

# *The Treasure of Virtue*

*May 15, 2022*

We're here meditating today in honor of the Buddha because today marks the day, the full-moon day in May, when he was born. Then thirty-five years later, again on the full-moon day in May, he gained awakening. And then forty-five years after that on the full-moon day in May, he entered total *nibbāna*. So today is a good day to think about him.

Of course, we should be thinking about the Buddha every day, because in his awakening he found something really important that has a bearing on every day in our lives, which is that human action can find true happiness—it can be attained by training the mind.

We should think about that all the time, because as we make our choices going through life, we should always keep in mind the fact that there is that possibility—that if we train our minds, we can find true happiness. We have to watch out for the things that would get in the way.

As the Buddha said, your two most important possessions are right view and virtue. It's based on these two things that you can develop mindfulness, and through mindfulness you can get the mind into concentration. So you want to make sure that these foundations are really strong.

Right view starts, of course, with the principle that if you act on skillful intentions, the results will be good for the long term. If you act on unskillful intentions, the results are going to be bad for the long term. You have to hold to that view all the time. It's not something you think about only when you're in a monastery, or just during the hour where you're going to sit and meditate. This is something that should inform all your actions. It's one of those laws that applies 24/7.

It's not like a traffic law that says you can park here on Wednesdays and Thursdays, but not on Sundays and Fridays. And it doesn't come in and out of influence based on what you want. It's there all the time.

So when you think about that, you have to realize, okay, you've got to be very careful about how you act.

From that view comes the basic principle for virtue, which is that you don't intentionally act in ways that will cause harm to anyone: You're not kill living beings. You're not going to

steal anything. You're not going to have illicit sex. You're not going to lie. You're not going to take intoxicants. In this way you protect others, but more importantly you protect yourself.

As you observe the precepts, you create a good foundation for getting the mind into concentration through mindfulness. To begin with, the simple fact that when you sit down, closing your eyes, trying to make the mind still, you look back on your actions for the day, and you realize you haven't harmed anybody at all: That gives rise to a sense of joy, a sense of well-being inside, a sense of self-esteem. Those qualities are really useful when you're going to work on concentration, because sometimes it gets frustrating. You try to get the mind to settle down, and it seems to be just full of thoughts. It's like herding cats, or the image they give in Thailand is of catching crabs to put into a basket. You get the first crab in the basket, but by the time you reach down to gather up the second crab, the first crab is already crawling out.

At times like that, it's good to be able to remind yourself that, yes, you do have some goodness inside.

At the same time, by observing the precepts, you've learned already some of the skills you're going to need as you meditate. When the Buddha talks about getting the mind established, he says that there are three qualities you have to bring to it. One is mindfulness, the ability to keep something in mind. Two is alertness, your ability to watch what you're doing. Three is *ātappa* or ardency: You really try to do this well.

Now, if you've been observing the precepts, you already have some practice in developing these qualities. To observe a precept, one, you have to keep it in mind. That's mindfulness. Two, you have to watch your behavior to make sure that it stays in line with the precept. That's alertness. And in times when it's difficult, you figure out ways to get around the difficulties while at the same time not breaking the precept. That's ardency. It's the quality that embodies discernment.

I was reading someone saying that bringing discernment to the precepts means knowing when to observe them and when not. But that's lazy discernment, and it's not really wise. Wise discernment figures out, for example, what to do when you have some information that you know someone else would like to get out of you, and they would like to abuse that information once they get it. You have to figure out some way to avoid that topic of conversation, not give the information, but without lying.

That sets the bar higher. And there are difficulties like that with all the precepts. But you make an effort to maintain the precept, even if the difficulty is simply the fact that, say, people

around you are drinking, and you don't want to drink, but they start putting pressure on you. You have to figure out how you withstand the pressure in such a way that you don't insult them, but at the same time you hold your ground. When you can observe the precepts in that way, that's how you develop discernment. That, as I said, is the ardency here.

So these qualities—mindfulness, alertness, and ardency—are precisely what you need to get the mind to settle down. You're mindful of the breath, and then you're alert to watch both the breath and the mind to make sure they stay together. Then, if they're not staying together, you put forth an effort to figure out: Is the problem with the mind, or is the problem with the breath, or is something else interfering? When you figure out what the interference is, then you can put an end to it.

Because the interference, the Buddha says, is not so much things coming at you from outside, it's usually what the mind is doing to itself, saying to itself, thinking to itself. If you can figure out how to change the conversation inside, then you've gone a long way toward making it easier to get the mind to settle down—and to observe the precepts on the external level as well.

So these are some of the ways in which you have views made straight, as the Buddha calls them, and precepts that are pleasing to the noble ones. When you have these two qualities, then it's a lot easier for the mind to settle down because you've learned the skills you need to meditate. And you have a sense of confidence in yourself, and joy in the Buddha's teachings.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha put right speech, right action, and livelihood into the factors of the path, because they build on right view and right resolve. And they lead to right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. They're your most precious possessions.

The Buddha talks about this in the context of things you might lose as you observe the precepts. There will be times when, in the eyes of the world, you're put at a disadvantage when you're observing the precepts. Other people can make money by lying, but that avenue is closed off to you. So you may have to suffer loss of wealth for a while. You may have relatives who want you to lie for their sake, and you have to say No. They may get really upset, but you have to realize that when you're dying, your relatives can't come and help make sure that you go to a good place. It's going to depend on you—your past actions and your present actions at that time. So you don't want to do anything that's going to create difficulties then. That's purely between you and you.

So when other people try to pressure you into drinking or breaking the precepts in other

ways, you have to remind yourself that your wealth lies in maintaining your precepts. And you have to learn how to say No to your friends in a way that doesn't insult them.

In this way, you develop wisdom, discernment, and compassion through the precepts. You develop purity by observing the precepts. These are all qualities of the Buddha. In fact, these are his three main qualities: wisdom, compassion, purity. You can develop them, too, by looking for happiness in a mature way, a wise way.

The Buddha never says that you should sacrifice your happiness for other people, because as he says, when you say *sacrifice your happiness*, it means breaking the precepts. You never break the precepts for anybody's sake, because the precepts are more valuable than any of your other possessions.

You could lose your wealth. You could lose your health. You could even lose your relatives. As the Buddha said, it wouldn't be all that serious. But if you lose your precepts and your right view, that loss can harm you for a long, long time.

So do your best to stick by the precepts even when it's hard. The more you can stick with them even when it's hard—figuring out ways to make it easier, but at the same time not breaking the precepts—the more you can develop a lot of good qualities in mind. Qualities that will lead to your happiness in this life and the next, and to the happiness and well-being of others. This is a practice that's good all around.