

Virtue

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Years back, when Ajaan 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 daily life. The person asking the question was interpreting the “practice” as the particular technique of meditation taught on the retreat. Yet Ajaan Suwat focused most of his answer on practicing the precepts, developing virtue. I thought I saw a number of people rolling their eyes, thinking, “Here we are meditators already, yet he’s teaching us this kindergarten stuff.” But it wasn’t kindergarten stuff. That’s how the practice is lived in daily life: through virtue.

Remember that the word for meditation in Pali, *bhavana*, doesn’t mean sitting with your eyes closed. It means developing. You’re developing good qualities in the mind. And the practice of virtue—right speech, right action, right livelihood—follows on right resolve, as do right mindfulness and right concentration. Right resolve covers the resolve to resolve for renunciation, for no ill will, and for non-harming. The precepts carry through with this resolve in the area of your words and your speech, while the meditation carries it through directly in area of the mind. But it’s hard to divide the mind from your words and your actions. After all, who’s giving the orders when you do something? Who’s giving the orders when you say something? It’s the mind.

And when you follow the precepts, what are you doing? You’re making the vow not to be harmful. You’re making the vow to renounce any sensual pleasures that may come from lying or stealing or killing. You’re making the vow not to act on ill will toward anyone else, for yourself or for other people. These vows are an extension of right resolve, and they’re important. They’re 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. That way, you learn to trust yourself. You also learn the sense of ease that comes when you don’t do things that go against those principles. They 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 things against the precepts: Are they really you? Exactly where do they lead you? Practicing the precepts 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 the responsibility that goes

along with that power. Over time, as you figure out ways to lead your life in line 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. Because why don't you trust yourself? 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.

But if you stick with the precepts, it's easy to be open with yourself. You look at your behavior, and there's nothing you can criticize yourself about, there's nothing to be ashamed of, nothing to deny. You create an openness and honesty inside the mind. As the Buddha once said, that's a 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, such as mindfulness, alertness, and persistence. You have to keep your precepts in mind, remembering that you've promised yourself not to lie, not to speak divisively, not to speak harshly, not engage in idle chatter. And you've got to be alert to watch your mouth to see: Are you engaging in any of those kinds of speech?

It also involves discernment. There come times when you don't want to tell the whole truth to somebody, because it might be harmful, yet at 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 develops a lot of important skills. In addition to mindfulness, alertness, and discernment, there's also brute persistence, as you simply stick with it. You make up your mind: "I'm going to follow these precepts 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, he says that it requires mindfulness, alertness, and what he calls ardency, which is another word for right effort or persistence. These are qualities you have to bring to the act of being focused on the body in and of itself, focused on feelings in and of themselves, whatever the topic of your meditation, so that when you sit down and meditate, you're not coming totally green to the practice. You're already developing these qualities in your daily life, in the way you speak, in the way you act.

Then, after you've been meditating, you continue the same process. You take the mindfulness and alertness you've been developing in the meditation, and you put them to use. You're like a person who goes down to the gym, not because he wants a beautiful body, but because he wants to be strong, so that he can use the strength for good purposes.

The same with meditation: We're meditating not simply to get a nice peaceful state of mind, but to be able to take that peaceful state of mind and put it use in good ways, in the way we speak, in the way we act. These things are all mutually reinforcing. That way, 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 as like a dog. If you keep it on a short leash, then when you want it to heel, it's right there. If it's on a long leash, it can wander all over the place and get the leash wound around all kinds of things. When the time comes to bring it back to heel, you've got to unwind the leash, which takes a lot of time. All too often 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. And this is how you keep it nearby: by keeping on top of your thoughts and your words and your deeds throughout the day. When your thoughts, words, and deeds are within the precepts, it's easy to get the mind to settle down and to stay with the breath in the midst of what you're doing. After all, the things that destroy your meditation, the things that destroy you focus in the course of the day, are not just the sights and sounds and smells and tastes and tactile sensations that come from outside. A lot of them come bubbling up from within the mind. In fact, sights, sounds, etc., on their own can't destroy your meditation. It's your mind's reactions that destroy your focus. So if you learn to keep your response to things within bounds, you find that these are not confining bounds. After a while, you find that you can wear them very comfortably.

Someone once asked me how was it that the Vinaya can be seen as something liberating—that's one of the meanings of word, Patimokkha, something that helps with liberation. After all, it's rules. Well, the rules protect you. At the very least, the community that lives by a very clear set of rules doesn't have to sit around and discuss everything for hours every week. What behavior is appropriate or inappropriate is all pretty clear. Everybody lives by it. Nobody causes trouble for anyone else. We all get along. When things aren't clear, when there's a lot of room for free interpretation, then there are a lot of discussions. Things have to be hashed over again and again.

The same with the five precepts: When certain things are out of bounds, that's it. Just say, "I'm just not going to follow those ideas," and 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 itself, you find that the fence doesn't really impinge on anything of value. It's really for your own good. It helps keep you on track.

It's in this way that the precepts are a way of taking the meditation into daily life and using daily life as a means for helping your meditation—because it's all a matter of developing good qualities in the mind, the qualities that can support you, that are based on honorable resolve, the resolve to stick with right resolve.

Right resolve is something you want to treasure. These are the areas in which desire is really a good thing. You want to maintain those good desires. Most of us live by throwaway desires. We try something 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 that gives them a little bit of happiness when they get it, but not all that much. Yet when the desire comes back up again, they think, "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.

This is because our desires are not all that satisfying, 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. And when your thoughts, words, and deeds follow through with them, you find that the quest for true happiness, the desire for true happiness, is something worthy of respect as well.