

Character

April 1, 2018

As we practice keeping the breath in mind, we bring three qualities to the practice. The first is mindfulness, which is the ability to keep something in mind. In this case, you're remembering to stay with the breath. And you're also remembering the lessons you've learned from your past meditations—things that worked, things that didn't work—so that when a particular problem comes up, you have a fund of knowledge to draw on. That's the first quality.

The second quality is alertness: being on top of what's happening and not drifting off and paying attention to other things. You want to pay attention to what you're doing right here, right now, and especially paying attention to keep the mind with the breath. If the mind wanders off, you notice that, so that you can bring it right back.

And that's done by the third quality, ardency. This is when you're trying to do it well. And it's in this quality that your character comes into the meditation. It's not just technique that we're engaged in here. The kind of person you are comes into the question of how well you do this, the energy you put into it, along with the persistence, the dedication, and the truthfulness—all of which are qualities called perfections. These are qualities we develop not only in meditation, but also in daily life. In fact, the way we develop them in daily life will spill over into the meditation. If you tend to be lazy, the sort of person who gives up as soon as you meet with an obstacle outside, that's the kind of person you'll be as you meditate.

It's in this way that you have to look at your whole life as part of the practice. Meditation is not simply something you stick into your life the way it already is. It asks that you look at the way you live your life to see if you need to make some changes in your attitudes and your activities.

Thinking in terms of perfections is very helpful. There are so many things we do in the world outside to get a reward, and then we start realizing that the rewards of the world are not really worth all that much. Money? Fame? Power? You have to look for other reasons. If you realize that you're developing your character, it gives you a good reason to stick with the duties you still have in the world—because as we live in this world, we all have duties. Part of being a human being means you have things you've got to do, many of which you really don't want to do, but they've got to get done.

As the Buddha said, with the things that you should do but you don't want to do them, if you can talk yourself into doing them, that's a sign of wisdom. In other words, you don't simply force yourself to do the duties. And you don't say that you'll do only what feels good to you already. You learn how to want to do the things you have to do to get good results. And thinking in the terms of the perfections is helpful that way. You can think of your duties as an

opportunity to develop your endurance, to develop your truthfulness, your determination, your persistence, all the Capricorn virtues, along with your goodwill.

There are times when you have to do something because someone else needs your help, and here's a way of proving whether you really have goodwill for other people. So it's good to keep in mind the whole list of perfections: generosity, virtue, renunciation, discernment, persistence, endurance, truth, determination, goodwill, and equanimity. These are all qualities that we can develop in daily life in our duties at work, our duties at home, and whatever other duties we have as we live in the human society.

See all these duties as an opportunity to develop something good inside yourself. As one of our chants says, the world is swept away, and our accomplishments in the world will get swept away with it. You often hope to find meaning in life by the mark you leave on the world, but there are plenty of erasers out there ready to erase whatever you do. But if you think of your activities in terms of developing the qualities that you'll take with you, then the work of the world can become part of the practice.

And see it as an opportunity to develop your persistence, patience, and endurance. That way, you have something solid. Because when we leave this life, the qualities of the mind are what go with us. You want to make sure that your accompaniment, your friends on the journey, are good qualities. And as you develop them in daily life, then they'll spill over in your meditation.

After all, there's a large element of endurance that comes into the meditation. We're here to comprehend suffering. That means we have to learn how to sit with it, not to push it away, not to run away from it—and not simply to endure it. You do need some endurance in order to look at it, but the point is that you bring your discernment to it as well. So if you're good at talking yourself into doing an unpleasant duty, you can talk yourself into being willing to sit and look at your suffering, to try to comprehend it, because that's your duty as a meditator.

In this way, your outside duties help with the duties of the four noble truths. The perfection of renunciation, when you learn to give up certain pleasures for more solid pleasures, more solid forms of well-being: This is going to be really helpful in the duty of abandoning the cause for suffering. We crave the things we like, so to abandon our craving, we need to have experience in saying No to some of our favorite pleasures outside.

So the practice of the perfections helps with these duties of the four noble truths. Particularly with developing right effort: Part of the path requires that you make your intent firm and that you keep at it, keep at it, keep at it. Sometimes the effort is going to be light, sometimes it's going to be heavy. But if you can make yourself willing and up for the effort, whatever's required, then that character trait is going to help carry you through the path.

So the perfections are not simply sops for people who don't meditate. They're a necessary part of your meditation, in that you learn to develop in daily life the qualities you're going to need as you try to bring the mind to concentration and then try to use that concentration to understand why the mind keeps creating unnecessary suffering for itself. Even though it wants

well-being, well-being, well-being, what it actually does is create more suffering, suffering, suffering.

Why is that? Ignorance. Where is the ignorance? How can we get past that? Not with just a trick of perception or a sly technique. Qualities of the character are going to be required to pierce *through* the ignorance. That way, whatever duties you have in daily life do become part of the practice. By carrying out your daily duties, you're preparing yourself to carry out the duties of the four noble truths.

So think of the perfections as treasures you can develop while doing the work of the world out there. There's a lot of work that needs to be done and that nobody's doing. Here's your chance to do something positive for the world and to gain something positive for yourself in the process. Other people may or may not recognize what you've done, but that's not the issue. You know that you're developing something good in your mind. Something solid.

In this way, you come to see that what seems like drudgery outside is actually an opportunity. And when you see it in that way, you benefit and the world outside benefits as well.