate to the changing forms of their bodies. A living being may also have a body that needs an appropriate degree of mobility or immobility within its surrounding medium, and an

appropriate temperature range— not too hot and not too cold. Living beings come to be through their parents, and they inherit the forms of their bodies from their ancestors; thus it can be said that all living beings also need parents so that they can come to be.

Those living beings that we call “social animals” also need, in addition to stuff and parents, special care from parents (and/or from other adults) when they are young so that they can grow to be adults, and they need an appropriate amount of cooperation among each other throughout the course of their lives. We humans are social animals. We have received from our ancestors the need to receive care from others and the potential to care for others, as well as the need and the potential to cooperate with each other and with all other beings.

When we look deeply into the process through which all beings throughout space and time have come to be, we see that we have come to be through the same stuff and the same ancestors as other living beings; thus we are not separate from all others. If we doubt this, we can take a pencil and a big sheet of paper and begin to draw a map of the paths of our bodies in space and time, and the paths of all the stuff that we use every day, and the paths of our parents and other ancestors and the stuff that they used, and the paths of all other living beings and their stuff and ancestors. The map that we draw will show us that we are all inseparably together in this world; we all came to be, and we continue being, through the activity of others.

When we see and acknowledge that all beings in the world belong to us, and that we belong to all others, and that we want to support the needs and abilities of all others, then we don't want to steal or take stuff from others that they have not given to us.

One day Zen teacher Shunryu Suzuki was speaking about ethical principles and he said: “Do not steal. When we think we do not possess something, then we want to steal. But actually everything in the world belongs to us, so there is no need to steal. For example, my glasses. They are just glasses. They do not belong to me or to you, or they belong to all of us. But you know about my tired old eyes, and so you let me use them.”

The urge to steal can take the form of simple greed (*I want it*), or more complex but no less unhelpful mental activity such as: envy (*I want what they have*), entitlement (*I deserve it*), fear (*If I don't take it, I'll suffer*), anger or resentment (*They hurt me, so I'll take it*), confusion or carelessness (*I didn't know it was theirs* or *I took it by accident*). When we notice these kinds of mental activity, we should stay still and quietly examine their causes and conditions. The impulse to steal, like the impulse to violate any of our other ethical principles, is born in the depths of our own poor understanding of the nature of self and other, our own emotional immaturity, and our own ignorance of the best way to live for the benefit of all others.

## **2. PRACTICE GIVING AND RECEIVE WHAT IS GIVEN**

Second, having remembered the needs of all living beings, and knowing that we want them to have what they need, we imagine giving others all that they need. We practice, in imagination, giving everything to others and devoting all our physical, verbal, and mental actions to their care. In our actions we try not to overreach ourselves but do what is within the limits of our present capacity.

We also practice, in imagination, receiving everything that happens to us with love. Instead of imagining that we are taking or making our actions—such as moving our arms, legs, head, eyes, and tongue—we imagine that we are receiving our actions.

We still accept full responsibility for all actions, but we shift from imagining ourselves acting unilaterally (in a one-sided and isolated way) to imagining ourselves acting multilaterally (in communication with all others). By practicing a free flow of unconditional and unhesitating generosity, we change our mental activity and train ourselves to see giving and receiving everywhere. Again: In our imagination, we practice giving and receiving everything without limit; in our physical and verbal actions, we practice giving and receiving whatever we can to the best of our present capacity and in communication with others.

When we do not practice a free-flowing giving and receiving with all others, our vision is limited, so that even when others are giving generously and receiving graciously, we may not see and appreciate their efforts. On the other hand, when we start practicing giving and receiving while refraining from taking what is not given, we begin to see that all life is always giving and receiving at the same time. Everything is giving and given. All others are giving themselves to themselves, which is all others giving themselves to you, which is you giving yourself to all others, which is you giving yourself to yourself. There are no separate givers, receivers, or gifts—only an endless fabric into which we are all being inseparably woven through giving and receiving. Life becomes very simple and very basic, like Hindu teacher Neem Karoli Baba's life principle: "Love and feed people" and "Love and serve everyone."

### **3. FEEL THAT WHAT IS GIVEN IS ENOUGH**

Third, we rest in what is given. In this moment, everything just is as it is, and we can feel that it is enough. In this moment, there is nothing anyone can give or receive, because all beings are as they are. In this moment, there is not something missing; everything is complete, all beings are in their places, and nothing is stolen.

When we feel that there is nothing missing and what is given is enough, the urge to steal or take what is not given does not arise. The impulse to grasp or reject something does not arise. Then we ask: What is it that all others need in moments to come? We accept what is given in this moment, and we act to give all others what they need, and to receive what we need from all others, in the coming moments. Just as beings of the past gave to us by being themselves in their present moment, we give to all future beings (including our future selves) by being ourselves in our present moment.

Our vow to refrain from stealing or taking what is not given is called the second grave precept, but it is not separate from **the first grave precept** (*no killing life*) or the third (*no abusing sexuality*). When we violate one precept, close inspection will show that we have violated other precepts in some way, if only subtly. “The first precept is about taking life, which is a form of stealing—stealing the most precious thing someone has, his or her life. When we meditate on the second precept, we see that stealing, in the forms of exploitation, social injustice, and oppression, are acts of killing—killing slowly by exploitation, by maintaining social injustice, and by political and economic oppression. Therefore, the second precept has much to do with the precept of not killing.”

The first two precepts (one: *no killing life* and two: *no taking what is not given*) are not separate: this is true of all our ethical principles. The shared purpose of all our ethical principles is to attune us to the quality of our mental activity and wake us up to what we do so that we can make every effort to realize our full potential as living beings and help all others realize their full potential as well.

## SOURCES

This guide to how to refrain from stealing or taking what is not given was rendered by Nathan Strait ([nathanstrait.com](http://nathanstrait.com)) on the 14th of February of 2014. It is a meditation on the second grave precept of **the ethical principles of bodhisattvas**. The first quotation is from Shi Faxun's book *One Life, Five Precepts*, Singapore: Shi Faxun, 2011. Shunryu Suzuki's words are from David Chadwick's book *Zen Is Right Here: Teaching Stories and Anecdotes of Shunryu Suzuki*, Boston: Shambhala, 2007. The list of urges is inspired, in part, by an essay on the second precept by Pamela Weiss found on the web site of her company, Appropriate Response. The section on giving and receiving was helped by a collection of articles titled "Joyful Giving" in the January 2014 issue of *Shambhala Sun*, and by Reb Anderson's book *Being Upright: Zen Meditation and the Bodhisattva Precepts*, Berkeley: Rodmell Press, 2001. The last quotation is from the chapter on the second precept in Thich Nhat Hanh's book *For a Future to Be Possible: Commentaries on the Five Mindfulness Trainings*, Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1993.