Purifying Action

As we make an effort to follow the precepts there will be times when, for lack of a gentler way of putting it, we'll fail. We'll take actions that will cause harm to others and to ourselves. We'll be forced to confront an unavoidable fact: we aren't perfect.

When we fail, when we make mistakes, we may judge ourselves, condemn ourselves.

For whatever reason, we think we should be perfect.

It's important to learn to relate skillfully to our imperfections. As we travel the Buddha's road we have to learn to accept that we have a long way to go. We have to realize that we've been cultivating unskillful habits for most of our lives and that it's going to take time to change our habits and purify our actions. Recognizing our patterns of unskillfulness, the karma we've produced over the span of many years, we have to learn to have compassion for ourselves. We have to learn to replace self-judgment with compassion.

As we develop ethical conduct, we'll hit obstacles. There will be times when we'll fail to follow the precepts. There will be times when we won't be able to find the motivation to follow the precepts. There will be times when we'll lack the willingness. At times we may make a determined effort to stay to the precepts but may fall short of our objectives, slip into so-called old behavior. We may vow, for instance, to refrain from speaking divisively about a co-worker but find ourselves doing it, perpetuating a longtime habit of divisive speech.

When we're not able to follow the precepts, we can try to change our behavior. We can try to effect change by putting forth effort. But sheer effort will take us only so far. We might believe that we'll be able to change our ways, transform habitual patterns, if we try hard enough, exert exceptional effort. But what's almost always required when we struggle to practice ethical conduct is to develop wisdom. Ultimately we purify our actions by developing wisdom.

Developing wisdom may seem like a complicated endeavor; however, it's actually rather simple. We develop wisdom by seeing the drawbacks in the unskillful and the benefits in the skillful.

In the final set of instructions the Buddha gives Rahula, he tells the boy how to look at his actions after he's acted in an unskillful manner. The Buddha recognizes there will be times when we'll fail. He knows we'll make mistakes. He knows we're not perfect. His teaching is humane, designed for fallible human beings.

When you act unskillfully, the Buddha says, acknowledge it. Then make it a learning experience.

(It should be noted that the Buddha tells Rahula that after taking an unskillful physical or verbal action he should talk to somebody about it. Talk to a teacher or a wise friend. This is an integral facet of the learning process.)

Learn from your mistakes, the Buddha says. Develop wisdom. See the drawbacks in your unskillful actions. See that your unskillful actions have brought about suffering, affliction, for others, for yourself.

We always have to remember that in scrutinizing our unskillful actions we're not judging ourselves. We're not criticizing ourselves. We're not despairing. We're not engendering an emotional response. Instead, we're looking at our actions calmly, evenly. We're looking objectively. We're simply seeing that our actions have caused suffering.

This is how we develop wisdom: by seeing the drawbacks, by seeing that unskillful actions lead to suffering, by seeing that these actions aren't serving us.

We develop wisdom, the Buddha emphasizes, by seeing for ourselves. We don't develop wisdom, the sort of wisdom that will lead to changes in our actions, by listening to what somebody says, but rather by seeing for ourselves that there are drawbacks in acting unskillfully and benefits in acting skillfully. Teachers guide us, show us where to look. But we have to look for ourselves.

It's not enough for somebody else, the Buddha, the teacher, or whomever, to tell us there are drawbacks in not following the precepts. We have to see it for ourselves.

In the early years of my practice, I was unwilling to subtract gossip. Gossip is an aspect of idle speech, the fourth category of harmful speech. While not as damaging as other forms of harmful speech, gossip brings about suffering. It leads us away from the path. I'd heard that, but I guess I wasn't convinced. I guess I didn't think it was important to refrain from gossip. At any rate, I wasn't willing to give it up. However, I was willing to pay attention to what happened when I gossiped. I didn't stop gossiping, but I made an effort, when I gossiped, to look at the results. When I engaged in gossip, I asked: What are the consequences of doing this? Are there drawbacks in it?

I watched closely. What I saw, again and again, was that when I gossiped I experienced dis-ease.

I felt this dis-ease in my body.

As time went on, it became more and more apparent. When I gossiped, I suffered. I caused myself harm.

I kept watching. Gradually, I lost interest in gossip. I became disenchanted with it. And gradually, I stopped gossiping. I stopped because I'd developed wisdom. I'd seen the drawbacks.

In seeing the drawbacks in unskillful actions, we're not partaking in an intellectual process. We're not thinking about the drawbacks. Instead, we're allowing ourselves to experience the actual results of our actions. We're seeing what it's like when we act unskillfully. To put it bluntly, we're feeling the pain.

Thinking about suffering is very different from experiencing it, knowing it firsthand. In seeing the drawbacks of our unskillful actions, we're dealing with reality. As the Buddha puts it, we're seeing "according to reality."

The most effective way to comprehend the drawbacks in acting unskillfully is to consider the body. This is a key aspect of the skill: to be able to ascertain the consequences of our actions, to recognize our suffering, by being mindful of the body.

As dharma students we learn, after acting unskillfully, to pay attention to the body. After we lie, after we speak divisively, after we gossip, we bring our awareness to the body. We notice what's happening in the body. After acting out on some form of unskillful behavior, we may notice dis-ease in the body. We many notice dissonance, discord, contraction, tightness, tension, agitation.

The dis-ease we detect in the body is a manifestation of mental dis-ease, mental suffering. As dharma students, we learn to develop sensitivity to painful mental qualities as they're articulated bodily. The Buddha realized more than 2,500 years ago what contemporary scientific research is beginning to demonstrate, that mental qualities are expressed throughout the landscape of the body. As we develop the ability to discern dis-ease, suffering, as it's being expressed in the body, we strengthen our capacity to develop wisdom, to understand the drawbacks of acting unskillfully.

It's by developing a wisdom that transcends intellectual wisdom, what we might call felt wisdom, or embodied wisdom, that we effect change.

In cultivating ethical conduct we're asked to notice how our meditation is affected when we don't stay to the precepts. If we speak falsely, if we speak harshly, we'll experience dis-ease, agitation, and when the mind is afflicted in this fashion, meditation is problematic. If we're involved in illicit sexual conduct, if we're having an affair with somebody who's married, the mind, needless to say, will be greatly agitated. If we're taking intoxicants and thus harming others and ourselves, we'll experience much agitation. It's difficult to practice meditation, to still the mind, when we're subject to these highly agitated states.

In order to cultivate a bona fide meditation practice, in order to foster strong concentration, the concentration we'll need to move along the path, it's imperative that we become developed in generosity and ethical conduct and the other skillful qualities. This is a foundational principle in the Buddha's teachings. Students who put a lot of effort into breath meditation but struggle to follow the five precepts get only so far, and not that far, in terms of their ability to cultivate concentration. This is something I've seen numerous times from my perspective as a dharma teacher. Conversely, I've seen students well-developed in ethical conduct make remarkable progress in breath meditation practice. It's always been clear to me that these students are able to build strong concentration in large part because they adhere to the precepts.

Sometimes students face significant challenges when it comes to following the five precepts. They may, for instance, be battling an addiction to alcohol or drugs. In these situations, I tell students that they've got to stop the behavior. I suggest, accordingly, that they seek help from other sources, go to a therapist, join a 12-step program, etc.

More frequently, students indicate they're confronted with less threatening quandaries with regard to the precepts. They may, for example, have a habit of drinking a couple glasses of wine with dinner. Or they may be on the verge of telling a "small lie." Or they may have a tendency to engage in gossip. They're not sure if they should refrain from these actions. Usually, in these instances, I don't tell students that they shouldn't do what they're doing or what they're intending to do. I don't tell them pointblank that they should eliminate the behavior. They're usually not ready to make that sort of change. More often than not, I tell students that they've got to see for themselves if there are drawbacks to these actions. If you take the actions, if you drink the wine, if you tell the lie, pay attention. Pay attention to the consequences. What's it like when you do it? What are the results? Are there drawbacks? Do your actions bring about suffering? How does it affect your meditation practice?

I don't necessarily ask students to refrain; I ask them, instead, to pay attention, to develop wisdom.

We owe it to ourselves to do that. We owe it to ourselves to study our actions. Through this kind of self-examination, we purify our actions.