

Two Versions of the Sixteen Zen Precepts

Jack Wicks, June 2026

Here are two versions of the Sixteen Zen Precepts used in the Jukai ceremony from two different, predominantly American, Zen lineages. The precepts are essentially the same in each case though the different flavours they offer are worthy of reflection.

The first, from Ordinary Mind Zen teacher Elihu Genmyo Smith, offers a relatively direct and straightforward version of the precepts in the Jukai ceremony. However, it also includes different versions of the Refuge Vows from: Japanese Soto Zen, the Early Buddhist Pali tradition, and two English renderings, one a direct translation of the Pali and the latter, an alternate English version that removes religious elements¹. These variations of the Refuge Vows are quite lovely.

The second, to contrast this, is the more poetic form of the precepts used in the Jukai ceremony in the Diamond Sangha, established by Robert Aitken². This latter version includes the elements from Bodhidharma and Dōgen in the ceremony, which creates a more exploratory, koan-like rendering. This accompanies the essential and more straightforward formulation they typically use³.

These two versions provide unique perspectives with which our approach to the precepts can be informed and enriched.

¹ *Everything is the Way*, Elihu Genmyo Smith

² *The Mind of Clover*, Robert Aitken

³ [Zen Buddhist Precepts](#), Melbourne Zen Centre (retrieved 28 June 2026)

Jukai Precepts

From Ordinary Mind Zen School teacher Elihu Genmyō Smith⁴

The Three Treasures

Japanese version:

Namu kie butsu	<i>Homage to Buddha, in whom I take refuge⁵</i>
Namu kie hō	<i>Homage to Dharma, in which I take refuge</i>
Namu kie sō	<i>Homage to Sangha, in whom I take refuge</i>
Kie butsu mujō son	<i>I take refuge in Buddha, the honoured perfect teacher</i>
Kie hō rinjin son	<i>I take refuge in Dharma, the honoured pure teaching</i>
Kie sō wago son	<i>I take refuge in Sangha, the honoured harmonious community</i>
Kie bu kyō	<i>I have completely taken refuge in Buddha</i>
Kie hō kyō	<i>I have completely taken refuge in Dharma</i>
Kie sō kyō	<i>I have completely taken refuge in Sangha</i>

Pali version:

Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchami	<i>To Buddha, as refuge, I go</i>
Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchami	<i>To Sangha, as refuge, I go</i>
Sanghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchami	<i>To Dhamma, as refuge, I go</i>
Dutiyampi buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchami	<i>A second time, to Buddha, as refuge, I go</i>
Dutiyampi dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchami	<i>A second time, to Dhamma, as refuge, I go</i>
Dutiyampi sanghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchami	<i>A second time, to Sangha, as refuge, I go</i>
Tatiyampi buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchami	<i>A third time, to Buddha, as refuge, I go</i>
Tatiyampi dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchami	<i>A third time, to Dhamma, as refuge, I go</i>
Tatiyampi sanghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchami	<i>A third time, to Sangha, as refuge, I go</i>

English/alternative English version:

I take refuge in the Buddha/unity
I take refuge in the Dharma/diversity
I take refuge in the Sangha/harmony

⁴ *Everything is the Way*, Elihu Genmyō Smith

⁵ Trans. J. Wicks.

The Three Pure Precepts

I vow to be nonharming

I vow to do good

I vow to do good for others, to serve all existence

The Ten Grave Precepts

I vow to practice nonkilling

I vow to practice nonstealing

I vow to practice not being greedy, not misusing sexuality

I vow to practice telling the truth

I vow to be aware of my ways of clouding the truth by my ignorance

I vow to abstain from speaking of the errors and faults of others

I vow not to elevate myself or put down others

I vow to be generous

I vow not to indulge in self-centred anger

I vow not to speak ill of the Three Treasures, the truth, the teaching, and those who practice the teaching

Sixteen Bodhisattva Precepts as used in the Diamond Sangha⁶

This is essential formulation is here, followed by the fuller form used in the Jukai Ceremony.

Three Vows of Refuge

I take refuge in the Buddha

I take refuge in the Dharma

I take refuge in the Sangha

Three Pure Precepts

I vow to maintain the precepts

I vow to practice all good dharmas

I vow to save the many beings

Ten Grave Precepts

I take up the way of not killing.

I take up the way of not stealing.

I take up the way of not misusing sex.

I take up the way of not speaking falsely.

I take up the way of not giving or taking drugs.

I take up the way of not discussing faults of others.

I take up the way of not praising myself while abusing others.

I take up the way of not sparing the Dharma assets.

I take up the way of not indulging in anger.

I take up the way of not defaming the Three Treasures

⁶ [Zen Buddhist Precepts](#), Melbourne Zen Centre (retrieved 28 June 2026)

Sixteen Bodhisattva Precepts in Diamond Sangha Jukai Ceremony

Taking Refuge

I take refuge in the Buddha

I take refuge in the Dharma

I take refuge in the Sangha

Three Pure Precepts⁷

To Maintain the Precepts

This is the cave whence all dharmas of all Buddhas arise

To Practice All Good Dharmas

This is the path of fulfilled enlightenment

To Save the Many Beings

Transcending profane and holy, I liberate myself and others

The Ten Grave Precepts⁸

I take up the Way of Not Killing.

Self-nature is subtle and mysterious. In the realm of the everlasting Dharma, not giving rise to the idea of killing is called the Precept of Not Killing.

The Buddha seed grows in accordance with not taking life. Transmit the life of Buddha's wisdom and do not kill.

I take up the Way of Not Stealing.

Self-nature is subtle and mysterious. In the realm of the unattainable Dharma, not having thoughts of gaining is called the Precept of Not Stealing.

The self and things of the world are just as they are. The gate of emancipation is open.

⁷ with assembly responses from *Kyōjūkaimon* (Doctrine of Jukai) by Dōgen

⁸ with comments from *Isshin Kaimon* (The Precepts of One Mind) by Bodhidharma, followed by assembly responses from *Kyōjūkaimon*, by Dōgen

I take up the Way of Not Misusing Sex.

Self-nature is subtle and mysterious. In the realm of the ungilded Dharma, not creating a veneer of attachment is called the Precept of Not Misusing Sex.

The Three Wheels are pure and clear. When you have nothing to desire, you follow the way of all Buddhas.

I take up the Way of Not Speaking Falsely.

Self-nature is subtle and mysterious. In the realm of the inexplicable Dharma, not preaching a single word is called the Precept of Not Speaking Falsely.

The Dharma wheel turns from the beginning. There is neither surplus nor lack. The whole universe is moistened with nectar, and the truth is ready to harvest.

I take up the Way of Not Giving or Taking Drugs.

Self-nature is subtle and mysterious. In the realm of the intrinsically pure Dharma, not giving rise to delusions is called the Precept of Not Giving or Taking Drugs.

Drugs are not brought in yet. Don't let them invade. That is the great light.

I take up the Way of Not Discussing Faults of Others.

Self-nature is subtle and mysterious. In the realm of the flawless Dharma, not expounding upon error is called the Precept of Not Discussing Faults of Others.

In the Buddha Dharma, there is one path, one Dharma, one realisation, one practice. Don't permit fault-finding. Don't permit haphazard talk.

I take up the Way of Not Praising Myself while Abusing Others.

Self-nature is subtle and mysterious. In the realm of the equitable Dharma, not dwelling upon I against you is called the Precept of Not Praising Myself while Abusing Others.

Buddhas and Ancestral Teachers realise the empty sky and the great earth. When they manifest the noble body, there is neither inside nor outside in emptiness. When they manifest the Dharma body, there is not even a bit of earth on the ground.

I take up the Way of Not Sparing the Dharma Assets.

Self-nature is subtle and mysterious. In the genuine, all pervading Dharma, not being stingy about a single thing is called the Precept of Not Sparing the Dharma Assets.

One phrase, one verse — that is the ten thousand things and one hundred grasses; one dharma, one realisation — that is all Buddhas and Ancestral Teachers. Therefore from the beginning, there has been no stinginess at all.

I take up the way of not indulging in anger.

Self-nature is subtle and mysterious. In the realm of the selfless Dharma, not contriving reality for the self is called the Precept of Not Indulging in Anger.

Not advancing, not retreating, not real, not empty. There is an ocean of bright clouds. There is an ocean of solemn clouds.

I take up the Way of Not Defaming the Three Treasures.

Self-nature is subtle and mysterious. In the realm of the One, not holding dualistic concepts of ordinary beings and sages is called the Precept of Not Defaming the Three Treasures.

The teisho of the actual body is the harbour and the weir. This is the most important thing in the world. Its virtue finds its home in the ocean of essential nature. It is beyond explanation. We just accept it with respect and gratitude.
