

## *Honest & Observant*

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The Buddha once said, “Let an observant person come, one who is honest and no deceiver, and I’ll teach that person the Dhamma.” It’s interesting that those are the characteristics he looked for in a student.

Observant, of course, because you’re going to have to observe your mind. After all, the causes of suffering are coming from within the mind. They’re basically activities we’re doing again and again and again without realizing that they’re causing suffering. So you have to learn how to observe that.

As for the honesty, a lot of the things we do that cause suffering are things we like doing. And unless you’re honest, you’re not going to be able to give them up.

So these are the two qualities that Buddha teaches us to develop in the path. As he said, “When concentration is nurtured by virtue, it has great fruit, great reward. When discernment is nurtured by concentration, it has great fruit, great reward. When the mind is nurtured by discernment, it’s freed from the effluents.”

We’re looking for freedom. We have to build our search on virtue, concentration, discernment. We all know this, but it’s good to think about why it is the case. Notice that Buddha is not saying that you can’t get into concentration without virtue, or that you can’t get some discernment without concentration. But the question is, are those things going to be reliable? Will they really free the mind?

Think about the practice of virtue. You’re taking on some rules that may cut across your old behavior, cut across your desires. You have to be willing to say Yes to the rules and No to the desires. There’s a passage where the Buddha talks about how you go from listening to the Dhamma to actually awakening to the truth. The first step after listening is that you ponder what you’ve listened to, to see how it fits in with other Dhamma you’ve learned and not with other beliefs you may have. Then you decide that, Yes, you want to practice the Dhamma.

That’s the next stage, desire. Then based on desire, the Buddha says, there’s willingness. You’re willing to submit to the training. Then you judge. You look at the ways you ordinarily act and you ask yourself, “Where do my actions fit in with the Dhamma and where do they not?” When you see where they fit in with the Dhamma, then you exert yourself. That’s the next stage, exertion, to develop those good qualities even further. As for things that are not in line with the Dhamma, you have to learn how to say No to them. This, too, is part of exertion.

This is where it’s difficult, because a lot of these things are things we like doing.

That's why an effort is involved. Sometimes we like doing them simply because it's automatic. It's an old habit that we haven't looked at for a long time. When you look at it, you begin to realize quite easily, "I don't want this anymore." In other cases, though, there are habits you're very familiar with, they're very blatant, and yet you follow them over and over again. It's going to be hard to say No to them. You have to learn how to create new habits. But it's through exertion of this sort that you finally awaken to the truth.

So honesty is required right from the beginning. When you start looking at your behavior and see where it follows and doesn't follow in line with the precepts, the precepts offer guidelines that are clear-cut and easy to remember.

Some people say *hard-and-fast*, but *clear-cut* is a better way of characterizing them because they're short and easy to memorize. When you're faced with difficult situations where it's hard to hold by the precepts, it's good to remember they really are clear-cut and really are absolute.

Of all the Buddha's teachings, only two were categorical—in other words true and beneficial across the board. One was the principle that you should abandon unskillful behavior in body, speech, and mind, and develop skillful behavior in body, speech, and mind. So there are no cases where he would recommend breaking the precepts, no matter what your motivation might be.

The other categorical teaching, of course, are the four noble truths.

In these two cases, you keep running up against fences that the Buddha puts up and your willingness requires that you see that "Yes, my old behavior doesn't fit in. I've got to change."

But it's not just that. It's also a willingness to look at your intentions, because the intentions make all the difference. I got an email recently from a student in Europe who owns a movie theater. He had an ant invasion. He did his best to get the ants out without killing them, but of course he ended up killing a few. But as I told him, it was the intention that counted. You didn't intend to kill them, so you didn't break the precept. This means that the precepts are not there to make sure that we're absolutely harmless. They're there to make sure that we get sensitive to our intentions, to make sure *they're* harmless. When you do something, what do you expect? What do you want to attain? Be very clear about that. That's where the precepts point you. They point you at the mind.

There's a Dhamma textbook in Thailand written back in the beginning of the 20th century that defines virtue as holding to the precepts in body and speech. Just that. This was brought to a Ajaan Munn's attention, and he said that an important element was missing in that definition: the mind. It's the mind that creates the intentions, and the intentions are what make the difference between

what does and doesn't fall under the precepts. In fact, one time he said he himself observed one precept, which was the mind: Keep the mind in good shape, keep the mind skillful, and you don't have to worry about acting in unskillful ways because, after all, it's the mind that gives the orders. When you realize that an intention goes against the precepts, you've got to make sure you don't act on it. You can't slough it off, saying it's unimportant, or try to excuse it on other grounds. When you develop that kind of honesty and that kind of restraint, then your concentration is concentration you can trust.

As I said, it's not the case that you can't get into concentration without virtue. You can. But if your mind is full of denial about the harm you've been doing through your behavior and you're not used to looking at your intentions clearly, the concentration will be full of walls where you've closed off parts of your mind, closed off parts of your memory to yourself and created all kinds of stories on those walls that have nothing to do with reality. That's not the kind of concentration that's going to help you see things clearly as they function, which is the role of discernment.

So here again, you want to be honest with yourself. You make up your mind to stay with one object and you've got to maintain that intention. Now, you will have had some practice with the precepts in maintaining an intention. You also will have had practice in developing the three qualities that the Buddha said are necessary for the mindfulness that leads to concentration. One, of course, is the quality of mindfulness itself, with which you're able to keep things in mind. You have to keep the precept in mind. Alertness: You watch your behavior, and especially your intentions, to make sure they're actually in line with the precept. And then, ardency: If you see that there's a temptation to break the precept, you've got to do something about it. You can't just give in to it. You can't just go with the flow.

So those three qualities that are needed for the precepts are what you bring to the practice of concentration. You keep your object in mind, like the breath, and you're alert to see how the breath is going and whether the mind is sticking with the breath or not. If there are any problems with the breath, you adjust them. You make the breath a good place to be. This is one of the functions of ardency. The other function focuses on the mind: If it's wandering off, you've got to bring it back. It wanders again, bring it back again. While you're with the breath, try to be as sensitive as possible to how the breathing feels, because that sensitivity is what's going to develop into discernment.

After all, discernment isn't just a matter of imposing the Buddha's concepts on your mind. You have to be sensitive to what you're actually doing and the results

you're actually getting from what you're doing, and that's nothing you can get out of books. It's something you develop by being observant inside. As you get more and more sensitive to the breath, you find that you can get the mind into deeper and deeper stages of concentration. As you see things in the breath that are uncomfortable, you smooth them out. Any gaps in your awareness, you try to connect them.

It's normal that you start out with gaps in your concentration. You'll be with the object for a while, then you slip off, then you come back, slip off again. Don't throw away those little moments of concentration, though. Realize that it's through connecting those moments of concentration that you're going to get deeper concentration, more solid concentration.

So whenever there's a tendency to blur out a little bit, plow right through. Stay, stay, stay right here as continually as possible, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath, all the way through the spaces in between, and then into the spaces to the next breath and the next.

All too often our concentration is like a phrase in music; then there's a pause, then there's another phrase and a pause. But here we want to make it like a single note that the musicians just hold for many measures. As you try to keep the mind still like this, you're bound to see what comes in to disturb it. This is where the discernment gets based on concentration. It's not just about watching things coming and then noting that they go. It's trying to figure them out. You'll notice that some things come into the mind and have no appeal. They just drift in, drift out. Other things have hooks. You can't say, "Well, I'll just sit here and watch them come and watch them go." They will come and they will go, for sure, but you've got to get the mind in a state where they don't come anymore. Or if they do come, they have no hooks at all.

That requires that your discernment is not just a matter of being with awareness or being with the knowing or just being still. It requires that you think, but this is a kind of thinking that's not far away and discursive. It's thinking about what's going on, what you're *doing*, right now: Where is the appeal? When this thing comes in, why does the mind go for it? Which part of the mind goes? To what extent was it already prepared to go?

This is where the honesty comes in. Sometimes it seems as if the thought comes out of nowhere and you're knocked off by it. But if you're really observant, you'll begin to notice that even before you go off with the distraction, there will have been a little discussion at one corner of the mind: "The next chance we get, we're going to go for *x*." And then it pretends like it didn't say anything.

If you're not honest, you'll go along with the pretense. But if you're honest, you

begin to realize that there are traitors inside this committee of the mind. You've got to learn how to ferret them out. And the best way of doing that is trying to catch the distraction more and more quickly until you can see the moments where decisions are being made even before the thought is clearly a thought. This is where the discernment comes in, because you can see where the thought is going to go. It's determined by the intention that oftentimes precedes the thought. Then you can learn how to question that.

So there's a lot to question here. As I said yesterday, the four noble truths basically tell us that our minds have been lying to us, telling us that  $x$  is going to cause happiness when  $x$  is actually a cause for suffering and stress. So this is where being observant and being honest comes in. And this is how we develop those qualities so they get more and more perceptive, more and more true.

The truth of the Dhamma is not the sort of thing you gain by simply reading books and understanding them or remembering the steps. You listen to the Dhamma—in which case reading the Dhamma would count as listening to the Dhamma—and then you ponder it. But then you have to have the desire, the willingness, the ability to judge your actions fairly, when they do and they don't fit into the Dhamma, so that you can exert yourself properly to encourage what needs to be encouraged and to discourage what needs to be abandoned.

You begin to recognize that there are some forms of desire that should be encouraged, some forms of desire that should be abandoned. There are Dhamma teachings that sound deep and profound, but they're lying to you. You have to watch out for that. But again, you put them to the test of your honesty. If you adopt a particular teaching, does it really put an end to suffering or does it just put up walls inside? It's only when you're honest that you can see this.

But the rewards of honesty are great. As Ajaan Lee once said, "The truth in the Dhamma is something that can be found only by people who are true." Other people can know *about* the Dhamma, but they don't really know the truth. This is one of the ways in which the Dhamma is really special.