

Virtue Fosters Concentration

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When you came to the meditation hall—took off your shoes, came in the door—did you take off your everyday mind as well and bring a different mind inside? Obviously not. It's the same mind.

So it stands to reason that the way you live your life, the way you walk up to the hall, everything you do in the course of the day, is going to have an impact on what you're going to do as you sit here. The things you let your mind focus on, the things you do: They develop habits that carry into the time when you sit down to meditate.

This is why the Buddha put so much emphasis on the precepts and on restraint of the senses as important parts of the practice. These two topics come under a larger frame, called the four precepts of purity. They're your precepts, restraint of the senses, purity of your livelihood, and reflecting on the requisites. All of these are habits that you develop as you go through the day. And if you follow these precepts or these kinds of virtue, you bring good habits into the mind as you sit here.

With the precepts, of course, you're learning to refrain from things that are harmful to yourself or other people. In other words, you have to learn how to say No to any impulse that is sloppy or careless. And you have to learn how to say No effectively. If you tell yourself, "Okay, I'm not going to do this," and then five minutes later find yourself doing it, you haven't made much of a change in the mind; you haven't trained the mind. But if you make up your mind, "Okay, no more killing, no more stealing, no more illicit sex, no more lying, no more taking of intoxicants," then once you promise yourself to avoid these kinds of behavior, you have to learn how to stick with that promise.

As you stick with it, you bring in qualities of healthy shame, healthy compunction, conviction in the principle of karma, learning how to practice delayed gratification. In other words, there may be an instantaneous pleasure that comes from breaking a precept, but you realize that down the line it's going to be bad. Or there may be difficulties in observing the precepts but down the line it's going to be good.

This is where shame and compunction come in. Shame: realizing that breaking the precept would be beneath you. And compunction:

realizing, “Okay I don’t want to cause harm down the line because it’s going to be *me* down the line receiving that harm.”

Whatever ways you can find of getting yourself to stick with the precept effectively and learning how to feel at home with the precepts: Those habits are going to be useful the next time you sit down to meditate, because you’re going to have to refrain from wandering out after every vagrant thought and learn how to say No effectively to distraction. In learning how to say No effectively in terms of the precepts, you learn how to trust yourself. If you’ve been saying No and then saying Yes five minutes later, there’s part of the mind that knows “Okay, I don’t have to be afraid of the No’s. The Yes is going to come and maybe if I push a little bit, it’s going to come faster.” But if you trust yourself: You say No and it means No, then that habit carries into the meditation.

Then of course there’s the unentanglement that comes from not engaging in the precepts. You don’t have any bad karma connections that tend to pull you out. The reason why a lot of people can’t come to meditate is because they’ve got bad karma that stands in the way, pulls them out. They’ve got all these responsibilities that came about because they broke the precepts in one way or another. But the precepts allow you to disentangle yourself from a lot of the nasty back and forth of karmic retribution. That, too, frees you to meditate. You look back on your own behavior and you don’t see anything to criticize. There’s nothing you have to deny, there’s nothing that you have to feel remorse over. That makes it a lot easier for the mind settle down.

Also, as you’re observing the precepts, you have to be mindful, you have to be alert, and you have to develop ardency in sticking with them. These are all qualities you bring to the practice of mindfulness, and through mindfulness into the concentration.

So there are a lot of reasons why the Buddha said the precepts are an important part of the path. When he decided that there were eight folds in the eightfold path, it wasn’t because he liked the number eight and he had two extra spaces so he stuck the precepts in there. That’s not the case at all. Right speech, right action are an immediate result of having right view and right resolve. And they’re going to have a huge impact on your practice of right mindfulness and right concentration. So that’s one area of virtue that’s helpful to concentration.

Another area is restraint of the senses. This one is obvious: If you go around gathering up images of things you like to look at, or

hearing about things that you hate to hear about, focusing on what's attractive about other people or what's really disturbing or upsetting about other people's behavior: If you gather that up all through the day, it's going to be sitting here waiting for you as you try to settle down. It's like dragging home a lot of stuff in a big bag and now there it is, the big bag in the middle of your room. Sometimes it's so big there's not space for you to sit down.

So as you go through the day, notice what you're looking at, why you're looking at it, what you're listening to, why you're listening to it, what you're reading, why you're reading it: Where is this going to get your mind in terms of virtue, concentration and discernment? And who's doing the looking, who's doing the listening? Are you doing it, or is greed? Or is it lust? Anger? Are they taking over? Remember Ajaan Lee's analogy of all the little beings inside your body. Maybe they're looking through your eyes instead of you and they send you all kinds of false reports.

In other words, learn how not to identify with every instance of greed, aversion, and delusion that make you want to look at this or listen to that. You have to look at where the desire to look is coming from. And where is it going to lead? What is it going to do to your mind? Instead of just following your likes and dislikes, you stand back and learn to look at your sensory engagement as a causal process. Where is it coming from, where is it going? What can you change so that it's more conducive to concentration? You're not dragging a big bag of stuff in here. Let everything out there in the world stay out there in the world. Don't drag their stuff into your mind. This keeps the mind a lot cleaner so it's a lot easier to settle down with a sense of spaciousness inside, so that you don't start bumping into all these old issues as you try to sit down.

Purity of livelihood: This is important, too, because the way we make our livelihood tends to blind us to the harm that we're causing. If, in order to feed, we need to do this or do that that's harming someone else, we usually find ways to justify the harm. In that way, we create a lot of bad karma and there's a huge patch of denial inside the mind. Denial is not useful for gaining discernment. It stands in the way.

So you look at your livelihood: Who is it affecting? What kind of affect is it having? Does it involve any kind of dishonesty? Does it involve any kind of harm? If it does, you've got to watch out, you've got to change the way you get your livelihood, because otherwise there's a basic dishonesty in your practice. And that dishonesty will

then get in the way of any honest discernment arising.

And finally there's reflection on the requisites. These are the things we need in order to stay alive. You have to be very careful that you take just enough, because the more you take, the more of a burden you're placing on others. As the Buddha said, being unburdensome is an important principle in the practice. So reflect on these things to realize when you eat, when you wear clothing, when you use shelter, when you use medicine, all these things: Somebody has put a lot of work into that. Sometimes there's a lot of death and destruction that goes into just getting us our basic requisites. So you make up your mind: You're going to use just enough to give you the strength to practice.

You also look at your motivation. As the Buddha said, looking at the way you feed, do you feed in play? In other words, do you try exotic foods because the idea of eating them sounds like fun? Do you want to put on some weight, put on some bulk? How much bulk do you need? Or are you just following, as they say in one of texts, the top-most flavor with the tip of your tongue?—in other words, feeding for entertainment.

You have to realize that a lot of animals have lost their lives to provide you with food—and this applies even to vegetarian diets. To keep those plants insect-free, they use a lot of pesticides. They may be organic pesticides but they still kill. There's a lot of loss of life that goes into getting us fed. And the beings that lost their lives didn't lose their lives in fun, so you don't want to eat in fun. You eat for a purpose.

In that way, too, you not only create a lighter burden on the world but you are also careful about your motivation, the way you justify things to yourself. That, too, becomes a habit that you carry into the mind. If you learn how to be very careful about these things, very meticulous, that habit of being meticulous and thoughtful carries into the meditation.

So these four areas of virtue—the precepts, restraint of the senses, purity of livelihood, and reflection on the requisites as you use them—create states of mind that you bring into the meditation hall that are really conducive to getting you here to settle down, to have a sense of well-being in the present moment, to be alert in the present moment, ready to open up all the doors in your mind to see where the mind is creating issues, where it's creating suffering, and get to the root of it.

So just as the meditation has an impact on the rest of your life, the

rest of your life has an impact on your meditation. Try to make sure that that impact is good.