Four Virtues

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Back when Ajahn Suwa was teaching in Massachusetts, on the last night of the retreat, someone asked him, “How do you carry meditation into your daily life when you go back home?” And his response was, “Take care of the precepts.” The Thai word “sin,” or the Pali word “sila,” also means “virtue.” And some of the people got up upset. They felt that he didn’t respect them as lay meditators, that he was giving them a lowly practice, insinuating that they weren’t prepared for a higher practice. But that wasn’t the case at all. The practice of virtue, observing the precepts, is an important part of developing the mind. And if you have a narrow idea that meditation means simply a meditation technique, you’re missing out on an important, a lot of important, important dimensions of what this practice is all about. There are actually four kinds of virtue. The first one starts with the precepts, the precepts of not killing, not stealing, not engaging in illicit sex, not lying, not taking intoxicants. These create the atmosphere you need. They create the environment you need in order to develop the mind even further. Because meditation is not the sort of thing that’s going to thrive if you take it back and your life is like a sidewalk with all the tiny little cracks, and the meditation gets forced into the cracks. You’ve got to give a good soil. Then the process of observing the precepts, making sure you don’t kill anything, not even little bugs. Not telling even white lies. You have to be very careful. You have to be very mindful and alert. In other words, you’re developing the qualities you need in formal meditation throughout the day. You’ve got to keep your precept in mind and be alert to what you’re actually doing to make sure you stay by the precept. The precepts are promises that you make to yourself. You don’t want to harm anybody. So the act of keeping the precepts is also an act of truthfulness. In the calm moments of your life, you look at your life and see what’s important, what’s not important, what’s harmful, and what’s not. You want to be able to keep that perspective in mind and don’t turn traitor to your own best interests. All of which is developing good qualities in the mind, qualities that are important for the higher practice. There’s a continuity. It’s the same theme all the way through. As one of the forester johns once said, “In the name of Dharma is one thing clear through, starting with generosity and going up all the way to the noble attainments.” So when you’re working on your precepts, maintaining them throughout the day, it’s an important element in training the mind, developing the mind. The second kind of virtue is restraint of the senses. The mind goes to the day feeding all the time, and you’ve got to be very careful about what kind of food you feed it, what you look at, what you listen to. It’s a constant activity of feeding, feeding, feeding, until the question is, “What kind of things are you bringing into the mind?” The Buddha has a series of teachings called the novice’s questions. The tradition is that this is what he taught Rahula very early on. It starts at what is one, what is two, what is three, what is four, all the way up to what is ten. The most interesting of the questions is what is one. The answer is all being subsist on food. The process of feeding is something we all have in common. How does your mind feed? Who is being harmed by the feeding? On the one hand, just the fact that you have to keep on feeding, that there’s this constant hunger inside. I’m not talking just about physical hunger. The mind has a hunger. That right there is suffering. Then, of course, the people that you depend on for emotional support. There’s a kind of stress and strain that goes there as well. So you have to be careful. When you look at things and listen to things, what do you bring into the mind? Many times you bring in greed, anger, and delusion, because those are the things that direct your looking. If you let them direct the looking, they begin to take over. So when you look at something that you ordinarily find really attractive, learn to look at the unattractive side as well. Or something you really hate, learn to look at the attractive side. Look for the good side. As the John Lee once said, “Be a person with two eyes, not just one.” You’re your choice of what to listen to. How are you going to be able to control the movement of the mind? That so often happens when you eat. If you eat in the wrong way, you bring a lot of germs into your system as well, i.e., the germs of greed, anger, and delusion. So you’ve got to watch out for those. Don’t let greed look or anger do your looking for you. You want wisdom, you want mindfulness to do your looking. And again, you’re developing the qualities you’re going to need for a formal meditation. Because looking, listening, smelling, thinking, tasting, and touching—these are things we do all the way throughout the day. So there’s always opportunity for practicing, for developing the mind. You choose this purity of livelihood, the way you make your living. Again, this is very closely related to the way you feed. And if you’re dishonest with yourself about who’s getting harmed by the way you make your living, it’s very hard to be honest about the more subtle things going on in the mind. So you want to look at the way you make your living and make sure that it’s pure. Because this principle of purity goes all the way into the practice. The first couple months I was staying with the Chan Fu, and I got really fascinated by the fact that he seemed to have some interesting psychic powers, particularly the ability to read minds. I guess you must have sensed, of course, that I was fascinated by that, because one night he mentioned all these things that come with concentration practice and all the different psychic powers. He said, “Those are just games.” But the essence of the practice is purifying the mind. It’s putting the mind in a place where it doesn’t have to feed on anything at all. It’s totally sufficient for itself. And it starts from being pure in your livelihood. So check the way you make your living to make sure that it does really simplify your life. Support your practice and it isn’t an obstacle. The fourth virtue is reflection on the requisites. As you use the requisites of life—food, clothing, shelter, medicine—reflect on them. When you’re born with a body, you’re born with this big gaping hole that needs to be fed, needs to be covered and protected from the weather. You need shelter, and it’s costly having one little disease after another. So you need medicine. Simply by the fact that you have a body, you’re placing a big burden on the environment around you. So you want to reflect to make sure that when you wear clothing, or when you buy clothing, why you’re buying it. Is it simply to protect the body from the elements? To keep yourself decently covered? Or does it go beyond that? If it goes beyond that, you’re creating needless burdens. What about the food that you eat? Why are you eating it? You’re out exploring, as the passage in the Canon says, looking for the tip-top taste with the tip of your tongue. Are you trying to bulk up? Again, you’re placing burdens on all the people. If there’s any meat in your diet, of course, that’s oppressing the animals. But even if you’re a vegetarian, there’s a lot of work that goes into getting those vegetables to your plate. So you want to make sure that you’re placing as little burden as possible on the environment around you. You eat simply to keep the body going so that you’re strong enough to do the practice. Similar principles apply to shelter and medicine. All these things involve suffering. So you want to make sure that you’re not placing undue burdens on the world around you. But you take it deeper than that. You realize that as long as you keep coming back, as long as you want to keep being reborn with the body, it’s always going to be placing burdens, burdens, burdens on the world. Wouldn’t it be better if you found a way of being happy and you didn’t have to come back? So reflect on that as well. So this principle of virtue is not just the precepts. It envelops your whole life. It creates the environment for the practice to go well. Your meditation then becomes a very consistent part of the way you live. The way you live energizes the meditation. So think of all of these areas as good opportunities for developing the mind, to find that state of purity that doesn’t have to feed on anything. That doesn’t place a burden on anything at all. So in this way, virtue not only creates the basic day-to-day framework of your life, but also keeps your practice headed in the right direction, which is why Jon Szwed gave the advice that he did. It’s not a lowly practice. It provides the context for the whole practice.

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