

## *Virtues & Values*

*March 12, 2020*

Tonight we inaugurate our temporary monastery. It's taken a lot of work, a lot of cooperation. Now we can sit with our eyes closed and do the work inside.

The practice is a matter of work outside and work inside. The reason we have the monastery is to create a community where we can help one another. The lay people provide support to the monks so that the monks can devote themselves full-time to the practice. As they develop expertise, they can share that expertise with the lay people. So both sides benefit. As the Buddha said, in helping yourself, you help others. In helping others, you help yourself.

In helping yourself, you're trying to get some control over your mind. You try to develop good qualities and abandon bad qualities. That's what mindfulness is all about. This is how mindfulness becomes your refuge. You not only remember what's right and what's wrong, but you also learn to recognize it here in the present moment, and you remember what to do about it.

If something unskillful comes up in the mind, you have to recognize it as unskillful. You can't say to yourself, "Well, this is my thought, this is my preference, and I'm going to hold on to it." You have to think about the long term, where your likes don't matter, and the actual results of your actions *do* matter. So if a thought is unskillful, you try to develop the wisdom to recognize it as unskillful and to make up your mind to abandon it.

If a skillful quality arises in the mind, again, you don't simply watch it come and go, and think that that's insight. You try to develop it; you try to maintain it. You protect it. And as you protect it, it protects you. Of course, as you're developing good qualities inside, other people will benefit. The less greed, aversion, anger, and delusion you have in your mind, the less these things will come out in your actions, and the less other people will be affected. If they're interested in the practice, they'll find it easier to stick with the practice, too.

The Buddha gives the example of two acrobats. One acrobat is standing on the end of a bamboo pole. His student is standing on his shoulders, and he says to her, "Okay, now you look out after me, and I'll look out after you. In that way, we'll perform our tricks and come down safely from the pole." And she says to him, "No, that won't do. I look out after myself. You look out after yourself. In that way, we protect each other. We'll be able to perform our tricks and come safely down from the pole."

As the Buddha said, in that case the student was right. If you think about it, you have to maintain your balance. You can't maintain anybody else's balance. But in maintaining your balance, you make it easier for them to maintain theirs. That's how helping yourself helps others.

At the same time, in helping others you have to develop qualities like patience, equanimity, kindness, and goodwill. That's how we live together. That's how we help one another. And in doing so, we develop these good qualities inside, qualities that will be to our benefit.

So even though, as we're meditating, each person is focused on his or her own breath—we can't look at anyone else's breath—we're still helping one another. At the very least, when you're sitting here in a group like this, it's hard to get up and give up on the meditation, saying, "I don't feel like it tonight. I'm tired. It doesn't matter if I stop early." It's hard to do that when other people are sitting around you. But at the same time, you see their example. It gives you encouragement, and you give them encouragement, too.

Years back—in the early years, when I was first ordained, in my first week with Ajaan Fuang—there was another young monk who was also newly ordained. We went to sit at the wooden shed up at the top of the hill. It wasn't too long before my legs were in pain. Mosquitoes were biting me. And I was ready to give up. But then I opened my eyes and noticed him; he was sitting there and looked very peaceful. So I thought, "I can't let him beat me. I've got to maintain the good name of America." So I continued sitting. Well, I found out later that he, too, was in pain, suffering from the mosquitoes biting him. He was ready to give up, but then he opened his eyes and saw this American sitting there. And he couldn't let himself be beaten by the American. In that way, we kept each other going.

So don't think of meditation as a selfish practice, and don't think of it as something you do only on your own. You need guidance, and guidance comes from whom? It comes from people who've had more time to practice. This is how monks can help the lay people. They've had more time to practice. They've had more experience, and they can share their expertise. Lay people can encourage one another as well.

If you were the only person meditating in all of Brazil, you might give up easily. You might think that you were crazy—that you were doing something that didn't have any value because no one else gave it value. But when you see that there are other people who value a life devoted to the practice, it gives you more encouragement. And in the same way, you give them encouragement as well. It's in this way that we're stronger together, wiser together. We have more energy for the practice together.

So keep these thoughts in mind. These are among our values as meditators. We talked earlier this morning about how meditation is not just a matter of technique. The practice is not just a matter of technique. It's a matter of virtues and values as well. Virtues are the good qualities you develop not only when you sit here with your eyes closed but also when you're being generous, when you're observing the precepts, and when you're developing thoughts of goodwill.

Values lie in seeing that these are important things to do. We shape our lives through our actions, and our actions are determined by the qualities of our intentions. So we want to look into our intentions to make sure they're harmless. That's an important value.

There's so much harm being done in the world—people do it so casually—that it's inspiring to see people who value harmlessness and develop the virtue of harmlessness in their thoughts, their words, and their deeds. This gives the context for the technique because we know that we could have good values but if we forget them, then even though we may have the values, we don't have the virtues. We have the virtues in what the Buddha calls a "spotty" way. Sometimes they're there, and sometimes they're not.

But if we can train ourselves to be watchful of our minds, we can keep in mind what's really important in life—the long-term results of our actions—making sure that they're harmless and that they lead to a happiness that's solid, reliable, and if we're right here at the present moment where those decisions are made, then we can develop the virtues we need. The goal of harmlessness is something that becomes possible.

So we focus on the breath as an anchor here in the present moment because, of all the things in the world, it's the closest to the mind. When you're with the breath, there's no past breath you can watch. There's no future breath you can watch. You've got to be in the present moment to be with the breath. And it's here in the present moment that you're making your decisions and you can keep careful watch over the quality of your decisions.

Otherwise, the mind is like a corporation whose the chairman is off on vacation all the time. As a result, the workers end up making the decisions—some of them of them wise, some of them not. But the chairman has no idea. He plays no role in determining the future of the corporation. That kind of corporation is going to fail, because the individual members are not coordinated. But if the chairman is always there, always watchful, always in touch with the different members of the corporation, then everyone works together. The decisions are good for the corporation.

And it's the same with the mind. When you're here in the present moment and the mind is still, you can hear the different voices of the committee or the corporation of the mind. You can sort out who's responsible and who's not responsible, who can be relied on and who can't be relied on. In that way, your values become a reality. They really do develop into virtues, the qualities of the mind you need to find a happiness that you can rely on.

Now, each of us will experience this happiness for ourselves. That's what the chant about the Dhamma says: "This is to be known by the observant for themselves." This is why each of us has to develop the skill inside individually. But when we're all practicing, we all offer support to one another. In that way, our practice acquires strength, and we can reach the goal at which we all aim.