

Prevention

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There are four right exertions. The formula goes, “You generate desire, activate persistence, uphold your intent: one, to prevent unskillful qualities of mind that haven’t arisen yet from arising; two, to let go of those that have; three, to give rise to skillful qualities that haven’t yet arisen; and four, to develop and take to perfection the skillful qualities that have arisen.

Of the four, the first one tends to get the least attention: preventing unskillful qualities from arising. This gets special short shrift if you hear that mindfulness means being aware of the present so that you don’t want to anticipate anything before it happens: Simply be with the arising and passing away right now.

But mindfulness doesn’t function that way. Mindfulness is actually a quality of your memory, applying useful things from your memory of the past to the present moment with the knowledge that your mind is always creating karma. The mind is not just passively receiving input. It’s out there actively creating the world that it knows. Some of that creation involves input from outside but then even before the input comes the mind is already shaping things.

So the purpose of mindfulness is to remember when things come up, either from outside or from inside, that you have to figure out what to do with them. You have to remember what to do with them for the sake of your well-being now and into the future.

In this way, mindfulness points to the past or pulls out of the past things that are necessary or useful. Alertness is what watches the present moment, especially in terms of your actions. And ardency is the quality that realizes, okay, things have to be done. There are dangers if you allow unskillful things to take over the mind, and there are lots of benefits that come when you get rid of them. There are dangers when you don’t give rise to skillful qualities, and there are benefits that come when you do.

We’re involved in all three time-frames here because the principle of karma is involved in all three, too. You’ve got things coming in from the past, you’ve got things you’re doing in the present, and you’ve got to realize that what you’re doing in the present is going to have an impact on the future as well.

So when you realize that the mind has tendencies to give rise to unskillful qualities—and you tend to know which ones are your own personal weaknesses—you can’t just sit around and wait for them to come up and then say, “Whoops, I’ve got to do something about them.” You want to be prepared, you want to get the mind ready ahead of time so that you can nip these things in the bud as soon as they come up.

For instance, if you know that you have a problem with lust or pride around your body, you do the contemplation of the thirty-two parts. Think about unzipping your skin and looking inside to see which part in there really is worthy of lust or worthy of pride. And learn how to

get good at this so that as soon as the thought that the body is beautiful comes up, you have an alternative perception that can cut it off.

The more you've practiced beforehand, the quicker you can do this. This is not going to totally solve the problem of lust but at least it helps you keep it at bay. And it gives you some tools, some weapons with which to deal with the problem when it does come.

Then, as the formula for right exertion shows, when you're working on something like this, you need to generate desire, activate your persistence and uphold your intent. In other words, you're working on the first three bases for success at the same time.

To begin with, you have to make yourself *want* to do this. And part of the wanting of course comes from a sense of heedfulness: realizing that if you don't take care of this problem, it's going to come and eat you up.

Or you might motivate yourself out of a sense of compassion, both for yourself and for other people. If you know that your lust has harmed other people in the past and could probably harm other people again, remind yourself, "Okay, this is for their good as well as for mine." And that you've all suffered enough.

That's one of the questions the Thai ajaans keep asking, "Have you had enough suffering?" And your mouth may say, "Plenty enough," but something in your mind says, "No, I want some more, I don't care." So you've got to learn how to argue with that attitude.

This is how you activate your persistence and maintain it.

Then you have to pay careful attention to what you're doing. That's what it means to uphold your intent.

It's like practicing the piano. If you just put in time but don't pay attention to what you're doing, you get something out of it but not as much as you could. The whole purpose of practicing, doing something over and over again, is to notice things about what you're doing that you didn't notice before.

Ajaan Maha Boowa has a really nice passage when he talks about how he realized that he was really quick at coming up with those perceptions of the unattractiveness of the body, and he wanted to know if this had put an end to his lust. So he tested it, by trying to come up with perceptions of beauty. It took him a while. But then, after three days, he began to realize that a little part of his mind began to say, "You know, I actually like this."

So then the question was, "What do you do now?" The lust wasn't gone. That's when he began to reflect on what he was doing. It was an issue of perception, the images we have that we hold in the mind. And why does the mind go for these perceptions? What makes it create perceptions that it knows deep down inside are going to create trouble?

It was by doing this process over and over again that he was able to see very clearly the process of how the mind creates perceptions that it then falls for. That was how he was able to get past the problem.

The same way when you're practicing a musical instrument. As you just go through the

notes again and again, after a while you begin to realize, “This sounds good,” or, “That doesn’t sound good,” or, “This sounds better than that.” Or, “I pay attention here,” or, “I don’t pay attention there.” Or, “This phrase leads to that phrase”: things you wouldn’t have noticed if you did it only once or twice—or things you wouldn’t have noticed if you just did it again and again but were not really using your powers of observation.

So that element of intent, really focusing on what you’re doing, is a very important part of right exertion, so that you can actually fulfill your motivation, which is to protect the mind from habits you know tend to get it into trouble.

Another way of preventing unskillful things from arising is when you’re going to go into a situation where you know you tend to lose it, you tend to get angry. It might be a family situation, or a situation at work. So what do you do? Are you going to wait until you get in there and just come up with strategies on the spot? Why? You can actually think these things beforehand.

If you’re going to be meeting your drunken uncle, you know the kinds of things he says. Well, he knows where your buttons are. What are you going to do so that he can’t find your buttons? Or if he pushes them, what can you do so that they’re not there—you don’t respond the old way? How can you manage that? Or if he says something that you feel that you’ve got to fight off but then you realize, okay, afterwards you’re going to regret having gotten engaged with him at all: How do you keep out of the fight?

Again, part of this lies in developing the desire. And that means arguing with any voices that say, “Look, maybe I can beat him this time!” Or, “I don’t want to be just a doormat,” or whatever—the kinds of things that make you get into stupid fights. Learn how to recognize those things ahead of time and have a strategy in mind for dealing with them.

When I was staying with Ajaan Fuang, as his attendant, I’d go up to his hut every day to clean it. Halfway through the time I was there, they’d moved his hut from the bottom of the hill to a hut further up the hill. I’d be walking up to his hut in the afternoon to clean it up. And if I had an issue to discuss—about something that’d come up in my meditation or something else in the monastery that day—I found that if I hadn’t planned how I was going to phrase the first sentence, he would find something wrong, cut me off, and that would be the end of the conversation. The issue would not be discussed that day.

So as I was walking up the hill, I’d have to plan, “Okay, how do I say this? If I say this, what will his response be? If I say it *that* way, what will his response be?” I found that over time I could begin to anticipate his responses and avoid getting cut off. And that was the whole purpose of his behaving that way: so that I should think about my words before saying them.

This means that this is not a practice where you just trust that whatever impulse comes up is going to see you through. You have to plan. You have to observe what’s worked and what hasn’t worked in the past.

And if you haven’t found anything that works in the past, use your ingenuity. That’s one of

the translations for *vimamsa*, which is the fourth base of success. It's in this way that you find you avoid a lot of trouble.

And that's the whole purpose of this particular exertion. You know that there are dangerous potholes in your road, so you learn how to prepare yourself to be able to step around them. You know there are booby-traps, so you know how to avoid them because you've planned things out ahead of time.

Now, your plans may not work out, but at least having *some* plan in mind is much better than just going in and trusting that an impulse will inspire you or something will come to you. You've got to think strategically. And when you've found something that works, remember it. When you've found something that didn't work, remember *that* as well.

This is how mindfulness gets applied to this particular exertion—and shows that it's good not only for being with the present moment. It's also good for helping you shape the present and the future in a way that doesn't lead to harm for yourself, harm for anybody else—and opens the way clear for developing more and more skillful qualities as you go through life.