Three Virtues for the Mind

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When we think about the precepts, we tend to think of the five precepts, dealing with actions of the body, the words we say. But there’s also a list of precepts for the mind. It involves three things. Avoiding excessive greed. Avoiding ill will. And developing right views. This is part of what we’re doing as we meditate, is to develop these virtues in the mind. For instance, as you focus on the breath, try to make it really comfortable so you can show to yourself that happiness doesn’t have to depend on a lot of things outside. There’s a strong current of thought in our society, even with the recession and all the exposure of what greed has done for us over the past who knows how long. There’s still a strong current of thought that says, “The more things, the better.” But you have to realize that when you gain a thing, you often lose certain things as well. You lose a certain amount of freedom, a certain amount of security. The more things you have, the more you have to worry about protecting them. You get tied down to them. So the question is, once you’ve gained a certain basic level of physical comfort—enough food to keep you alive and healthy and enough clothing to protect you from the elements, enough shelter to protect you from the elements to give you a quiet place to stay, and enough medicine to keep you healthy—once you have that level of comfort, where do you find greater happiness? We have to start turning inside to develop a sense of inner well-being. Develop a sense of inner security so that you don’t have to worry about what happens to the world. There’s a teaching on the eight ways of the world. There’s material gain and material loss, status, loss of status, praise and criticism, pleasure and pain. And as long as we stake our happiness on the eight ways of the world, we’re going to be turned on. Because, as you notice, each of these qualities has its opposite, and they switch back and forth. If our happiness depends on things that switch back and forth, we’re going to be jerked back and forth as well. So we need a place for the mind where it doesn’t have to depend on these things for its happiness, where it can see that there are advantages both to gain and to lose. Status, loss of status, praise and criticism, pleasure and pain. Each of these has their uses. Each of them has their drawbacks. So to see that, we have to have the mind in the middle, in a place that’s not spinning around with these things. That’s why we practice meditation, to give ourselves that sense of well-being, a sense of solidity inside that’s not going to be thrown around. One of the images in the canon is of a stone pillar, sixteen cubits tall, eight cubits buried in the ground, buried in the rock, actually, and then another eight cubits up above ground. So that no matter which direction the wind blows from, in their eight directions, like the eight qualities of the world, the pillar doesn’t shiver or shake at all. That’s the kind of mind we want to develop. Once you have that solidity inside, then you find that the issue of observing that precept for the mind, that virtue for the mind, to avoid excessive greed, gets a lot easier. Because you look at greed and say, “What do you gain from it? Nothing but suffering.” It pulls you toward more and more things, but the things mean less and less as you gain them. And they weigh you down. They get you concerned. They expose you to all kinds of dangers as well. So that’s the first precept for the mind. The second one is avoiding ill will, realizing that you don’t gain anything from anybody else’s suffering. You don’t gain anything from wishing yourself ill as well. Because you come down on yourself, you’re able to harm yourself. What’s to prevent you from harming other people as well? When you’re down on yourself, you don’t like to see other people who are doing well. You’re jealous of their happiness. And as for other people who are suffering, you don’t really care about them. That’s the sense of what serves them right. It’s a way of creating a lot of suffering, both for yourself and the people around you. It accomplishes nothing. There’s so much the mind can do if it gets trained. It’s conducive both to its own happiness and to the happiness of others. In the Buddhist teachings, happiness is not a zero-sum game. It doesn’t have to be the case that when one person is happy, somebody else has to suffer or get less happiness. By being generous, by being virtuous, by meditating, we increase our own inner fund of happiness. We don’t take anything away from anyone else. And by showing good will to ourselves, by meditating, we get the mind under control. Learning how to avoid the things that we like to do but we know lead to suffering down the line, and how to get ourselves to do the things that we don’t like to do but we know will lead to happiness in the long term, requires a certain inner strength. Again, this is another reason why we practice concentration. Showing good will for ourselves makes it easier to act in a way that’s kind, compassionate, and empathetic with other people. Finally, there’s the issue of right view. Realizing that our actions do give results. They might not give results as quickly as we’d like, but they do give results. If you act with a skillful intention, it’s going to lead to good results. An unskillful intention is going to lead to bad results. We have the choice. What we experience from moment to moment is not just the result of past actions; it’s also the result of what we’re doing right now. We take the potentials that come from the past and we select from among them and nurture certain potentials until they become actualized and allow others to stay unactualized, at least for the time being. Which means that when we’re suffering, we don’t have to suffer. We can change the way we’re relating to a particular sensation, a particular idea, a particular state in the body or conditions around us. We can take them and turn these things into a lot of suffering. We can turn them into a lot of happiness, depending on the choices we make right now. And again, to see this clearly and to work with it skillfully requires that the mind be settled and still, because it takes a lot of practice and a lot of sensitivity to gain a sense of what things you can change in the present moment and what things you can’t. There’s a lot of trial and error, and you have to put yourself in a position where you’re a good observer. Because if your mind is running around, you can’t observe things clearly. You get little bits and snatches of ideas, but you can’t rely on them across the board. And even when the mind is still, you have to test things again and again. It’s not the case that any idea that comes up in a still mind is going to be skillful, is going to be true, or timely. There’s a passage in the Canon where the Buddha talks about four different types of people. There’s the person who does unskillful things, says unskillful things, is greedy, has ill will, has wrong views, and when this person dies, goes to a bad destination. There are other cases, though, where other people do the same things. Kill, steal, have illicit sex, lie, engage in idle chatter, harsh speech, divisive speech, and so on down the line. And yet, when they’ve died, they go to a good destination. Then there are other people who abstain from unskillful behavior, and when they die, they go to a good destination. Other people abstain from unskillful behavior and they go to a bad destination. The Buddha says there could be people who gain concentration, even gain psychic power, so they can see these things happening. But if they see only one or two cases, then they go out and they say, “Well, this is the way it is in every case.” They can develop all kinds of wrong views. The person who behaves in unskillful ways but goes to a good destination says, “Well, there’s no results of good or bad actions.” Or the person who sees someone behaving skillfully and going to heaven or one of the good destinations says, “Well, this must happen in every case.” So it’s not the case that just because the mind is still and you have psychic powers, you see things for what they actually are. We’re talking really strong concentration, not just little glimpses of stillness that happen to a lot of people. So even though the mind is still and something comes up in the mind, you can’t totally depend on it to be true. You’ve got to be very careful to test it again and again, to see things from a broad perspective and not be one-sided in your views. So we need not only concentration but right view to help us along. So we see things happening in the world. People do a lot of good things and yet they seem to suffer. They seem to disprove the teachings on karma. The Buddha simply said, “Well, sometimes actions take a long time to show their results.” In the case of someone, say, who behaves unskillfully but prospers either now or in the next life, the person may have some other good karma as well. And the bad karma will eventually show itself. And the same with a person who does skillful things, says and thinks skillful things in the present life, but then suffers. That person may have some other bad karma that’s hogging all the opportunities right now. But the good actions will eventually show their results. And in any event, even when things are going poorly, it doesn’t mean that you have to suffer from them. That’s your choice. That’s your potential here in the present moment as well. After all, there are ways of the world. There’s pleasure and there’s pain, and there are uses for both. If there’s the kind of pleasure that incites you to practice, okay, that’s a skillful use of the pleasure. If it makes it easier for you to practice, that’s a skillful use of the pleasure. And as for the pain, as the Buddha said, it’s a noble truth. By learning to sit with the pain and watch it, you get so that you can understand it. And when you understand it, really, you don’t have to suffer from it. So the stillness of the mind is essential for our ability to sit with the pain and watch it. But then you take that stillness and you combine it with right view. And that can take you far. So it’s good to keep these three virtues of the mind in mind as we practice, and to realize that one of the reasons we are practicing is to make these virtues easier, make them more solid, so the mind doesn’t feel inclined to go running after a lot of things. It doesn’t give in to an impulse to wish ill of other people. And it keeps its views on karma, which are very useful for learning how to avoid the things that you like to do but you know lead to bad results, and to do the things you don’t like to do but lead to good results. And you keep the principle of action firmly in mind. You find that has a lot of pragmatic value. Your life becomes happier. You cause less harm to the people around you. It’s all around a good thing.

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