

## *Five Precepts, Five Virtues*

*May 8, 2022*

The Pali word for meditation, *bhāvanā*, means to develop, to try to develop good qualities in the mind. Even with something simple like this, focusing on the breath: Take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths, and try to stay with nothing but the breath.

In other words, the sound of the crickets, the sound of the wind, the sound of the crows: You don't have to pay them any attention. They're there, you know they're there, but you don't have to make them your focus. Your focus is on the sensation of breathing in your body.

To do this, you've got to develop some good qualities in the mind: Mindfulness is the first one. You've got to keep in mind your determination that each time you breathe in, you're going to stay with the breath. Each time you breathe out, stay with the breath

You also have to be alert to make sure that you actually are staying with the breath and to notice how the breath feels.

One of the ways of making it easier to stay with the breath is if you feel comfortable with the way you breathe: It feels good coming in, feels good going out. What kind of breathing would feel good now? You might want gentle breathing or you might want more intense breathing. Think of the breath not just as air coming in and out through the nose. The whole energy movement in the body counts as breath, too.

So make a survey: What's going on in the body right now? When you breathe in, where do you feel it? If you pay careful attention, you can actually feel it going all the way down through the torso, down through the legs, or down the shoulders down through the arms, down to the tips of the fingers. There's an energy that lets you know that you've got a body right here. How does that energy feel? And when you breathe in different ways, what does that do to the energy? Which way of breathing seems to be best for the body right now? You can try fast or slow, heavy or light, deep or shallow.

Experiment to see what feels good right now because, after all, the breath is the force of life. Without the breath, you wouldn't know the body at all. The body and the mind would have to go their separate ways. This is the force that keeps them together. So it only stands to reason that if this force feels good, it's going to be good both for the body and for the mind.

That's a combination of alertness plus another quality the Buddha calls *atappa*, which means ardency: You try to really do this well. Give it your full attention, and remind yourself even though it doesn't seem like much is happening—just breath coming in, breath going out—there are lots of variations. Sometimes they're subtle, sometimes they're more blatant, but either way, you can create a sense of well-being in the body for free.

You don't have to buy your breath or borrow it from anybody else. It's right there, free. It's simply a matter of your learning how to cultivate the potentials you already have in the body.

So what we're doing is we're giving the mind a good place to stay. If it doesn't have a good place to stay in the present moment, it's going to want to wander around.

And it wanders around in what? In thoughts that it's made up—some of which are true, some of which are not true, some of which are good to think, some of which are not good to think. So we want to learn how to get some control over the way the mind is thinking. The more mindful and alert and ardent you are in getting some control over the mind, the more control you'll have over your thoughts. You can think about what you want to think about, and you don't have to think about things you don't want to think about. You can be in charge.

All too often it's the other way around: Our thoughts are in charge. A thought comes into the mind and you can't shake it. It seems to follow you around wherever you go.

It's not necessarily a thought that you like, or necessarily a thought that's actually good to be thinking, but it's there. And the reason it has power is because you haven't learned the powers of your own mind: to maintain the right focus, to be mindful, to be alert, to give yourself something else that's good to stay with.

When the mind is more solid like this, then you can begin to trust it, because

the development of the mind, the meditation, goes together with two other practices: the practice of generosity and the practice of virtue. It's a lot easier to practice them when you've developed a sense of well-being inside.

If you're feeling ill at ease, if you're feeling exasperated, the mind will say, "No, I don't want to be generous, and who cares about virtue? Look at all the people in the world who get ahead by breaking the precepts." But getting ahead like that is not necessarily good for them, and it's not going to be good for you if you follow their example.

There are five precepts all together. The precept against killing, against stealing, against having illicit sex, against lying, against taking intoxicants: These are the five qualities that make you a human being because they go together with five virtues.

In other words, it's not just that you don't kill living beings, you actually look out after their welfare, you develop the virtue of kindness.

As for not stealing, the opposite is learning how to be generous: realizing that there are a lot of areas where you have more than enough. There's a sense of well-being, a sense of spaciousness in your mind when you feel rich enough in your own time, your own strength, your own forgiveness, that you're willing to share.

As for the precept against illicit sex, you develop the quality the Buddha calls renunciation. Renunciation sounds like you're giving up something, but in his way of thinking renunciation involves giving up things of lesser value to gain things of more value. In this case, you develop the sense of well-being that comes from concentration: Simply by sitting here breathing—the breath coming in, going out comfortably—you don't require any sensual pleasures at all to make you happy. That's what you learn when you meditate: You've got the resources inside that allow you to breathe in a way that feels really satisfying, and it's all for free. It has nothing to do with sensual desires at all. That's what renunciation means.

It's like making a trade—or like playing chess. You know you'll have to give up some pieces in order to win. The people who want to keep all their pieces never win. Or it's like planting flowers and other plants in your garden: You may decide that you want all kinds of plants in your garden, but some plants will kill the other plants. You put in a eucalyptus tree and it's going to kill everything else in the garden.

In the same way, you have to realize there are certain pleasures in life that you just have to say No to, because you want something better. And illicit sex is one of those areas where you just say No. Then you compensate. You find something else that would give you a greater pleasure, something more solid, less harmful. That's the virtue that's paired with the third precept.

The virtue that goes with the fourth precept, of course, is that you're truthful. You're honest in your dealings with other people.

And the virtue that goes with the fifth precept against intoxicants is that you're heedful. You see clearly that your actions will make a difference between whether you're going to be happy or suffering. And you realize you have to be really careful about what you do, say, and think. You can't just go with every urge that comes into the mind. You have to stop and think, "When I do this, what are the results going to be?"

As the Buddha said, the sign of wisdom is when you realize that there are things that you like to do but you know will give bad results, so you learn how to say No and stick with it. As for other things that you don't like to do but will give good results if you actually do them, you learn how to talk yourself into wanting to do them. That's a sign of real wisdom, a sign of real intelligence: knowing how to psyche yourself up to make sure that your likes and dislikes don't take over your life. As for your sense of cause and effect, of what really will be in your long-term best interest, you let that take charge.

To develop these five virtues—the virtue of kindness, the virtue of generosity, the virtue of renunciation, the virtue of truthfulness, the virtue of heedfulness—requires work, requires strength. This is one of the reasons why we meditate and get the mind to settle down like this, because when the mind settles down, it gains strength. It's not running around all the time, and it's not harassed by thoughts that are totally useless. You train it to think when it needs to think, and to rest when it doesn't. That way, you're using your mind well. You're in charge of your life. This is what it means to be free: to do what's skillful. That's the best use of your freedom.

If we're free simply to follow our greed, aversion, and delusion, that's a kind of slavery. But the freedom that comes when you realize, "Okay, I can choose my

actions based on what the long-term results are going to be, and I have the inner strength I need to resist any temptation to go for a quick fix. I'll stick with my sense of what's for long-term benefit": That's a freedom worth cultivating, which is what we do as we meditate. As we develop these good qualities of mind, we're cultivating freedom in the best sense of the word.