

Virtue Contains the Practice

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There's a passage in the Canon where a group of monks are going off to a foreign land and so they go to pay their respects to the Buddha. He asks them, "Have you gone to see Sariputta?" They say, No, they haven't, so he recommends that they do. When they pay their respects to Sariputta, he asks them, "Suppose you meet intelligent people in that foreign land who ask you what your teacher teaches: What are you going to tell them?" So the monks ask him what he would recommend that they say. The first thing he starts out with is, "Our teacher teaches the subduing of passion and delight."

Most of us, if we heard that as the first thing the Buddha taught, would probably run away. We like our passion; we like our delight. But notice that Sariputta starts off with an action. The Buddha teaches you something to *do*. As Sariputta explains it, if the person asks, "Passion and delight for what?" you say, "For the five aggregates." What's the danger of having that passion and delight for those things? It's that you suffer as they change. And the advantage of abandoning that passion and delight is that you put an end to that suffering.

So it's all about doing. The Buddha's own first teaching—on the noble eightfold path—was also a recommendation on what to do. This means that the teaching starts out with action as its basic principle. Actions are real. You choose your actions; you can change them. Those actions have life-shaping consequences, so you need to pay attention to what you're doing and to the consequences you're creating.

This leads to a series of shoulds and should-nots: actions you should do and actions you shouldn't if you want to put an end to suffering. The *if* there is crucial. The Buddha's shoulds are conditional in the sense that *if* you want to put an end to suffering, this is what you have to do. He's not forcing anything on you. But he is giving you guidance, and his guidance is categorical, i.e., true across the board. As he said, our normal reaction to suffering is bewilderment and a search. The bewilderment is that we don't know why we're suffering. Why is this happening? What can we do? If you don't believe in the principle of human action, you stay bewildered.

There were people who, in the Buddha's time, taught that human action is powerless. The Buddha rarely went out of his way to seek out other people to argue with them, but he did go to argue with those who taught doctrines that basically left you without any hope for making a difference in the present moment—either by teaching that everything is the result of past action or everything is a result of the will of a creator or that everything is totally without cause. Those kinds of teaching, he said, leave you bewildered because they leave no grounds for a should or should not. If everything is determined, there's nothing you can do. If there's no connection between cause and effect, then no matter what you do, you can't have an impact on anything. You're lost. You have no recourse when suffering comes up.

So the Buddha's teaching you what to do when you suffer so that you're no longer bewildered and you don't have to continue suffering. And in that way, his teaching is a gift. As with any gift, when you receive it, you want to make good use of it. You don't want to just throw it away. You learn to be grateful for the generosity of the person who gave it and try to put it to the best use possible.

So what is the best use possible? You start by looking at your own actions because that's where the teaching is aimed. You look at the results of the actions you're doing right now to see if there's any connection between what you're doing and the fact that there's suffering in the mind.

This is why the Buddha says that uncertainty is overcome by looking at skillful and unskillful qualities in the mind. To begin with, you're focusing your attention on the most important issue in life, which is what sort of impact your actions are having, and particularly what kind of impact your mind states are having. After

all, the source of action is in the mind. If you're uncertain about different mental qualities, then watch. Try developing goodwill; try being generous; try observing the precepts. See what kind of impact these qualities have on your life.

At the same time, try to develop the qualities that allow you to judge these things in fairness and with accuracy. Try to be mindful; try to be alert. Mindfulness is what connects cause and effect. If you don't have any mindfulness—i.e., if you can't remember what you did—you're not going to be able to figure out how this feeling of pain or this feeling of pleasure is related to actions you did a while back and have forgotten about. So you try to keep in mind what you've been doing. If you see any suffering coming up in your experience, try to trace it back. "What action is this related to? What kind of attitude is this related to?" The fact that there's pain in the body is a normal part of life, but the fact that there's a pain in the mind is unnecessary. It doesn't have to be there. So what's causing the pain in the mind? If you can trace it back to an action—physical, verbal, or mental—then you've got a handle on things. You can end your uncertainty; you can end your bewilderment.

Of course, this requires alertness as well: that you really are paying attention to what you're doing. All too many of us don't. We go through life just going through the motions without looking carefully at our intentions. If you ask most people why they did something, they have to cast back and often they can't think of why so they invent a why. But if your alertness was shaky to begin with, that "why" is really unreliable. So you really want to be alert to what you're doing, i.e., to what you're intending right now. The more alert you are to your actions, the more you'll be able to remember what you've done. This is why mindfulness and alertness go together.

Then you combine these two qualities with the Buddha's shoulds and shouldn'ts. That's what ardency is all about. When the Buddha gave a categorical teaching about skillful and unskillful actions, he didn't just say that the distinction between the two is a categorical truth. The categorical truth is that unskillful things should be abandoned and skillful things should be developed. Again there's a should there. There's a recommended course of action. As you actually pursue that course of action with a sense of interest, of a desire to know, that's ardency. You're bringing all three of these qualities together: mindfulness, alertness, and ardency.

In the beginning, you develop these qualities as you follow the precepts. This is one of the reasons why the precepts come so early in many of the Buddha's teachings. In the noble eightfold path, for example, he talks about right speech, right action, and right livelihood before he talks about meditation. In his graduated discourse, virtue follows right after generosity. The reason for this is that when you're trying to develop virtue, you have to look at the things you're doing in your day-to-day life. This is how you develop your mindfulness and alertness. If you see that you're causing any harm, you try to drop what you're doing so as to stop that harm. That's how you develop ardency. Fortunately, the Buddha doesn't force you to experiment with every possible course of action, to see whether or not it's harmless. He gives you guidance. He says across the board that you don't want to kill, you don't want to steal, you don't want to have illicit sex, you don't want to lie, and you don't want to take intoxicants.

That last one is important because, as he said, we're already intoxicated with youth, we're intoxicated with health, we're intoxicated with beauty, we're intoxicated with life. The mind is already drunk. You don't want to add any more intoxication on top of that because you won't be able to develop the mindfulness and alertness you need in order to see things clearly and judge your actions fairly.

So you try to hold to these precepts and see what impact they have on your life. That's the only way you're going to come to any kind of certainty. And it's the only way you're going to lead a life that provides a good container for the practice. You see this so many times on retreats when people come in off the street to spend a whole week just being with their breath. If they have any unskillful behavior in their past, it's going to come up at some point or another in the retreat.

I myself haven't been to many meditation retreats but I do remember one in particular where, halfway

through the retreat, one guy just broke down and started sobbing deeply in the middle of the afternoon. It went on for about ten, fifteen minutes. I found it very disturbing. But everybody else in the room was sitting there quietly as if nothing were happening. I learned later that this is a normal occurrence on retreats. It turned out this particular person had been a cocaine dealer and some of the stuff that he'd been engaged in while selling cocaine was coming up in his awareness.

I was also told that this happens on modern meditation retreats all the time: People come in with no background in virtue, and the stillness of the retreat provides a space for their remorse to suddenly erupt. This may provide a moment of catharsis, but not much more. If you have big wounds in your life caused by your misbehavior, it's very difficult for the mind to settle down and really be mindful and alert with enough stability to see things as they're actually happening and to direct your attention in a wise direction.

So the principle of virtue is very important, both as a container for the practice and as basic training in mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. These are the qualities that eventually you're going to bring to the body in and of itself, or feelings or mind states or mental qualities in and of themselves. But to come to those frames of reference with any solidity, you need to have practice with these three qualities in your daily life. So remember to stick by the precepts and watch over your behavior. Be alert to see when you might be breaking a precept. If you feel any temptation to break it, develop the quality of ardency, trying to figure out how not to.

Most often the problem is that a good half of the mind wants to break the precept. So even though there are lots of skills that the Buddha recommends for holding to the precepts—learning how to say No to our greed, No to our anger, No to our delusion—we apply those teachings in only a half-hearted way. Then we say that the Buddha's recommendations are not working, so we go and give in to the temptation. But the actual problem is that we haven't given the teachings a fair chance. And the result of this half-heartedness is that we stay half-minded and bewildered. We wonder: Is the Buddha really right about skillful behavior? If you try to behave skillfully and all you do is find yourself getting really tense about it, is it really all that skillful?

Well, the real question is: Why are you getting tense? Is this the mind's way of looking for an excuse not to stick with skillful behavior? There are ways of sticking with the precepts and staying perfectly relaxed around them. After all, the mind is in a state of normalcy when it's not killing, not stealing, not engaging in all these other unskillful forms of behavior. So why are you tense in refraining from these actions? Are you trying to make them unattractive to yourself? It's only when you're really true with yourself that you're going to see the truth, and this is what it comes down to.

Ajaan Lee made this point many times, as did Ajaan Fuang. The reason we're uncertain is because we're not looking truly at what we're doing. There are things we hide from ourselves, things we've done that we don't want to admit to ourselves. We've acted on intentions that we don't like to own up to. This is what keeps us bewildered. The only way out of this bewilderment is to finally admit to ourselves that, yeah, we are causing suffering. This is what we keep running up against. There's suffering going on and it's related to our behavior. You want to learn to get past all the mental subterfuges and elaborate excuses you can give to keep on engaging in the behavior that part of you likes but also knows is not really skillful. When you've decided you've had enough, that's when you're really ready for the practice.

So suffering is what causes us to be bewildered but it's also what reminds us that we want to stop being bewildered. Otherwise, we're just going to keep banging our heads against the wall of that suffering. That's where the other reaction comes in: the search. Maybe there's a way out; maybe there's somebody who knows how to put an end to suffering. The Buddha stands ready to give you his advice. It's simply up to you as to when you're ready to take it.