Virtue

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“Sikkhaya di-magarovo,” strong respect for the training. The training has three aspects, virtue, concentration, and discernment. The technical term is training in heightened virtue, heightened concentration, and heightened discernment. To have respect for these things, we have to understand what they’re all about. The aspect that seems to get the least respect is virtue. The word sila can mean precepts; it means virtue. It’s related to a word that means normalcy. In particular, when we focus on the precepts, we tend to think of them, some people tend to think of them, as Sunday school rules, things that you do in order to be obedient, to be a good little boy, a good little girl. They get a bad rep because people abuse them. In other words, they obey certain rules in order to believe that they’re better than other people. They get self-righteous about it. So when we come to the precepts in the Buddhist teaching, we can often have that same misunderstanding. We’ve seen people being very self-righteous about the fact that they can adhere to a certain rule or abide by a certain law, whereas other people can’t. We’re afraid that that’s what the precepts set us up for. That’s not why they’re there. We’re not here to compare ourselves with other people. The precepts are here as a whole practice of virtue, so that we can see ourselves more clearly. We can develop more alertness. Alertness is the quality whereby you see what you’re doing. Catch yourself in the act. This is precisely it. You’re catching yourself in the act. As defilements move around in the mind, the precepts are there. All the aspects of virtue are there so that we can catch ourselves as these things come out in our thoughts, in our words, in our deeds. They’re a tool for understanding. They’re a tool for alertness, for knowledge. The area of our lives where we tend to be most blind is right in front of our nose, what we’re doing right now and the effects of what we’re doing. The precepts are there for us to catch ourselves as we attempt to break a particular precept. When you remind yourself, “Hey, there’s a precept around this action,” it’s meant for you to turn and look at exactly what was your motivation for doing that. That’s when you begin to see that there was some greed, there was some lust, there was some delusion, there was some fear. There was something in there that you ordinarily wouldn’t want to admit to yourself, but it was there. That’s what the precepts do. They help you catch yourself in the act. That’s in being able to catch yourself and to admit the truth of what you see. That’s an important part of the Dhamma practice. As the Buddha once said, “Bring me someone who is no deceiver, someone who is truthful, and I’ll teach that person the Dhamma.” You have to be truthful about your own mistakes. You have to be truthful about your own shortcomings. If you’re the sort of person who’s always running away from blame, from things, you’ll never learn the Dhamma. One of my most important lessons, being with Ajahn Phuong, was learning to accept his criticism. Sometimes he accused me of doing things I actually hadn’t done. Somebody else had done them and foisted them off on me. I was learning to accept that, and now I’m learning to not argue. Realizing that I wasn’t there to make a good impression on him, I was there to learn to look at myself and try to run away from the blame for something, whether you actually did it or not. It’s not a good habit. And if it was something that really was important, I would find a better time to talk to him about it, exactly what had happened. But sometimes on reflection, after thinking, “Well, I’ll talk about this later,” a day or two afterwards, you look back on the incident and realize it wasn’t really worth talking about anyhow. So you let it drop. But this willingness to look at our mistakes and accept our mistakes, admit our mistakes, that’s what allows us to grow in the practice. This is precisely what the precepts are there for. Even when you’re obeying the precepts, following the precepts, you’ll find that there’s something in the mind that tends to argue against them now and then. So you want to look into that voice. Exactly where is it coming from? What thoughts, what values, what ideas is that voice expressing? So the precepts are an important part of the practice for gaining insight into ourselves. We often think of insight practices as being a particular technique for meditation, but precepts are an insight practice as well. If we can’t gain these insights, then no matter how much we may do more advanced practices, they don’t really get down to the real roots of things. Several years back I was in India with a group of people going to the different Buddhist holy spots. There was a monk who’s made pretty much a career as a guide, taking people to the Buddhist holy spots in India. He commented to me one time that of all the various groups he’s taken through India over the years, the one that was most difficult was a group of Apidhamma people, people who spent their time going through the Apidhamma, analyzing mind states, supposedly observing very precise mind states. But he said in terms of their anger, in terms of their inability to adjust to things, they were by far the worst group he’d ever encountered, because they hadn’t focused on the precepts. They were trying to go for the absolute right off the bat. As a result, they had huge blind spots in terms of their behavior. The same holds here in the States. There’s a meditation center I go to, and they have lots of different groups coming through. One of the members of the staff once commented that by far the most difficult group was one they had every year. There were people who were opening up to Rigpa. That was all they were doing, just lying around, opening up to the Absolute. But in terms of how they were dealing with a relative, it was pretty poor. That wasn’t a part of their training. Which, of course, means there are huge blind spots that don’t get treated. When you take the precepts seriously, when you respect them, you find that you learn a lot about yourself. That’s their whole purpose. At the same time, it makes life easier for everybody around you. When you understand what the precepts are about, why they’re there, then you can get the most benefit out of them. The word sila, which translates as precept, also means virtue. There are actually four types. We tend to think of the rules as the expression of sila. The five precepts, the eight precepts, the ten precepts, the 227 precepts that monks follow. That’s one aspect of sila. There are actually three other aspects as well. One is right livelihood, looking at how you make your living, how you get what you need to eat and drink, wear as clothing, use as shelter, use as medicine. Are you honest and upright in the way you do that? When you take this principle and look at your life, you begin to see ways in which you may be less than honest. That’s an important insight. Another type of sila is reflecting on the requisites, like that chant we have every evening. Reflecting on why we wear clothing or what our reasons for wearing clothing should be, the reasons for why we eat, what those reasons should be, how we use shelter, how we use medicine. Because when you think about the requisites, they all come through suffering, either our own suffering or the suffering of other people. And if you use them in excess, you’re just creating more suffering for the world. So look at when you wear something. Why are you wearing it? Exactly how many suits of clothing do you need? How many sets of robes do you need? How wonderful do they have to be just for covering the body, protecting from heat, protecting from cold, insects? Covering the parts of the body that can cause shame. That’s really all we need clothing for. You want to look at where you go overboard. That’s an important lesson. You can hold yourself in check. Realize how much your existence is placing a burden on the world, and you want to keep that footprint as light as possible. Look for food. Exactly how much food do you really need in order to continue the practice? Not for decorating the body, not for plumping yourself up, not for putting on bulk, not just for the flavor, not just to enjoy the feeling of being full, but just enough to keep the body going and to keep it healthy. That’s all you need. When you’re eating, try to notice exactly at what point have you had enough. Then stop. Learn to listen to what the body has to say. At what point does eating become a burden? In other words, you’re taking on too much food. Okay, you’ve missed your point. Go back tomorrow and look again to see at the point where the body tells you it’s full, it’s got enough. It’ll tell you if you watch carefully. That’s one of the reasons why it’s important to stay with the breath as you eat. You’re sensitive to the body. There’s something in the energy of the body as a whole that’ll tell you, “Now you’ve had enough food. You can stop.” When you reflect on the requisites, how they come to you, why you should be using them, it really opens your eyes as to where you may be too self-indulgent. It gives you standards for how you eat and how you use clothing, how you use your shelter, how you decorate your house, what kind of house you choose, what kind of dwelling you choose. What kind of medicine you have. There are important lessons here for learning to see your own mind, to see the defilements as they come out in your thoughts, words, and deeds. Even more so is the fourth of the four major kinds of virtue, and that’s restraint of the senses. When you look at something, does greed arise? Does anger arise? Does illusion arise? Why are you looking at it? What’s your purpose in focusing your eyes right there? The same with your ears. What’s your purpose in listening to something? Part of us says, “Well, I’ve got eyes. I’ve got to see.” Well, you focus them. You direct them in a particular way. It’s the same when you listen. You listen to certain things and not to other things. Why did you focus there? If you catch yourself in the act of focusing on something for the sake of lust, realize it’s not the object that provokes your lust. It’s the desire in the mind. If you look at something that’s causing lust, consciously look at the side of that object that will kill your lust. And if you see that the mind is resistant to that, okay, the problem is not the object. The problem is the mind. You’ve got something deep and ingrained right there that you’ve got to work with. The same goes for anger, greed, delusion, fear. Look at the element of intention in the way you go about your senses, the way you relate to the senses. After all, if you look at dependent-core arising, the element of intention comes before the six senses. There’s a doing in there that underlies the way you look, the way you listen, the way you smell, the way you taste, the way you touch things. And if you pay attention to how you do these things, you’re going to catch that element of intention, see it in the act, and see where there’s a defilement that underlies that intention. This way, the practice of the precepts leads immediately and directly to the training of the mind. At the same time, it provides a really good environment for training the mind. Because if you give greed, anger, and delusion free reign through the course of the day, of how they’re going to use your eyes and your ears when the time comes for the mind to settle down, it’s hard not to continue giving them free reign. They’re going to want free reign, even as you try to rein them in. But if you’ve kept them on a short leash throughout the day, then when the time comes to meditate, they’re on the short leash. You’ve got them under control. Your mind hasn’t been filled up with all kinds of garbage. At the same time, you get to see the element of intention, the element of attention. Your mindfulness and alertness get strengthened. So the practice of meditation has, as an integral part, practice in terms of virtue. The virtue of the precepts, the virtue of right livelihood, the virtue of reflecting on the requisites as you use them, and the virtue of restraining the senses. All of these things are tools for knowledge. All of these things are tools for insight, catching defilement in the act. That’s an important thing to see, an important thing to gain insight into. Without that, the meditation practice is floating around in some never-never land. It doesn’t really dig deep down into the character. It doesn’t dig deep down into the will, the part of the mind that’s where the defilements hang out. But if you use the precepts as a tool for knowledge, you can’t help but see these things. And if you’re willing to work with them, then the precepts have done their job, alerting you to the fact that, yes, there is still greed, anger, and delusion lurking around in there, and they’re coming out all the time. It’s only when you’re alerted to their existence that you can really deal with them. So have respect for the training in the precepts, respect for training in heightened virtue, because it’s one of the important ways of getting to know your own mind and to see exactly where the troublemakers are, the movements of the mind that cause suffering. Once you see these things, then you can use your concentration, your training in concentration, your training in discernment, to uproot them. But all three trainings have to work together. the path, really, to give the results that it promises.

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