

## *Views, Virtue, & Mindfulness*

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The Buddha compared mindfulness to a gatekeeper in a fortress at the edge of a frontier. In a fortress like that, you've got to have a gatekeeper who really knows what he's doing, knows whom to let in and whom not to let in, whom to trust, whom not to trust. In the same way, the function of mindfulness is to remember, to keep something in mind. In particular, you want to keep in mind what's skillful and what's unskillful, and to recognize skillful and unskillful qualities when they show their face. Then the function of right effort is to actually make the effort to encourage skillful qualities in the mind and to abandon unskillful ones.

There's a fair amount of judgment that goes along with that. You have to judge what's skillful and what's not skillful. It's like being a craftsperson. Say you're working on a chest of drawers, and you're doing the planning, the sawing, and the measuring. You've got to watch carefully what you're doing. If you see that you're making a mistake or that things aren't fitting together quite right, you've got to figure out what to do to fix the situation. That means you have to draw on your fund of knowledge from all the chests of drawers and other pieces of furniture you've made in the past. Because as you're working on a skill like that, you're always going to be running into problems. In the beginning, you depend on your teacher to point out what the problems are and how to solve them. But as you gain more and more experience, you begin to see the problems on your own, and can figure out the solutions on your own.

So that requires, on the one hand, knowledge, and two, a certain sense of confidence. You don't fall to pieces when the blade of the plane digs into the wood in a way that you didn't want it to. You figure out how to change what you're doing so that the mark doesn't show. And it's the same with the meditation. You build up experience, learning from the books, learning you're your teachers what you want to do with the meditation, and when problems come up, how to handle them. Then you notice on your own which problems you've been able to solve, and how you solved them in the past, and you want to keep that knowledge in mind so if that problem comes up again, you have a technique ready.

At the same time, you need a certain amount of confidence that you can do this. You've done it in the past, and you're going to be able to keep on doing it into the future as you face issues that are more and more delicate, more and more refined, that go deeper into the mind.

If you're starting out with the meditation, you need some practical experience outside of the meditation itself to build up that sense of confidence. This is why the Buddha talked about the two things that really help mindfulness along: purified virtue and views made straight. One of the ways in which these things help mindfulness is that you have to keep these things in mind, and in doing so, your mindfulness gets stronger.

With straightened-out views, you have to remember that the suffering you're experiencing right now is an important issue. That's the problem. Also, remember that the suffering that weighs down on the mind comes from within the mind itself. And if there's going to be a solution, it has to come from within the mind as well.

That's all part of right view. In other words, your actions are what make all the difference, so the solution is going to have to come from your actions. You can't wait for some special being outside to come and solve the problem for you. If you believed that there will be somebody out there who's going to save you or deliver you from your sins or whatever, you wouldn't have to be all that mindful. You'd basically do what you want and hope that there's going to be salvation at the end from somebody else. You wouldn't have to really straighten out your act because someone else would do it for you. But if you realize that you're the one who has to do the work, you're going to have to keep in mind certain principles and the lessons you've learned. That gives you a lot more impetus to want to remember, "Well, what is skillful and what's not?" You want to keep this in mind as you're practicing.

Then there's purified virtue. This helps with mindfulness in a lot of ways. To begin with, if you're going to stick with the precepts, you have to keep them in mind. It's not a matter of going through the ceremony of taking the precepts and then hoping that the ceremony will take care of everything for you. You make an intention, you set up an intention that you're not going to kill, you're not going to steal, you're not going to have illicit sex, you're not going to lie, you're not going to take intoxicants, and then you stick with it.

Now, to stick with it, you have to keep remembering. If in the past you've been breaking these precepts, it's awfully easy to fall into those old habits. And when you fall into the old habits, you start developing some wrong views around them, about how you can't change, or that's just the way you are. They did a study recently where they had people play a game where it was really easy to cheat, and it was pretty transparent that you could cheat and get away with it. Right before playing the game, the test subjects people read some pieces on free will and determinism. One group read a piece that argued really strongly for determinism:

that nobody has any free will, that whatever they are, that's the way they're going to be. The people who read that piece tended to cheat more than the others, who read a piece arguing strongly for free will. And, of course, the people who cheat more want to justify it to themselves and say, "Well, I just couldn't do it any other way." So it's a vicious circle. The wrong view leads to the wrong behavior, and the wrong behavior leads to the wrong view. As a result, you don't see any reason to try to remember what's skillful and what's not, because apparently it wouldn't make any difference—if that's what you believe, and that's how you've been behaving.

But if you realize that you can change your ways if you try hard enough, and if you figure out how to get around the temptation to break the precepts, that strengthens your understanding of why you want to be mindful, to keep on top of things.

At the same time, if you've been engaging in unskillful behavior, you don't want to think about it, you want to forget about it. The tendency to forget also becomes a habit, which makes it harder to develop mindfulness when you're going to sit down and meditate. Your mind ranges back into the past, and all you can see are unskillful things, so you start putting up walls of forgetfulness. And that becomes a habit, a habit that's hard to get out of.

So that's still another reason why you want to develop this quality of virtue. You look back on your behavior and there's nothing to criticize yourself about. You gain a sense of confidence because you realize, "I can do this. I can make this change."

That's one of the reasons why the Buddha has you reflect on virtue when you find that your meditation is not going well. You realize that you do have some good to you. You have been able to change your ways in the past. You have been able to learn from your mistakes. And this thought makes it easier to recognize and learn from your mistakes in the meditation, because you're developing a more skillful attitude as to how to judge your behavior.

There's so much fear about judging behavior nowadays. That's basically a fear that comes from people who are really unskillful. They figure: "If I don't judge my behavior and don't judge other people's behavior, then they won't judge mine." It's kind of an easy out. But things don't work that way, and in the long run, you make things harder, not easier.

But if you've been learning how to get more skillful in your behavior, then when you make a mistake, it's not the end of the world. You know that you do have some good to you, so you're able to take mistakes in stride and not try to

deny them or to forget about them—and at the same time, you're not defeated by them.

You're developing a quality that leads into concentration, because the purpose of being mindful is to bring the mind into a concentrated state, and one of the first factors in concentration is evaluation. You evaluate what's going on in the meditation: How's the breath going? Could it be better? If you're skilled at judging your own behavior in general, it's a lot easier to make skillful judgments about the breath, neither hypercritical nor hypo-critical. You're able to see precisely what's happening and you have the confidence to try to figure out the solution—knowing that this is important, this is how you're going to straighten out the mind, this is how you're going to gain release from suffering.

This is why the Buddha started his instructions to Rahula with advice on how to act; one, how to be truthful; then two, how to evaluate your intentions, how to evaluate your actions, and how to learn from them, so that when you make a mistake it's not the end of the world. But at the same time, you recognize it as a mistake. You try to figure out how not to do it again, you seek the advice of others, you observe for yourself, and you develop the resolve that "I don't want to repeat that mistake; I don't want to harm myself; I don't want to harm others."

It's a way of developing compassion for yourself and for others. It's genuine compassion, not the compassion that says: "Well, we're going to go easy on people; we're not going to judge anything or anybody at all, just let things go." That's not compassionate at all. True compassion means, when you see you've made a mistake, you want to do what you can to learn how not to repeat it. Because mistakes do cause harm, and it's only when you admit that they cause harm, and you realize that there's another way that's within your capabilities: That's when you're showing genuine compassion to yourself. That's when you're using your powers of judgment in a wise way.

So what this comes down to is the fact that your practice of meditation isn't divorced from the way you live your life. These qualities of having right view, developing the virtues of right action and right speech: The Buddha listed these things before right mindfulness in the noble eightfold path because they really do provide the conditions that allow mindfulness to get really strong—so that when you learn a lesson, you'll remember it, you keep it in mind, and you can apply it again and again and again whenever appropriate. That's how the path develops and eventually all comes together.