

## On The Occasion of Taking the Precepts

By Thea Mercouffer

A couple of years ago we were camping on the beach near Point Mugu, and my husband had brought his little Piranha kayak, which is really meant for rivers, for all of us to play in the waves. It was a choppy, windy day, and the water was cold, so when my turn came, I put on the skirt - made of neoprene, it fits tightly around your waist and secures onto the opening of the kayak, so that you can stay dry. George and a friend had helped me get past the big waves and I was headed out.

In a moment of distraction the kayak was hit sideways by a swell and I capsized. Because of the skirt I was stuck inside the kayak, upside down in the water. I kept trying to right myself by maneuvering the paddle, but I could only get up to where one eye came out of the water and my mouth and nose remained under. With each attempt I grew weaker, craving for more air, and more frightened. Everything became jumbled together and all was happening faster than I could react. I would catch glimpses of George and the rest of our friends in the distance, too far away to make it back in time if I needed them. I tried loosening the skirt which was keeping me trapped under, but it was very snug. I was running out of options and could really feel the panic build dangerously.

And in that messy rush I suddenly remembered that what gets people dead in moments like this is not lack of air but lack of clarity. And with that, I decided to relax and reset. First, I stopped trying to right the kayak. I just stopped, I collected my thoughts and remembered that the skirt, in order to be released, had to be pulled away from me first, before it could be pulled up to release. A counter-intuitive motion that had me pop out in a split second.

It is not easy being under water, but at least I know where I am and what my task is: it's a simple pull-away motion, done in stillness, eyes open, my breath the only sound.

My taking the Precepts, or perhaps even before that, my coming to the temple last summer to rekindle my meditation practice, was akin to that moment of recognition that I was under water, that my life was losing steam, and that I was desperately, randomly, thrashing for air. Meditation and taking the Precepts is counter-intuitive, because urban life always asks for more work and more attention, rather than a slowing down. But slow down I must. Obviously I have not completely popped up yet, but I am relaxed and have faith that the mechanism will work.

Each day my faith is getting deeper and at times I have glimpses of the air, glimpses of you, Rev. Phoebe, and of Rev. Master Jiyu looking on from the shore. And I am not panicked anymore.

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