

Generosity & Virtue as Skills

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The cause of suffering is ignorance. The word for ignorance, *avijja*, is the opposite of *vijja*, which means not only knowledge but also skill. So to go past suffering we need to learn skills. This is an important point to keep in mind. We're not simply sitting here waiting for things to happen. We're trying to approach each breath in a skillful way, approach all our activities in a skillful way. When the mind settles down, it's because we've developed a skill. Then as we look at that skill and understand it, that's what gives rise to discernment.

So when things aren't going well in the meditation, ask yourself, "What are you doing that's not skillful?" It may be in the way you breathe, it may be in the way you approach the breath, it may be in the attitude that you bring to the practice. Learn to see all these issues as questions of skill. Try to bring to the practice the same attitudes you'd bring to any kind of skill you develop in your life.

This is why some meditation masters ask you to develop a manual skill before you meditate, because you develop a lot of good attitudes that way. There's a certain amount of patience, a certain amount of equanimity required to master a skill. In our modern society, a lot of skills are being lost, which means that many of us don't have the proper attitudes we need, the proper mental skills we need in order to sit down and meditate and do it well. So try to think back on whatever skills you've developed—it may be learning a musical instrument, learning a sport, learning a craft of some kind—and try to bring to the practice the attitudes that worked well in mastering those skills.

Part of this means having a desire and knowing how to relate to your desire. In other words, you want to do this well, you want to get good results, but you realize, if you have any skill at all, that if you want good results, you have to make the causes good.

So that's where you focus your desire. You want the mind to settle down. How do you get it to settle down? You just keep it with the breath. So keep coming back to the breath. As soon as you find that you've wandered off, come back, come back, come back. And any chattering voices in the mind that speak in tones of discouragement or boredom or whatever, you've got to learn to put those aside. You can't identify with them.

Then as you're with the breath, how can you stay in a way that's skillful, so that you're not putting too much pressure on different parts of the body, you're not trying to stifle the breath as you focus in on it. You do want the focus of your concentration to be strong and steady, but you don't want it to be so heavy that it becomes constricting. This is a matter of watching yourself, learning how to step back from what you're doing and judge it with a certain amount of equanimity and patience.

There was a famous teacher in Thailand who had a lot of Western students, and he realized that these were the two qualities that they were most lacking in: equanimity and patience. Again, it was probably because they didn't have many manual skills, but also because they were lacking two really important skills, areas that we don't tend to think of as being skills: the skills of generosity and the skills of virtue. These two skills teach patience and a lot of other good attitudes that you're going to need as you meditate.

The skill of generosity comes from realizing that your happiness can't depend on your eating alone. There's a happiness that comes from sharing, because in sharing you realize that you don't have to obey your desires. You can say No to your greed, you can say No to your possessiveness. This is especially true when you've given something, not because it was the holiday when people give things or you were under a compulsion to give, but because you just felt like giving. You saw something you had, and that someone else could use it well and would benefit from it, so you wanted to share. That's a skillful attitude, because it helps you see the happiness that comes in letting go, the happiness that comes in thinking about other people's needs.

The happiness we're trying to work on as we meditate is a happiness that's blameless. It doesn't cause any harm to anyone. When you're generous, you begin to realize that your happiness has to include the happiness of others as well. At the very least, you want to be able to share with them. That cuts down the boundaries between you and those other people, making it a lot easier to live together.

In this way, you develop a certain skillfulness in your relationships with others. You take long-term consequences into account. You learn how to say No to your more selfish desires. These are important skills and they require learning how to talk to yourself in such a way that you're happy to give. This skillful voice that you can create, or these skillful voices you can create in the mind, are going to be really helpful as you meditate.

Even more so with the skills of virtue. In the case of each precept—not killing, not stealing, not having illicit sex, not lying, not taking intoxicants—you have to think of it as a matter of learning how to live skillfully, of finding happiness in a blameless way. If you simply act on your impulses without thinking about consequences, there are going to be problems down the line.

If you're the type of person who breaks the precepts easily, it's going to get in the way of your meditation in many ways. One is that you tend not to want to look at your intentions, and you don't want to look at the results of your actions. You don't like even being told that there's a more skillful way to live. There's a certain willfulness in saying, "Well, this is the way I do things and I don't want to be told any other way at all." That closes the door. At the same time, part of you knows that what you've been doing is unskillful, so you try to bury it in denial. That's not creating the conditions for any kind of insight at all. Things have been closed off and buried up in your mind.

So when there's the impulse to kill, even if it's a case where you feel that you're in danger or someone you love is in danger, you have to remind yourself that there are other options. Even with something like dealing with the issue of termites: Once you've decided to make the vow to yourself that you're not going to harm anybody, you're not going to kill anybody, you've got to think about how you build your house or what kind of house you're going to be willing to live in. In other words, you have to plan ahead. It's not as if you take the vow and then suddenly discover down the line, "Oh, there's such a thing as termites in this world." You know there are termites in the world, so you have to prepare.

This willingness to prepare, to go out of your way in order to stick with your vow, to think about the consequences of your actions beforehand: That's an important mental attitude, an important mental skill that you're going to need as a meditator.

The same with stealing: If you're the type of person who says, "Well, taking a little this, a little that, doesn't really matter, they're not going to miss it," or, "Those corporations have been stealing from the rest of the world, so it doesn't matter if I take a little bit from them," that's developing a very sloppy attitude. What they do is their business. Your business is making sure that you're not infringing on things that other people have taken into their possession. And again, you learn how to realize that you don't need that thing, so why infringe on other people?

A similar principle with illicit sex: It's primarily defined as having an affair with someone or having a relationship with somebody on whom someone else already lays claim. Either they're married or they're going steady, or in the case of minors, the parents lay claim on the children: You stay away from that, because you realize it's going to cause a lot of trouble down the line.

You learn how to find alternative ways of gaining pleasure. This is one of the reasons why we meditate: to gain a sense of well-being inside, so that the strong urge to just give into an impulse becomes not quite so strong. It's not quite so hungry. You can create a sense of well-being here inside instead.

Of all the precepts, the one that requires the most discernment and the most ingenuity is the one against lying. It's so easy, when you want to avoid talking about something, just to say a little white lie and justify it to yourself. But when you set up the rule for yourself that you're not going to misrepresent the truth at all, then if you come across something that really would be harmful to talk about—and the Buddha recognizes there are some things that when you talk about them give rise to greed, aversion, or delusion, either in yourself or in others—you want to avoid that. You've got to develop the skills needed to avoid certain topics of conversation. Or when someone raises a question, you have to figure out deftly how get around it, so that you don't have to speak in ways that are going to give rise to unskillful mental states, and yet at the same time, you don't misrepresent the truth.

This teaches you to be meticulous, scrupulous, to use your ingenuity—all of which are a craftsman's skills, and all of which are the skills you're going to need to meditate.

As for the precept against taking drugs or alcohol, you have to ask yourself why. Why do you need to make yourself even more intoxicated than you already are? As the Buddha said, we're already intoxicated with youth, intoxicated with health, intoxicated with life. Those who have wealth are intoxicated with their wealth. Those who have status or power are intoxicated with their status or power. Those with beauty are intoxicated with their beauty. There's always something for us to be intoxicated with. So why compound the problem? Intoxicants, by their nature, make it very hard to be scrupulous and meticulous. You're destroying part of the intelligence you've worked so hard to develop as a human being.

This, too, is an attitude that a craftsman has. You work on skills, you work on abilities, and you don't want to destroy the ones that you've worked so hard to develop.

So when you approach the issue of virtue as a skill or as a series of skills, it helps to develop the right attitudes, the right inner voices—the ones that learn how to say No in an effective way, the ones that can encourage you and give you a sense of gladness over the fact that you have virtue. In other words, virtue is not just a hard taskmaster that's going to come down with a whip or a stick if you do something wrong. You learn how to encourage yourself to see the value of being virtuous, to see the goodness, the happiness, the sense of well-being that comes from knowing that you haven't acted in ways that harmful to yourself or harmful to others. Those are parts of your inner personality that are really worth developing. Those, too, are skills: the ability to talk yourself into doing something skillful and out of doing something unskillful. That's one of *the* prime inner mental skills that you're going to need to develop for the sake of the meditation.

So these are the skills that the Buddha has you develop as you approach meditation: the skills of generosity, the skills of virtue. When you see them as skills and not just rules that are laid down, you can see how they really do connect with the practice and provide a much better environment. Your relationships with other people are more peaceful, and it's easier to have the time to meditate. You've got the right inner attitude of patience, equanimity, the ability to see the value of trading in an immediate pleasure for a much longer term pleasure—all of which are skills that'll take you far.