

## *Three Virtues for the Mind*

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When we think about the precepts, we tend to think about the five precepts dealing with actions of the body and the words we say, but there's also a list of precepts for the mind. It involves three things: avoiding excessive greed, avoiding ill will, and developing right view.

This is part of what we're doing as we meditate: developing these virtues in the mind. For instance, as you focus on the breath, try to make it really comfortable, until you can show to yourself that happiness doesn't have to depend on a lot of things outside. There's a strong current of thought in our society—even with the recession and all the exposure of what greed has done for us over the past who knows how long—there's still a strong current of thought that the more things you have, the better. But you have to realize that when you gain a thing, you often lose certain things as well. You lose a certain amount of freedom, a certain amount of security. The more things you have, the more you have to worry about protecting them. You get tied down to them.

So the question is, once you've gained a certain basic level of physical comfort, enough food to keep you alive and healthy, enough clothing to protect you from the elements, enough shelter to protect you from the elements and give you a quiet place to stay, and enough medicine to keep you healthy: Once you have that level of comfort, where do you find greater happiness? You have to turn inside, to develop a sense of inner well-being, to develop a sense of inner security, so that you don't have to worry about what happens to the world.

There's a teaching on what are called the eight ways of the world: material gain and material loss, status and loss of status, praise and criticism, pleasure and pain. As long as we stake our happiness on these things, they're going to turn on us, because as you notice, each of these qualities has its opposite, and they switch back and forth. If our happiness depends on things that switch back and forth, we're going to be jerked back and forth as well. So we need a place for the mind where it doesn't have to depend on these things for its happiness, where it can see that there are advantages both to gain and to loss, status and the loss of status, praise and criticism, pleasure and pain. Each of these has its uses; each of them has its drawbacks.

To see that, we have to have the mind in the middle, in a place that's not spinning around with these things. That's why we practice meditation, to give

ourselves a sense of well-being, a sense of solidity inside that's not going to be thrown around as the world spins around.

One of the images in the Canon is of a stone pillar, sixteen cubits tall, eight cubits buried in rock, and the other eight cubits above ground, so that no matter which direction the wind blows from—there are eight directions, like the eight qualities of the world—the pillar doesn't shiver or shake at all. That's the kind of mind you want to develop.

Once you to have that solidity inside, then you find that the issue of observing that precept for the mind, that virtue for the mind of avoiding excessive greed, gets a lot easier. If you look at greed, you can ask yourself: What do you gain from it? Mostly suffering. It pulls you to more and more things, but the things mean less and less as you gain them. They weigh you down; they get you concerned; they expose you to all kinds of dangers as well. So that's the first precept for the mind.

The second one is avoiding ill will, realizing that you don't gain anything from anybody else's suffering. You don't gain anything from wishing yourself ill, either. If you come down on yourself, if you're able to harm yourself, what's to prevent you from harming other people as well? When you're down on yourself, you don't like to see other people who are doing well. You're jealous of their happiness. As for the people who are suffering, you don't really care about them. There's a sense that it serves them right. All of this is a way of creating a lot of suffering both for yourself and for the people around you. It accomplishes nothing, whereas there's so much the mind can do if it gets trained. It's conducive both for its own happiness and the happiness of others.

In the Buddha's teachings, happiness is not a zero-sum game. It doesn't have to be the case that when one person is happy, somebody else has to suffer or get less happiness. By being generous, by being virtuous, by meditating, we increase our own inner fund of happiness and we don't take anything away from anyone else. And by showing goodwill to ourselves by meditating, getting the mind under control, learning how to avoid the things we like to do but we know will lead to suffering down the line, and learning how to get ourselves to do the things we don't like to do but we know will lead to happiness in the long-term: That requires a certain inner strength. This is another reason why we practice concentration. By showing goodwill for ourselves, it makes it easier to act in a way that's kind, compassionate, and empathetic with other people.

Finally, there's the issue of right view, realizing that our actions do give results. They might not give results as quickly as we'd like, but they do give results. If we act on a skillful intention, it's going to lead to good results. An unskillful intention is going to lead to bad results. And we have the choice. After all, what

we experience from moment to moment is not just the results of past actions, it's also result of what we're doing right now. We take the potentials coming from the past and we select from among them and nurture certain potentials until they become actualized, while we allow others to stay unactualized at least for the time being. Which means that when we're suffering right now, we don't have to continue to suffer. We can change the way we're relating to a particular sensation, a particular idea, a particular state in the body or to conditions around us. We can take them and turn them into a lot of suffering, or we can turn them into a lot of happiness, depending on the choices we make right now.

To see this clearly and to work with it skillfully requires that the mind be settled and still, because it takes a lot of practice and a lot of sensitivity to gain a sense of which things you can change in the present moment and which things you can't. There's a lot of trial and error, and you have to put yourself in a position where you're a good observer. If your mind is running around, you can't observe things clearly. You get little bits and snatches of ideas, but you can't rely on them across the board.

Even when the mind is still, you have to test things again and again. It's not the case that any idea that comes up in a still mind is going to be skillful, true, or timely.

There's a passage in the Canon where the Buddha talks about four different types of people. There's the person who does unskillful things, says unskillful things, is greedy, has ill will, has wrong views, and when he dies, he goes to a bad destination. There are other cases, though, where other people do the same things—kill, steal, have illicit sex, lie, engage in idle chatter, harsh speech, divisive speech, and so on down the line—and yet when they die, they go to a good destination. Then there are people who abstain from unskillful behavior, and when they die they go to a good destination. And other people abstain from unskillful behavior but they go to a bad destination.

The Buddha states that there are people who gain concentration and gain psychic powers, so that they can see these things happening. But if they see only one or two cases and then go out and say, "This is the way it is in every case," they can develop all kinds of wrong views. Someone who sees the person who behaved in unskillful ways but goes to a good destination will say, "There are no results of good or bad actions." Other people who see someone behaving skillfully and going to heaven or one of the good destination will say that that happens in every case. Which is not true.

So it's not the case that just because the mind is still and you even have psychic powers, that you see things for what they actually are. And here we're talking

about really strong concentration, not just little glimpses of stillness that happen to a lot of people.

So even though the mind is still and something comes up in the mind, you can't totally depend on it to be true. You've got to be very careful to test it again and again, to see things from a broad perspective, and not be one-sided in your views.

This is why we need not only concentration but right view to help us along. When we see things happen in the world where people do a lot of good things and yet they seem to suffer, and that seems to disprove the teachings on kamma, the Buddha would simply say that sometimes actions take a long time to show their results. In the case of someone who behaves unskillfully but prospers either now or in the next life, the person may have some good karma as well. But the bad karma will eventually show itself.

Similarly with a person who does skillful things, says and thinks skillful things in the present life, but then suffers: That person may have some old bad karma that's hogging all the opportunities right now. But the good actions will eventually show their results.

In any event, even when things are going poorly, it doesn't mean that you have to suffer from it. That's your choice. That's your potential here in the present moment as well. After all, those ways of the world include pleasure and pain, and there are uses for both. There's a kind of pleasure that can incite your practice: That's a skillful use of pleasure. If it makes it easier for your practice, that's a skillful use of pleasure. As for pain, as the Buddha said, it's a noble truth. By learning to sit with the pain and watching it, you get so that you understand it. When you understand it, you don't really have to suffer from it.

So the stillness of the mind is essential for your ability to sit with the pain and watch it. But then you take that stillness and you combine it with right view, and that can take you far.

So it's good to keep these three virtues of the mind in mind as we practice, to realize that one of the reasons we're practicing is to make these virtues easier, make them more solid, so that the mind doesn't feel inclined to go running after having a lot of material things. It doesn't give into an impulse to wish ill of other people. And it keeps its views right on the issue of karma. That's very useful for learning how to avoid the things you like to do but you know will lead to bad results, and to do things you don't like to do but will lead to good results. If you keep the principle of action firmly in mind, you find it has a lot of pragmatic value. Your life becomes happier. You cause less harm to the people around you. It's an all-around good thing.