

Five Precepts for Caregivers

These are from a handout made by the Alaya Institute. This content was written by Frank Ostaseski, founder of the Alaya Institute and former Director of the Zen Hospice Project in San Francisco and a leader in holistic End of Life care.

Five Precepts

A while back, I developed five precepts as companions on the journey of accompanying the dying. Perhaps they have relevance in other dimensions of life and can offer some inspiration and guidance. I think of these as five bottomless practices that can be continually explored and *deepened*. *They are not linear and have no value as theories or concepts. To be understood, they have to be lived into and communicated through action.*

The First Precept: Welcome Everything. Push Away Nothing.

In welcoming everything, we don't have to like what's arising. It's actually not our job to approve or disapprove. It's our task to trust, to listen, and to pay careful attention to the changing experience. At the deepest level, we are being asked to cultivate a kind of fearless receptivity.

This is a journey of continuous discovery in which we will always be entering new territory. We have no idea how it will turn out, and it takes courage and flexibility. We find a balance. The journey is a mystery we need to live into, opening, risking, and forgiving constantly.

The Second Precept: *Bring Your Whole Self to the Experience.*

In the process of healing others and ourselves we open to both our joy and fear. In the service of this healing we draw on our strength and helplessness, our wounds and passion to discover a meeting place with the other. Professional warmth doesn't heal. It is not our expertise but the exploration of our own suffering that enables us to be of real assistance. That's what allows us to touch another human being's pain with compassion instead of with fear and pity. We have to invite it all in. We can't travel with others in territory that we haven't explored ourselves. It is the exploration of our own inner life that enables us to form an empathetic bridge to the other person.

The Third Precept: *Don't Wait.*

Patience is different than waiting. When we wait, we are full of expectations. When we're waiting, we miss what this moment has to offer. Worrying or strategizing about what the future holds for us, we miss the opportunities that are right in front of us. Waiting for the moment of death, we miss so many moments of living. Don't wait, if there's someone you love, tell him or her that you love them. Allow the precarious nature of this life to show you what's most important then enter fully.

he Fourth Precept: *Find a Place of Rest in the Middle of Things.*

We often think of rest as something that will come when everything else is complete, like when we go on a holiday or when our work is done. We imagine that we can only find rest by changing the conditions of our life. But it is possible to discover rest right in the middle of chaos. It is experienced when we bring our full attention, without distraction, to this moment, to this activity. This place of rest is always available. We need only turn toward it. It's an aspect of us that's never sick, is not born, and does not die.

The Fifth Precept: *Cultivate Don't-Know Mind.*

This describes a mind that's open and receptive. A mind that's not limited by agendas, roles and expectations. The great Zen teacher Suzuki Roshi, was fond of saying, "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few."

From this vantage point we realize that "not knowing is most intimate." Understanding this we stay very close to the experience allowing the situation itself to inform our actions. We listen carefully to our own inner voice, sensing our urges, trusting our intuition. We learn to look with fresh eyes.