Virtue

February 28, 2005

Years back, when Ajahn Suwat was invited to lead a retreat, I was his interpreter. The last night of the retreat, there was a question-and-answer session, and there was the inevitable question of how to carry the practice into your daily life. The person asking the question was interpreting the practice as the particular technique of meditation that was being taught on the retreat. And yet Ajahn Suwat focused most of his answer on practicing the precepts, developing virtue, and developing good qualities in the mind. And the practice of virtue, right speech, right action, right livelihood, follows on right resolve, as does right mindfulness, right concentration. Right resolve covers the resolve to resolve for renunciation, resolve for no ill will, resolve for non-harming. And the precepts carry through this resolve in the area of your words and your speech, while the meditation carries it through directly in the area of the mind. But it’s hard to divide the mind from your words and your actions. After all, who’s given the orders when you do something? Who’s given the orders when you say something? It’s the mind. When you’re following the precepts, what are you doing? You’re making a vow not to be harmful. You’re making the vow to renounce any pleasures that may come from lying or stealing or killing. You’re making the vow not to act on ill will towards anyone else, for yourself or for other people. And these vows are important. It’s a promise you make to yourself. When the Buddha talks about observing the precepts, he means just that. You make this promise and you stick by it. You learn to trust yourself. And also you learn the sense of ease that comes when you don’t do things that go against those principles. It may seem a little confining at first. You can’t quite say everything you might want to say or do everything you might want to do. But that’s the whole point. These desires to say or do those things, exactly where do they lead you? It makes you more and more aware of the results of your actions, the consequences of what you do. It gives you a sense of your own power and of the responsibility that goes along with that power. And over time, as you figure out ways to lead your life that follows with the precepts, you learn to trust yourself. This is really important. The other night I got a phone call from someone who wanted to practice meditation but kept saying over and over again, “I don’t trust myself. I don’t trust myself.” That kind of person is not ready to meditate. Why don’t you trust yourself? Well, you do things and yet you don’t want to admit the consequences. So you start lying to yourself, hiding things from yourself. And then you can’t trust yourself. With the precepts, it’s easy to be open with yourself. If you look at your behavior, there’s nothing that you can criticize yourself about, nothing to feel ashamed of, nothing to deny. It creates an openness in the mind, an honesty inside the mind. As the Buddha once said, that’s the prerequisite for practicing the Dhamma on any level, that you be honest. So following the precepts creates the right environment for developing the mind further in meditation. It also develops some important skills, mindfulness and alertness, persistence. You have to keep your precepts in mind. Remember that you’ve promised not to lie, not to speak divisively, not to speak harshly, not to engage in idle chatter. And you’ve got to be alert. Watch your mouth to see if you’re engaging in any of those kinds of speech. And it also involves discernment. There are some times when you don’t want to tell the whole truth to somebody because it might be harmful. And to the same time, you don’t want to lie. So what are you going to do? You have to figure out some way of getting around that whole truth. And yet still not say anything that’s inaccurate. That requires ingenuity. So the practice of the precepts is to be open to the truth. So following the precepts develops a lot of important skills. In addition to mindfulness and alertness, discernment, there’s also simple persistence. Just stick with it. You make up your mind, “I’m going to follow this precept no matter what.” And that quality of persistence, determination, these are all perfections. They’re all also very essential qualities for meditation. When the Buddha describes right mindfulness, there’s mindfulness, alertness, and what he calls ardency, which is another word for right effort or persistence. These are the qualities you have to bring to being focused on the body in and of itself, focused on feelings in and of themselves, whatever the topic of your meditation. So when you sit down to meditate, you’re not coming totally green to the practice. You’ve already been developing these qualities in your daily life, in the way you speak and the way you act. And then after you’ve been meditating, you continue the same process. You’re taking that mindfulness and alertness that you’ve been developing in the meditation and you’re putting them to use. You’re like the person who goes down to the gym not because he wants a beautiful body, but because he wants to be strong so he can use his strength for good purposes. It’s the same with meditation. We’re meditating not simply to get a nice, peaceful state of mind, but you take that peaceful state of mind and you put it to use in good ways, in the way you speak and the way you act. These things are all reinforcing, mutually reinforcing. So the next time you come to sit and meditate, you’re in good shape to meditate, because you haven’t been letting the mind wander off track. So you don’t have to pull it back. You can think of the mind like a dog. If you keep it on a short leash, then when you want it to heal, it’s right there. If you’ve got it on a long leash, you can wander all over the place and get the leash wound around all kinds of things. So when the time comes to bring it back to heal, you’ve got to unwind the leash. It takes a lot of time, many times. When you’re sitting here meditating, the whole hour is spent unwinding the leash. So to get the mind to settle down quickly, you want it right nearby. This is how you keep it nearby, by keeping it on top of your thoughts and your words and your deeds throughout the day. When your thoughts, words, and deeds are within the precepts and it’s easy to get them to settle down, stay with the breath in the midst of what you’re doing. Because the things that destroy your meditation are the things that destroy your focus in the course of the day. It’s not just sights and sounds and smells and tastes and tactile sensations coming from outside. A lot of it is what comes bubbling up from within the mind. In fact, sights and sounds, etc., on their own, can’t destroy your meditation. It’s your mind’s reaction that destroys your focus. So if you learn to keep your response to things within bounds, and these are not confining bounds, after all, you find that you can wear them very comfortably. The Vinaya could be seen as something liberating. It’s one of the meanings of the word patimokkha, something that helps with liberation. After all, it’s all those rules. Well, the rules protect you. At the very least, when the community lives by a very clear set of rules, we don’t have to sit around and discuss everything for hours every day. Every week, the behavior that’s appropriate, the behavior that’s not appropriate, it’s all pretty clear. Everybody lives by it. Nobody causes trouble for anyone else, and we all get along. When things aren’t clear, when there’s a lot of room for free interpretation, then there’s a lot of discussions. Things have to be hashed over. It’s the same with the five precepts. When certain things are out of bounds, that’s it. You decide you’re just not going to follow those ideas. Then you find it a lot easier to live with yourself. These are comfortable rules. They’re like a fence, but it’s a comfortable fence. When the mind gets more and more familiar with yourself, you find that the fence doesn’t really impinge on anything that’s really for your own good. It helps keep you on track. So it’s in this way that the precepts are a way of taking the meditation and the daily life and using daily life as a means for helping your meditation. It’s all a matter of developing good qualities in the mind, the qualities that can support you, that are based on honorable resolves, resolves that you want to stick with. The right resolve is something you want to treasure. These are the areas in which desire is really a good thing, and you want to maintain those good desires. We live by throw-away desires. We try something, and it makes us a little bit happy, but not all that much. So you throw it away, and you don’t really notice what you’ve done. The mind doesn’t make connections between its desires and the results of acting on those desires. Psychologists have shown that a lot of people don’t learn from their desires. They desire something and it gives them a little bit of happiness when they get it, but not all that much. And when the desire comes back up again, they think, “Well, maybe it’ll make me happy this time, like the old story of the person eating a bushel full of peppers, hoping to find one sweet one in there someplace.” The reason for this is our desires are not all that satisfying, and yet we don’t know anything else. So we don’t really pay much attention. But the Buddha said, “When you take your desire for happiness really seriously and stick to the kind of desires that really can lead to happiness, you begin to realize how valuable they are. You begin to treasure them. You learn from them. When your thoughts, words, and deeds follow through with them, you begin to realize how valuable they are. You find that that quest for happiness, that desire for happiness, is something worthy of respect as well.

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