

## *Concentration Nurtured with Virtue*

*July 23, 2009*

The Buddha once said that concentration, when nurtured by virtue, has great fruit, great reward. Now, he wasn't saying that you can't do concentration without virtue. There are many examples around of people who have very strong powers of concentration but very little virtue at all. What he was saying is that if you want your concentration to yield great fruit—in terms of bringing about the discernment that leads to release—it has to be done in the context of life where you're trying to be virtuous in your actions, taking your actions and your words seriously, and also taking seriously their impact both on yourself and on others.

This sensitivity to your actions and their results is what helps to bring your concentration to the state where it can lead to great fruit. If you go through life not really being careful about what you do, or not being sensitive to the impact of your actions, it's going to be very hard for you to be very careful about your meditation, and to be sensitive to cause and effect as they happen in the mind. Because virtue is largely the practice of applying mindfulness and alertness to your actions: You have to keep your precepts in mind, and you have to be alert to what you're actually doing.

One of Ajaan Fuang's students who practiced meditation with him for quite a while in Bangkok decided to come out to the monastery in Rayong to observe the eight precepts for a week. So she took the eight precepts and that afternoon as she was walking past one of the guava trees, she noticed how the guavas were ripe, just waiting to be picked. So she picked one and took a bite. Ajaan Fuang happened to be a little ways off and said: "Hey, what's that in your mouth? I thought you were going to take the eight precepts." She realized she had totally forgot about her precepts. And so he consoled her by saying: "What's really important is that you observe one precept, and that's the precept of the mind." After all, the mind is what's in charge of your actions. If you stay mindful of your intentions, it's going to cover your words and your deeds.

But words and deeds deal in particulars, so you have to pay attention to the particulars as well. For example, if you've taken the precept against killing, how are you going to deal with ants? How are you going to deal with termites? This forces you to think like an ant, think like a termite. When they come into your house, why do they come? Where do they come from? What ways can you deal with them without killing them? This moves from being simply mindful and alert to developing discernment and empathy. You learn to empathize with the ants,

empathize with the termites. They're looking for food, they're looking for water, just like you. You have to learn how to put your mind in their mind if you're going to learn how to deal with them. Discernment and empathy are good qualities to provide a foundation for your concentration.

There are going to come times when you come up against really difficult issues that are not easy to solve. That's to remind you, of course, that, living in this world it's hard not to harm beings, even if you don't intend to. And this is not just a matter of the awkwardness of having taken the precepts. It's the simple fact of your being born into this world with needs. You need food, you need clothing, you need shelter, you need medicine: These things involve suffering one way or another, not only for yourself in trying to get these things, but also for other people, other beings, that are involved in one way or another in the production chain. That thought is meant to give rise to a sense of samvega. If you want to be totally harmless, you have to get out, you have to stop participating in this process of samsara.

So as you observe the precepts, you're developing a lot of good qualities in the mind that are helpful in meditation. You see the harm that comes simply from the fact that you're alive, and you try to minimize that harm by minimizing the harmful intentions in your mind. You realize that the training of the mind, and only the training of the mind, is what'll get you out of this mess, to get you out of this addiction.

It may sound selfish that you want to get out and leave everybody else behind, but that's not the right way to think about these issues. Samsara, the wandering on, is a process, an activity, an addiction, and so the best way to deal with an addiction, and the kindest way to deal with other people who are addicted, is for you to learn how to overcome your own addiction. Then, once you've done that, if you can help, then you can help other people overcome theirs. It's not as if you're leaving them in a lurch. At the very least, you're giving them a good example that overcoming the addiction is something that can be done.

It's in this way that virtue provides the right context for concentration, a context of mindfulness and alertness, empathy, goodwill, compassion, a sensitivity to cause and effect—and in particular, a sensitivity to the impact you have on others.

This part is very important because this is one of the main areas where we tend to be very deluded and in a lot of denial. We don't like to think that we harm others beings, or that our actions have actually harmed anybody in any way that really counts. So we find ways of discounting other beings in cases we suspect where some harm has been done. We say, "Oh it really doesn't matter, those

people don't matter, those beings don't matter," or whatever. Or, "My intentions were good and so my good intentions should count for everything." They count for something, but not everything. When the Buddha has you look at your actions, he has you look at both your intentions *and* at the results. It's not a matter of either/or, it's both/and. We do this so that we can learn. It's not that we're trying to pass a final judgment on ourselves or our actions. We want to see where our actions harm others, and what we can do the next time around not to harm them.

When you think of this process of judging and evaluating your actions in this way—that you're judging a work in progress—then it's a lot easier to be open and honest with yourself about your actions and their results. You're not pretending that you're totally pure, totally perfect. I've met a couple of monks who are very proud of the fact that their precepts have been perfect. But you actually look at their behavior, and what they've done is to redefine the precepts to suit their behavior. So once an element of pride comes into the practice, it starts distorting things. You want to have always the attitude that "I'm willing to learn; if I can find a better way to do things, I want to find it."

The quality of ingenuity is also an important part of providing the right framework for your concentration. As Ajaan Lee once said, the ways of the mind are more than many, and certainly more than you can put in a book or simple meditation instructions. Which means that, with a lot of the practice, you've got to come up with your own instructions. You take the basic principles and you learn how to apply them. And if applying them one way doesn't work, you turn around and apply them in another way. Or find another strategy for applying them. You've got to use your own ingenuity.

There's ingenuity required in trying to keep your precepts even when circumstances are difficult. For instance, when someone has asked you a question, and you know that if you tell them the full truth about the answer, it's going to harm them, give rise to greed, anger, or delusion, you've got to be ingenious about how to change the topic or how to give a partial answer without lying. Taking the precepts requires you to be ingenious, to plan ahead of time, knowing sometimes that someone is going to ask a particular question and preparing yourself so that you don't have to suddenly think up the answer at the last minute. This is called making the effort to prevent unskillful qualities from arising, part of right effort, which in turn is a prerequisite for right concentration.

So the practice of virtue, if you take it seriously and do it skillfully, develops a lot of discernment. It *requires* discernment. Ajaan Lee makes the point that people sometimes practice virtue to help their concentration, and practice

concentration to help their discernment, but they don't think about turning around and using their discernment to help with their virtue and concentration, which is why their practice doesn't go very far. But if you realize that you have to bring discernment to the way you observe the precepts, bring discernment to the way you practice concentration, then all three aspects of the triple training help one another. Concentration, when nurtured by virtue, leads to discernment, it bears fruit in discernment. Discernment when nurtured by concentration bears fruit in release. That's the standard pattern. But the pattern that you discover in practice is that you've also got to use your concentration to work on your virtue and your discernment, and your discernment to work on your concentration and virtue.

So it's good to stop and think for a while about virtue, and how it actually applies to the training of the mind. Don't simply go through the motions of observing the precepts, or resent the precepts when they get difficult. Think of them as providing you with food for thought, food for contemplation, about the nature of what it is to be a human being, the nature of action, the qualities of your intentions. Are your good intentions really skillful intentions? There's a difference, you know. Good intentions can have delusion, whereas skillful intentions don't. That's the distinction.

So we use the precepts for training purposes. It's not that we simply just hold onto them, hoping that by following the precepts we'll be good little boys and good little girls and will get a reward. That's called clinging to habits and practices. It's a fetter. But if you see them as an opportunity to develop discernment and then apply your discernment to them, they become useful tools in the path.

It's not the case that once you've reached the level of stream entry you don't need the precepts anymore, in letting go of that fetter of groping at habits and practices. Actually, at that point, your precepts become really solid, because the mind has reached a state where it's always clear about its intentions, and so it's always going to act on skillful intentions. It's no longer groping because it understands exactly how the precepts function: They don't guarantee your awakening, but they do give you food for thought, they do train the mind in the qualities of mindfulness, alertness, ingenuity, discernment, compassion, and empathy. In a sense, they soften the mind so that you recognize a mistake when it happens. You're not stubborn. You don't put up walls of resistance and denial. That makes the mind a lot more sensitive to what it's doing and the results of what it's doing. That sensitivity encourages the desire to do these things as skillfully as possible.

When you have these qualities and bring them to your concentration, it's a lot easier to work through the problems that come up, and it's a lot easier to be sensitive to what's going on in the mind, so that your concentration will yield the discernment that really does lead to release.