Heightened Virtue

October 4, 2021

Atityate ca yo ’gho, detaṁ bhutanasasana. Commitment to the heightened mind. That’s the Buddhist teachings. The heightened mind basically means the mind in concentration, right concentration, like we’re trying to do right now. Lift the mind up. This is an idiom they use a lot in Thailand, the word for vittaka. The director of thought is vitto, and it rhymes with yoke, which means to lift. So you lift the mind above its ordinary concerns. Bring it to a topical concentration that’s skillful. You can try the breath, recollection of the Buddha, contemplation of the body and its 32 parts. Whatever lifts the mind from its ordinary concerns. Now, to lift the mind needs support, and support, of course, comes in mindfulness. Mindfulness, in turn, is supported by views made straight, by believing in the principle of karma, and also by pure virtue. The basis of all the virtue of the Buddha said is the five precepts. As we noted this afternoon, there’s plenty of room for defilement in the five precepts. They forbid only killing, stealing, having illicit sex, lying, and taking intoxicants. And that, the Buddha said, is heightened mind. There’s a heightened virtue when you really stick with these precepts. But even there, there’s lots of room for defilement. But you’re giving your defilement some fences. As for the eight precepts, the ten precepts, and the 227, these provide more fences for the mind. And they challenge you. With the eight precepts, there’s no sex. In addition to that, as Ajahn Suen noted, we practice restraint of the senses. Again, it’s not total restraint, but it’s the major issues. No food afternoon before dawn. No watching shows. No wearing cosmetics or perfumes. No lying on high, luxurious beds. Again, that takes care of your different sense doors. You control your mouth. You control your nose, your eyes, your ears. You control the body. Placing a fence here, a fence there. Essentially, so that you can get the mind into concentration, the real work of working with the defilements is in the concentration and the discernment. The precepts simply create an environment where you can really do that work. Now, the five precepts are basically the quality of a human being. So the five precepts, observing the five precepts, really we come here. And some people, as soon as they get here, forget about it. They finally have chances to break the precepts and they’ll take them. Really, we take them not as rules that we’re going to follow and hope that simply by following the rules we’re going to earn our way into nirvana. That attitude would count as grasping at habits and practices. I think you somehow, just by obeying the rules, you pass all the checkpoints. You have to look into why you’re practicing the precepts. Part of it is to create a good environment. If you tend to tell the truth, you tend to attract people to you who’d like to hear the truth. You’re not engaged in any killing or stealing or illicit sex. There are a lot of areas for danger and problems as you’re closing off. But more importantly, the precepts can be broken only through intention. And that focuses your attention on the mind, which is where it’s going to have to go to get into the right concentration. You look at your intentions. And here again, it’s possible to have all kinds of cravings, but you learn how to say no. That’s going to be a really good skill to have in the meditation because the mind will want to wander around. After you’ve lifted up a little bit, it says, “Let’s go back.” You have to say no. And when you’ve learned how to say no effectively with the precepts, then it becomes a lot easier when you’re doing concentration. Another reason the precepts are a good foundation for mindfulness is because, remember, mindfulness is to remember. It’s your active memory. And it’s a lot easier to remember things in your life when you haven’t been going around creating harm. Because there is that tendency in the mind when you can think back on ways you harmed somebody by breaking the precepts. Even before you knew anything about the precepts, you just think back on how you did things that were harmful. And it’s a memory that’s hard to keep in mind. You like to cover it up, put up a wall, and that makes it hard to learn. So for the sake of mindfulness and for the sake of focusing in on the mind, you hold to the precepts. You have to be alert. You have to be alert to make sure that you’re following them. And you develop the quality of urgency. You want to do this well, because the precepts present challenges. You’ve got bugs invading your house. What are you going to do? If you decide you can’t kill the bugs, how are you going to keep them out? If someone asks you for some information that you know they’re going to abuse, what are you going to do? How do you not divulge the information without, at the same time, lying? The precepts exercise your discernment. So they get you ready for the heightened mind and the heightened discernment, which is why they’re an important part of the path. But you have to remember, they’re not the whole path. They’re not going to do all the work. The work lies in the concentration and in the discernment. But they create a space where the work can be done, which is why the Buddha included them as part of the triple training. So then hold to the precepts wherever you are and maintain your status as a human being. The taijans like to talk about people who are human beings only in terms of their body, but there are other beings in terms of their mind. Some are hungry ghosts, some are common animals, some are angry demons, some are devas, some are brahmas. And a lot of it has to do with how well you observe the precepts. And the attitudes of mind that you bring to the practice, or you bring to life. Because a lot of the lower ones are not coming to the practice at all. But we do have this ability, and that’s just something special about human beings, is that we can lift the quality of our minds. So regard that ability as an important treasure. There’s so much out there in the world that tries to pull you down. Years back I was involved in a case where we had to go see a police sergeant who had confiscated unfairly the truck of one of the supporters of the monastery. And as they confiscated the truck, they told the driver, the owner, “Don’t be so surprised if things are missing. We’re not responsible for anything that disappears.” And so I had to find a higher-ranking police officer from another town and then go with him to talk to the police officer in that town. And when he saw the higher-ranking police officer, he said, “Oh, no problem. We can give the car back.” And then he turned to me and said, “Well, you know, everybody has to make a living one way or another.” It was like he was taking his sliminess and slamming it on me. And that’s the way the world is. People can be pretty slimy. And they don’t like to see other people who have lifted the quality of their minds, lifted the status of their minds. So they try to pull people down. So you’ve got to protect yourself. Value your precepts. Value your training. Even though they don’t get rid of all their cravings, they are an important part of the path. So give them some value, and they will share their value with you.

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