

Concentration Nurtured by Virtue

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Toward the end of his life, the Buddha gave a Dhamma talk that he repeated many times, and it started with the phrase, “Concentration nurtured by virtue is of great fruit, great benefit.” Notice what he’s saying there. He’s not saying that you can’t get into concentration without virtue, although many people have misinterpreted his words in that way, and in a dangerous way as well. I’ve known some monks who had strong powers of concentration, and they started getting sloppy with the precepts, and yet it didn’t have any effect on their concentration. So they figured, “Well, those precepts must not matter.” But as soon as you start thinking that way, you’ve justified unskillful behavior to yourself. That way, you’re lying to yourself. And concentration based on lying to yourself is not of great fruit, great benefit.

The great fruit and benefit of concentration, of course, is discernment. And from discernment there’s release. But without the virtue, no matter how strong it is, concentration is not going to lead to discernment, because it’s built on dishonesty. Discernment, however, is all about being honest and truthful with yourself. So if you want concentration that’s safe, it has to be based on the precepts.

There are five altogether: no killing; no stealing; no illicit sex; no lying; no taking of intoxicants. In each of those cases, it’s a promise you make to yourself. And you want to make it absolute—under no circumstances are you going to kill any living being; under no circumstances are you going to steal anything from anyone; no illicit sex at all; no lying at all, not even white lies; no intoxicants. That’s it. And for the precept to have power that really does nurture fruitful concentration, you have to make it a consistent, steady promise to yourself—one that you really do follow through with. Because in doing that, you develop lots of good qualities that are conducive for right concentration.

First, of course, is simply the lack of remorse. You haven’t harmed anybody with your words or actions. When you reflect on that, it’s easier for the mind to settle down. Remembering a precept and being alert to your actions to make sure

that you don't break it develops your powers of mindfulness and alertness, which of course transfer over into the concentration.

On top of that, there's the principle of harmlessness. You notice, in the factors of the noble eightfold path that we chanted just now, that from right view comes right resolve. Part of right resolve is to resolve on having no ill will and on being harmless. That's a factor of wisdom right there. So if you want your actions to be in line with wisdom, they have to be harmless as well. Because when we're developing both concentration and discernment, it's a matter of seeing how the mind creates unnecessary problems for itself: harm on a very subtle level, so subtle that when you first encounter these states of concentration, you don't see that there's any disturbance in the mind at all. But if you learn to be alert to how your actions can create harm for yourself or for other people, then you're in a better position to see the same principle at work in your mind.

The Buddha talks about developing the mind in a quality of emptiness. What that means is that you see that as the mind begins to settle down, it's empty of the disturbances you used to take for granted. It's like going out into the wilderness. You sit there and remind yourself, "Here I am in the wilderness." And the issues of home and the issues of all the people at home suddenly seem far away. They no longer weigh on the mind. You've probably had that experience. You go to the Grand Canyon or someplace else that's really impressive, and all of a sudden all your issues of daily life seem so small in comparison to the grandeur of the wilderness.

Well, you want to develop that same attitude as you settle down. And it's a lot easier for the mind to settle down if you haven't been engaged in harming other people, because that harm will start nagging at you. If you try to deny it, again, you're lying to yourself. So either the nagging sense of remorse or else the lying of the denial will block your ability to settle down in a way where you can really see things clearly.

But even if your engagement with other people has been virtuous, you realize that getting away from people takes a huge load off the mind—you don't have to worry about their issues; you're just there in the wilderness.

Of course, thinking about the wilderness, you might think of all the animals and the other things that can happen there. You're off on the North Rim of the

Grand Canyon—way away from anyone else. If anything happened to you, you're in a position of danger. So even there, the thought of wilderness can weigh on the mind to a certain extent.

That's why the Buddha recommends that you go on to thinking about the elements of the body. He recommends the earth in the sutta, but you can use the breath as an alternative. You're just here with breath. You can think of breath permeating throughout the body—the whole body is breathing, down to every little cell, down to every little nerve and blood vessel in the body. And that's a much less disturbed state of mind than even the thought of wilderness.

So in this way, a lot of the meditation is learning how to be sensitive to slight disturbances in the mind. And you can regard those disturbances as the suffering in the four noble truths, if you want to analyze them.

This is one of the teachings that Ajaan Suwat would give. You sit here trying to get the mind still. If there's any disturbance in the stillness, you can say, "Okay, this is suffering." When the Buddha talks about stress and suffering, it includes little things like this, in addition to the more blatant forms of outright suffering. If we can cause ourselves this kind of burden with little things like this, it's very easy to get involved in other, bigger burdens as well. This is your test case for how the mind adds an element of stress to the present moment that doesn't have to be there.

So when the mind, through virtue, is attuned to be sensitive to harm, sensitive to disturbance, then the concentration that's built on that virtue will be much more likely to develop the discernment needed to start stripping away the mind's bad habits—the subtle bad habits inside. But if you can't take care of the big bad habits, there is *no way* that the subtle ones are going to be resolved. So if you want your concentration to be solid, it's got to be based on virtue.

Years back, when Ajaan Suwat was teaching in Massachusetts, at the end of the retreat one of the questions was, "How do we go about maintaining meditation in our daily life?" Ajaan Suwat's response was to focus on the five precepts. The person who had organized the retreat was upset, because he thought that Ajaan Suwat was saying that lay people can't manage meditation in daily life, so they should just content themselves with the miserable little five precepts. But that's not what he was saying at all. It's through observing the precepts that you

create the container for your meditation practice. When the container is good, then you can maintain your concentration. If there are holes in your container, the concentration is going to leak out. In Ajaan Lee's image, it leaks out your eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body. And then there's nothing left. But if you have a sense that you've got something precious here, then you want to put it in a good container to protect it, to keep it safe and sound.

When you work with the virtues of the five precepts, you also have to work with the virtues of the restraint of the senses. They go together. In fact, one of the practices that you can take on in lay life is not only the five precepts but also occasionally taking the eight. The eight precepts add sense restraint to the original principle of harmlessness. You check what's going out your eyes as you look. In other words, the images may be coming into your eyes, but your purpose in looking is going out your eyes, focusing on this detail, that detail, for the purpose of greed, aversion, or delusion. You've got to watch out for that. If you allow those things to take over your looking and listening, then they're going to take over everything else inside. You're nurturing these qualities in daily life but then you're trying to cut through them when you're meditating, so of course there's going to be a conflict.

So if you find that you're looking out of greed, try to see the unattractive side of what you're trying to use your greed to stir up. After all, it's not just because things are attractive that you feel greed—often the greed is there and then you look for things to get greedy about. It's the same with anger. This is why they have hate radio. The radio doesn't turn itself on—you have to turn it on to listen. You're looking for something to get angry about, so you find a commentator who's angry about something. And you get worked up about that.

And it's the same with other issues, dealing with other people. Sometimes you're looking for an issue and you start seeing things that are not there, just because you want to have an issue. So if you notice that happening in your mind, you have to counteract it—either stop trying to engage in that issue or try to look for the good side of the thing that you're making yourself angry about, so that you can bring things into balance.

This way, your wisdom and discernment are doing the looking, rather than your greed, aversion, and delusion. And here again, concentration that's held in a

container of the restraint of the senses is much more likely to give rise to discernment, because principles of virtue are in line with the principles of discernment.

All of the ajaans make the point that virtue, concentration, and discernment are really hard to distinguish from one another, especially if they're right virtue, right concentration, right discernment. They come together and they all depend on one another. It's not the case that you get your virtue straight, and then you go to your concentration and get that straight, and only then do you go to discernment. You need your discernment to work on your virtue and concentration; you need your concentration to work on your virtue. They help one another along, and they do come together. They come together around this principle of giving up anything that's harmful—no matter how blatant or slight. You don't say, "Well, I'm just going to go the subtle things in the mind, because I am advanced." If you let go of the subtle things but without having taken care of the blatant ones in your actions, it's not going to work. The blatant ones will still weigh you down.

So try to stick with all three of these principles and bring them together. That's how they nurture one another and really do yield great fruit and great benefit, lifting off the burdens of the mind.