

Four Virtues

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Years back when Ajaan Suwat was teaching in Massachusetts, in the last night at the retreat, someone asked him, “How do you carry meditation into your daily life when you go back home?” His response was: “Take care of the precepts. The Thai word, *siin*, the Pali word *sila*, which means precept, also means virtue. Some of the people got upset, feeling that he didn’t respect them as lay meditators, that he was giving them a lowly practice, insinuating that they weren’t prepared for any higher practice.

That wasn’t the case at all. The practice of virtue, observing the precepts, is an important part of developing the mind. If you have a narrow idea that meditation means simply doing your meditation technique, you’re missing out on a lot of important dimensions of what this practice is all about.

There are actually four kinds of virtue. The first 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, the environment you need, in order to develop the mind even further. Meditation is not something that can thrive if you take it back into your life if your life is like a sidewalk with only tiny little cracks where the meditation gets forced into the cracks. You’ve got to give it good soil.

In 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, very mindful and alert. In this way, you’re developing the qualities you need in formal meditation throughout the day. You’ve got to be mindful to keep your precepts in mind, and to be alert to what you’re actually doing, to make sure you stay by the precepts.

The precepts are promises you make to yourself: You don’t want to harm anybody. So the act of keeping the precepts is also an act of truthfulness. When, 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 not turn traitor to your own best interests. All of this develops good qualities in the mind, qualities that are important in developing concentration and discernment. There’s a continuity, the same theme all the way through. As one of the forest ajaans once said, Dhamma is one thing clear through, starting with generosity and going up all the way to the noble attainments. So as you’re working on your precepts, maintaining them

throughout the day, it's an important element in training and developing the mind.

The second kind of virtue is restraint of the senses. The mind goes through the day feeding all the time, and you've got to be very careful about what kind of food you feed on, in terms of what you look at, what you listen to. There's this constant activity of feeding, feeding, feeding. So the question is: What kind of food are you bring into the mind?

The Buddha has a series of teachings called the Novices' Questions. The tradition says that this is what he taught Rahula very early on. They start with, "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 beings subsist on food." The process of feeding is something we all have in common. And how does your mind feed? Who's 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—and we're not talking just about physical hunger, the mind has a hunger, too: That right there is suffering. And of course there are the people you depend on for emotional support, and 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? Often you bring in greed, anger, and delusion, because those are the things that direct your looking to begin with. If you let them direct your looking, they begin to take over. They bring in more and more of their friends.

So when you look at something that you ordinarily find really attractive, learn to look at its unattractive side as well. If there's something you really hate, learn to look at its good side. As Ajaan Lee once said, be a person with two eyes, not just one. If you can't control the movement your eyes or your choice of what to listen to, how are you going to be able to control the movement of the mind? As so often happens, when you eat, if you eat the wrong way, you bring a lot of germs into your systems as well, i.e., the germs of greed, anger, and delusion, so you've got to watch out for those. Don't let greed or anger do your looking for you. You want wisdom, you want mindfulness and discernment to do your looking.

In this way, you're developing qualities you're going to need for formal meditation. Looking, listening, and smelling, thinking, tasting, and touching: These are things we do all the way throughout the day. So there is always opportunity for practicing, for developing the mind.

Another one of the four virtues is purity of livelihood, the way you make your living. Again, this is very closely related in the way you feed. 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 subtler things going on in the mind. So you want to look carefully at the way you make your living. Make sure that it's pure, because this principal of purity goes all the way in through the practice.

The first couple months I was staying with Ajaan Fuang, I got really fascinated by the fact that he seemed to have some interesting psychic powers, particularly the ability to read minds. He must have sensed that I was fascinated by that, because one night he mentioned, "All these things that come with concentration practice, all different psychic powers, are just games to play with. But the real essence of the practice is purifying the mind": in other words, putting the mind in a place where it doesn't have to feed on anything at all, where it's totally sufficient for itself. This starts from being pure in your livelihood. So check the way you make your living. Make sure that it does really support your practice, that 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 this body, you're born with this big gaping hole. It needs to be fed, needs to be covered and protected from the weather. You need shelter. And it's constantly having one little disease after another, so you need medicine. Simply by the fact that you have a body, you're placing a burden on the environment around you.

So you want to reflect to make sure, when you wear clothing or when you buy clothing, why you are buying it? Is it simply to protect the body from the elements and to keep yourself decently covered, or does it go beyond that? If it goes beyond that, you're creating needless burdens.

As for the food you eat, why are you eating it? You're out exploring for it. There's a passage in the Canon that calls this looking for the tiptop taste with the tip of your tongue. If you try to bulk up, again, you're placing burdens on other people. And if there's any meat in your diet, that's of course 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 you're placing as small a burden as possible on the environment around you. You eat simply to keep the body going and strong enough to do the practice.

A similar principle applies 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 round you.

But you can take the reflections deeper than that. You realize that as long as you keep coming back, as long as you want to keep being reborn with a 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 where you didn't have to come back? So we reflect on that as well.

So this principle of virtue—it's not just the precepts—envelops your whole life and creates the environment for the practice to go well. Your meditation then becomes a very consistent part of the way you live, and the way you live energizes the meditation.

Think of all these areas as good opportunities for developing the mind, to find that state of purity that doesn't have to feed on anything at all, that doesn't place a burden on anyone.

In this way, virtue not only creates the basic day-to-day framework of your life, but it also keeps your practice headed in the right direction, which is why Ajaan Suwat gave the advice he did. It's not a lowly practice. It provides a context for the entire practice.