

## Vows

July 8, 2009

Tonight's the beginning of the rains retreat. It's a night for making vows: looking at your life, looking at your mind, and seeing what you'd like to see improved—and realizing that the improvement has to come from within, by developing qualities in the mind. So even though we're living in a land where it doesn't rain much during the rains retreat, we can still make use of the tradition to decide that for the next three months we're going to try to do something special with our lives, in terms of generosity, virtue, or meditation.

The word meditation here, *bhavana*, means developing. You're trying to develop qualities of the mind. So you can ask yourself: What kind of qualities would you like to see? More patience? More circumspection? More restraint? More energy in the practice? More mindfulness in your daily life?

Looking at your mind in this way is one of the first qualities of a good determination, which is discernment: seeing what needs to be done, having a clear sense of where you're lacking and what needs to be done in order to make up for that lack. And having a sense of what you're capable of. You want a determination that stretches you but not to the point of snapping—stretching you in the sense of taking the mind to a new level, taking the mind to a new place it's never been before. Because as the Buddha said, the practice is all about realizing what you've never realized before, seeing what you've never seen before, and that means in some cases doing what you've never done before. If you haven't had a daily practice of meditation, this might be a good time to start. If there are any of the precepts that you haven't followed, this might be a good time to start.

Once you've made up your mind what you need to do, then the next quality is truthfulness. You really stick with your determination regardless of the obstacles. For instance, you make up your mind you're going to be more circumspect around that principle of not engaging in idle chatter. Then you meet up with somebody with whom you've had a long history of idle chatter. So what are you going to do? How do you steer the conversation in directions that are actually useful? This is a good practice, a good challenge. Because if you want your life to go anywhere, you have to be really true to yourself, to see what is really good and then be really true to what you see. That means every day, once you've made the vow, you stick with it every day, every day, regardless of whether it's easy or not.

And part of the mind says, "Whoa, it's a little bit too much." One time Ajaan Fuang, after a long day of work, said out of the blue, "Tonight we're going to sit up and meditate all night." I was all ready to hit the sack. I said, "Oh, I can't do that." He said, "But is it going to kill you?" "Well, no." "Okay, then you can do it," he said.

So this involves stretching your concept or your idea of what you're capable of. Again, it's the power of your truthfulness that gives you the impetus to do that. Otherwise, we start making excuses for ourselves, saying, "Well, maybe not tonight. I've got good reasons not to do it." But once you've made a vow to yourself, if you can't trust yourself to carry it through, who are you going to trust? So once you've drawn this line in the sand, you try to stick with it. That's the quality of truthfulness.

The next quality is relinquishment. When you make a vow, there will be things that you have to give up if you're really going to stick with the vow. And often they're things you like. But you have to see the advantage of giving them up. After all, the Buddha said when you see a greater happiness that comes from abandoning a lesser happiness, the enlightened person will be willing to abandon the lesser happiness for the sake of the greater one. It's a very basic principle—so basic that the translator who was translating that passage for the PTS once said, "This can't possibly be the meaning of this statement because it's so obvious, everybody would know it." Well, we may know it but we don't live by it. All too often we think about the happiness *right now*, the pleasure *right now*, regardless of whether the future pleasure is going to be greater or not. So we have to be prepared for the fact that there are some things we like but they get in the way of some things that are actually better for us and will lead to greater happiness for us. We have to be willing to give them up.

This is the beginning of wisdom. That means learning how to talk yourself into being willing to give these lesser pleasures up. Wisdom is a strategy. All of this comes back to discernment, that first quality. It keeps popping up again and again. To be truthful requires some discernment: How are you going to stick to your vow? Say that you make a vow you're not going to lie at all, not even little white lies. Then a friend comes and asks you a question about something you'd just rather not talk about—or something you know that would get them upset for no real reason at all if you told them the truth. What are you going to do? You can't lie. It takes discernment to figure out how you're going to get around that question, how to avoid that topic without the person's realizing that you've avoided it. This is a good exercise for your discernment, a good exercise in diplomacy.

The fourth quality is calm. This means both the point to which you'd like to bring the mind through your vow—that you find a greater peace in life—and the means to get there. When you realize you've got to do some things that are hard and give up some things that you like, how do you keep your mind calm in the face of all that? How do you develop the equanimity you need to realize, "Well, this is what needs to be done, so I want to do it" regardless of whether it's easy or hard, pleasant or unpleasant? Again, you develop the discernment to keep the mind calm through this practice. If you make a slip, you learn to keep yourself calm, but you don't stay with the slip. You learn how to recover your balance. When the going gets tough, how do you keep going? How do you talk yourself into staying encouraged? In other words, how do you become your own best friend? How do you become

your own teacher? How do you learn the strategies for training yourself so that you really do grow in the practice?

This is important to remember. When the Buddha was teaching, he was mainly teaching adults. There were some of his teachings that are for children. But he wasn't the sort of person who said, "Well, once a person becomes an adult, that's it. There's no more development; there's no more growth," the way our society tends to think. He said that growth is still possible. As long as you're breathing, as long as you're still alive, there are areas in which the mind can grow. But it requires determination.

The impetus has to come from within. You have to see that you're suffering in ways that you're tired of and you realize that the solution has to lie inside, has to be found inside, has to be developed inside. That's the realization that keeps us on the path. At the same time, we see other people who are doing well in the practice and it should encourage us. They have something that we don't have, but it's something we can develop.

I was reading a work a while back about a man back in the thirties who said that looking at Buddha images with their sense of peace and calm was maddening—as if the Buddha had something special that we didn't have. He said, however, that that look of peace became less maddening when you realize that the Buddha's saying, "You can have this peace too. You can find this peace within your own mind as well." It's not like he has something we can't have. He has something good and he wants to show us how we can have it too: through developing our own minds, all the good qualities, the skillful qualities that we have in potential form.

So keep these thoughts in mind as you make your vow and as you try to keep your vow for the next three months. Begin with discernment in choosing the right vow, learning how to read yourself to see what would be a good vow to take. And then use discernment in figuring out how to maintain that vow, how to stay true to the vow, how to give up what you need to give up and how to maintain calm in the face of whatever difficulties you may encounter. This is how we grow; this is how we develop. This is how we take advantage of this tradition of setting aside three months to do something really special in the area of becoming more skillful in what we do and say and think.

That way, we have something really solid to look back on as we look back on our lives. If you make your sense of accomplishment in life depend on having succeeded at that job or on gaining this belonging or that relationship or whatever, that's all very uncertain, because the ways of the world can turn at any time. But if you develop good solid qualities of the mind, those qualities are independent of the world. If you make the mind solid, then you have something solid to look back on and something solid to take with you. After all, it's all right there in the mind. It's right where you need it.