Becoming Consummate

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The Buddha’s last words to his followers before he died, before he entered total nirvana, were to become consummate through heedfulness. Becoming consummate was something he talked about all through his teaching career, being consummate in your virtue, being consummate in your views, being consummate in knowledge and conduct. In other words, these were areas that should be mastered. They were a skill. The qualities of the noble ones fall into two main categories, the way you behave and the way you know. And the two go together. One of the things the Buddha noticed was that your behavior affects your knowledge, your knowledge affects your behavior. The kind of knowledge he was talking about requires an integrity in the way you act and the way you speak. This is why he said, “If you don’t become consummate, instructions on meditation don’t start right in.” With a particular technique, he said, the foundation for mindfulness, the foundation for concentration, is virtue. Integrity in how you speak, integrity in how you act. The whole rest of the path follows. He said, “Virtue is like the dawn. It’s the herald of the coming sun.” This is the practice of the path as a whole. And yet it’s not a matter that you have to wait until your virtue is perfect before you can meditate. The two processes go together. They help one another. If you’re looking for ways to act and speak that don’t cause harm, that don’t cause regret, you need a certain foundation. And concentration, as well, the well-being that comes from having the mind centered, makes it a lot easier not to get worked up about issues that come up in the course of the day. And having the proper view about what’s important. Because when the decision has to be made, what to say, what to think, what to do, your whole system of values comes in. If you keep reminding yourself the value of not doing or saying anything that’s later going to cause regret, that means that you have to be willing to put up with not having a quick retort, not being able to settle a situation right away. But so many times the things we try to do and say to settle a situation right away keep the situation going much longer. So if you’re clear on the fact that if you speak out of greed or anger or delusion, it’s going to cause trouble, then you just don’t speak. If you act out of greed or anger and delusion, it’s going to cause trouble. You don’t act. Which means that you may have to wait for a while, but in the long run, it’s all for the best. But in order to do that, you also have to have a sense of being solidly here in your body in the present moment. You don’t feel wiped out or blotted out by other people’s outrageous behavior. You’re here, the breath is here, and you have the choice to breathe through any sense of tension or tightness that comes with the anger. So it’s in this way that concentration helps your virtue. Having the right view also helps your virtue. So all these things go together. Notice what the Buddha said. You achieve this quality of consummation or being consummate in virtue or views, knowledge, and behavior by being heedful. Sometimes the word is translated as diligence, but that’s not really what the Buddha is talking about. Diligence just means continued, devoted effort. But he’s talking about something else, a sense that there are dangers in life, and the big dangers come out of our mind. You have to be wary about what the mind cooks up. You can’t believe everything that comes into your own mind, because there are skillful qualities and unskillful qualities—the qualities the Buddha calls asavas or fermentations or effluents, things that come flowing out of the mind. Sensual desire, becoming these little worlds that the mind creates for itself and then inhabits. Views and ignorance. These things keep flowing out of the mind, flowing out of the mind. And if you go along with their flow, you’re going to get into trouble. So you have to have a sense that these things are dangerous. In other contexts, he calls them floods. If they really take over, they close off your nose, they close off your eyes, they cover your head. You’re down under water, and you’re going to drown if you don’t watch out. So having a strong sense that there are dangers in the mind, but there are also friends in the mind. All the good qualities we’re working on here. This quality of heedfulness is not just a sense of worth. It’s also a sense of trust. You have to figure out who to trust in your mind. And once you find some qualities that are really trustworthy, as the Buddha said, you look after them, attend to them earnestly, like a mother her child. In other words, when mindfulness arises, look after it, take care of it, because it’s going to help you. When you give rise to concentration, don’t throw it away casually. So many people come here and they meditate, and at the end of the hour, the mind is beginning to get a little bit concentrated, but as soon as a little beeper rings up, there it is. It’s gone. John Lee used to call it frog concentration. In other words, as soon as you stand up, it jumps away. So try to have a meditation of concentration. A state of concentration, a devotion to your concentration, that’s more reliable than frogs. Look after it, tend to it. When the time comes for the end of the meditation, try to see if you can get up, bow down, go outside, and still have a sense of being centered inside, rather than flowing out with all those other effluents and fermentations that normally take over the mind. Try to have an awareness that stays inside. You can see things flowing out, but it doesn’t flow with them. This is important. This is the quality of heedfulness that’s going to protect you and will help you become consummate in virtue, in views, in knowledge and conduct. This is why we work with the breath and the body to keep our awareness firmly anchored here in the present moment. If your awareness fills the body, it’s difficult for it to all go flowing out. If it’s a one-pointed awareness, it goes very easily. You open your eyes and there’s just one point, it goes. If your awareness is whole body awareness, it can’t go flowing out the eyes. It’s too big. As long as you maintain that awareness of the whole body, you’re firmly grounded here in the present. Your hands are in your hands, your feet are in your feet, your whole body is in your body. If you don’t have this kind of awareness, it’s very easy for things not only to go flowing out the ears and the eyes and the nose and the tongue, but also back into the past, up into the future. As soon as the mind flows someplace, there you go, flowing along with it. You have no idea where that current is going to take you. So it’s important that you develop this ability to stay right here. When you see a thought that would have pulled you out, go out, but you’re not going out with it. That’s an important milestone in the meditation. You see the flow of the mind, but you don’t flow along with it. You’re right here. That’s when your sense of observer gets more and more reliable. It becomes something you can trust. It becomes your protection. So it’s important that you develop this ability to stay right here. It’s important that you realize that this quality of heedfulness is both weariness and trust. In other words, being very careful about which qualities you’re going to trust in the mind and which ones you have to watch out for. Trusting that the ones that are helpful will really help you. You can depend on them. They require work. They have to be developed, but they’re work worth developing, because they really do make a difference if you stick with them, if you’re devoted to them, if you attend to them earnestly, like we chanted just now. This practice of staying with the breath helps you to develop that quality of being devoted. One of the main problems of modern life is that most people feel there’s really nothing out there that’s really worth being devoted to. Everything gets casual. You’re treated with the same sort of flippant attitude, to the point where you don’t even know what respect and disrespect are. Everything is all the same. But once you value the qualities that are really trustworthy in the mind, that’s when you have a sense that there are some things in life that really are worth devotion, really are worth respect, because they really do help you. They really do protect you. They bring you to this state of being consummate. They help your virtue become consummate. They help your views, your understanding, your knowledge become consummate. So remember, this attitude of awareness also has to have an attitude of trust so it doesn’t become dry and bitter. The trust you have in the parts of the mind has to have a counterbalancing force of awareness so that it doesn’t become easily misled. Once the two of them are together, then there’s a possibility that your virtue will become consummate. Your concentration will become consummate. Your understanding of suffering and its causes will become clear enough, solid enough, so that you really can put an end to suffering. That’s what the Buddha was talking about when he said, “Become consummate.” Because that’s the knowledge that’s really worth developing, that’s really worth cultivating, because it really does make a difference. So that’s something you can trust. That’s why the qualities of the mind that pull you away from that knowledge, those are the effluents that you have to avoid from afar as fast as possible, like a dangerous road. It would be nice to have the ability to do what you like, but it doesn’t work that way. What you do really does make a difference, and the qualities you develop in the mind really can pull you in very different directions. But the good news is that the good qualities really can protect you and can take care of you. They can take you to a point where ultimately you don’t have to worry about being evil. Once your knowledge and conduct is consummate, you’re totally safe.

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