

Lessons for New Monks

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There's a sutta where the Buddha lists five principles that should be taught to new monks, and although they're specifically designed for new monks, they're also useful for lay practitioners to think about as well. They're about qualities you should develop in your behavior.

It's an important principle that your behavior shapes your environment: You try to create an environment that's conducive to the practice so that you're not just squeezing the practice into your old ways of acting. You behave on your own, and you behave with other people, in a way that's more conducive to helping the mind settle down and become independent—to become its own refuge.

The first principle is being virtuous. For the monks, of course, this means being strict in line with the Pāṭimokkha and all the other rules they're supposed to follow. For lay people, this means being strict in the five precepts. You hold to them. And as the Buddha says of the monks, they hold to their precepts and are willing to die rather than break them. Think about that. For the Buddha, virtue is that important.

You see this theme again, and again in the teachings: that if you really want to know the Dhamma, you have to be a virtuous person. I mean, there are people who can know *about* the Dhamma without being virtuous—we see this all around us—but to really gain the concentration and discernment that allow you to see how the Dhamma applies in your life, in your mind, in your behavior requires that you be virtuous.

To begin with, it requires that you have a sense of restraint and can say No to impulses that you know are unskillful; and second, you gain a sense of self-confidence, self-esteem. You live in a way that harms nobody. To become more independent in the practice, you have to have that kind of self-esteem. It's not based on how smart you are or how clever you are in saying things. It's based on how good you are in your interactions toward other people and how well you can control the intentions on which you act. And of course, as you follow the precepts, you find that it makes life a lot easier.

Take the precept on telling the truth: If you always tell the truth, then you don't have to worry about which lie you told to which person. Everything is straightforward. And as you're truthful, you find that people tend to be more truthful with you, too. If you lie to other people, and they can detect the fact that

you're lying, they're not going to see any reason to be truthful with you. You create a lot of difficulties for yourself.

So being virtuous is the first principle in which you have to be established. That's how the Buddha puts it for each of these five principles: You not only teach these ideas to the young monks, but you also try to get them established in them.

The second principle is restraint of the senses. This is your meditation practice as you go through the day. In concentration practice, you're trying to get some control over your mind, keeping it with one topic, and not letting your defilements come in and pull you away. So, given that you're cleaning up the mind as you meditate formally, you might as well keep it clean as you go through the day.

All too often we let greed, aversion, and delusion have free rein as we look at things and listen to things. Our looking and listening is pretty much determined by what we like, so we're feeding our likes. But then, as the Buddha pointed out, so many of the things that we like are actually suffering or the cause of suffering in and of themselves. So you want to get some control over these impulses.

In particular, if you notice that certain details of what you're looking at or listening to tend to provoke greed, aversion, or delusion, either don't focus on those details or else learn how to look at them in a different way.

In the instructions for the new monks during the ordination procedure, the preceptor is supposed to teach them the five topics for meditation, which are basically the first five of the 32 body parts in the contemplation of the body. These are the parts of the body we see when we look at a person: hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin.

For the most part, when we look at these things we try to see them as beautiful. Notice that we make the effort to see them as beautiful—because it does require an effort. The Buddha says, though, to look at them in another way. Learn to see them as not attractive. And actually, they're showing that they're unattractive all the time. If your hair falls out and you see it on the ground, "Well, that's dirty." You throw it away, even though before it fell off, it was you. Ask yourself, where does the line get drawn as to whether something's attractive or not? And why do you draw the line there?

In learning to look at the details in different ways, you learn an awful lot about perception and the desires that go behind the way you perceive things.

It also means that you're fencing the mind in: Instead of looking for your pleasures in the senses, you're going to learn how to look for your pleasure *inside* because an important principle in restraint of the senses is that you keep

mindfulness established in the body—which could include being mindful of the breath—and you’re going to look for your pleasure *there*, because if you can find a sense of well-being there, then it’s a lot easier to forgo the pleasures of the senses and to be able to step back from the whole process of feeding off of those pleasures so that you can see it in action. It’s like the difference when you’re sitting in a movie theater: Either you could sit facing the screen and get involved in the story up on the screen, or you can sit off to the side and look across the room. You see people sitting there, a beam of light flashing above their heads, and the people are laughing and crying all because of that little beam of light flashing.

When you see the process *as a process*, rather than getting involved in the effect that they’re trying to create, you’re not sucked in. But to not get sucked in means that you find this new perspective more interesting than getting sucked in. All too often we’re all too happy to get sucked in to the pleasures of the senses. So try to develop a sense of well-being inside, to maintain that ability to keep your senses under restraint and to find restraint intriguing.

A similar principle applies to the third principle you’re supposed to be established in, which is knowing some limits to your conversation. For lay people who don’t practice, conversation is one of the ways in which they find a lot of their pleasure in life—and also their escape from looking clearly inside themselves. You just get involved in the network of ideas and emotions that go with conversation. It’s a huge distraction.

For new monks, moderation in conversation is a good way of learning to become more independent. Instead of relying on conversation to keep yourself distracted, you’re trying to stay undistracted.

So ask yourself those questions that the Buddha would have you ask when you’re going to say something: One, is it true? Two, is it beneficial? And three, is this the right time and place for that? You’ll find that a large part of your training is getting a sense of the right time and place.

To give you an idea of how strict this can be sometimes, there’s that story Ajaan Fuang told me about when he was staying in the forest with another monk. One morning they were going on alms round and one of the people who put food in their bowls asked a question, and Ajaan Fuang’s first thought was, “That’s a question you don’t have to answer.” But the other monk did answer the question, and then later that day he had a bad case of diarrhea. Ajaan Fuang connected the fact that the monk was not being strict with himself in his conversation, and this was the result. That’s how strict the forest tradition can be in this area. Sometimes there are devas in the forest who are enforcing things.

The fourth principle for the monks is to go into the wilderness to get some seclusion. For lay people of course, this means finding some time to get some seclusion for yourself as well, having time away from your social connections so that you can sit down and squarely face your mind.

Going into the wilderness, of course, adds extra issues, too. The difficulties that come when you're out in the woods: A lot of things that are convenient in the monastery are suddenly not convenient. A lot of your time is taken up with the basic processes of life. And at night, when you're alone, you get to face your fears. So, based on your sense of self-confidence, based on your virtue, and your restraint, you can start looking into your fears.

One time, Ajaan Fuang asked me—when I expressed some concern about something he had asked me to do, “Are you afraid of dying?” And the way he asked it, you knew that the acceptable answer was No. Now, in any other place in the world you can ask people if they're afraid of dying and they have no embarrassment about saying Yes. But when you're learning to face your fears, you want to be able to say, “No! I'm willing to put my life on the line to learn the Dhamma.” That's how you learn things that otherwise would be kept from you—that you would be keeping from yourself.

The fifth principle is right view: As your usual avenues for finding pleasure get cut off, cut off, cut off, the mind's going to start thrashing around and complaining about how *this* is inconvenient and *that* is inconvenient. You start thinking about how all your suffering is based on the fact that there's *this* person here or *that* situation here—and things are not perfect.

The Buddha keeps reminding you: What is right view? Suffering comes from your craving. It doesn't come from conditions outside. If you want to put an end to that suffering—the clinging to the aggregates—you've got to follow the path. That's the *one* way out.

So, the Buddha's basically cutting off your normal ways of extending yourself to prop up your ideas about who you are—the kind of person you are, everything having to do with your self-image—and forcing you to look at the whole process of how you create your self-image to begin with, and to see how you're creating suffering because of that.

So, he cuts off your normal ways of looking for pleasure and leaves open the big one, which is developing concentration so that you can gain discernment—and so that right view can become more and more *right* as you apply it and learn the lessons that come when you actually try to live by it. As you do this, you create the ideal environment for you to practice.

Now, as I said, these teachings are primarily for new monks, but you can see that lay people can benefit from them as well—especially that one on conversation. There are so many issues in life that come about because people are careless in their conversation. They don't know when to stop.

So, that's a good principle to focus on. If something's not necessary, why say it? If silence is golden, you'd better make sure that your words are worth more than gold.

By following all these principles, you're making it a lot easier for your practice to develop. You're developing the right attitudes inside and you're creating an environment outside that puts a squeeze on your old ways of looking for happiness and opens wide the path that Buddha set out—the path that we tend to avoid because it's so unfamiliar.

But when we sense that we're encouraged to go in this direction, and that it's the one thing that's left wide open to us, we'll find that we become more and more confident that what the Buddha taught was really right.

We may say that we believe in what the Buddha taught, but when you finally have your experience of the deathless, you begin to realize that there were parts of the mind that held back their assent. So start right now chipping away at those parts, because they do get in the way.

These five principles are your set of tools for chipping away, for putting yourself in a position where you can see that the Buddha really was right: that the noble eightfold path does lead to the end of suffering, in a way that appears within your mind and your experience that cannot be denied.