

## The Five Essential Skills

### HOW TO STICK WITH VIRTUES AND GOOD PURPOSES

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#### Motivating reflections

- Reflect on the benefits to yourself of living from a virtue or purpose; do things to keep those benefits in mind (e.g., pictures of healthy people on the refrigerator, a list of reasons on a bathroom mirror for lightening up and not sweating the small stuff).
- Reflect on the benefits to others of living from a virtue or purpose; really try to have positive feelings about those benefits, not just a passing thought.
- Consider the costs to yourself and to others of not living from virtue or purpose.
- Allow yourself to feel appropriate remorse for not living from a virtue or purpose.

#### Committing yourself

- Privately “take precepts,” give yourself admonitions, or make a vow to yourself or to God.
- Declare yourself publicly and commit yourself to others. For instance, make a solemn promise to a significant person that you will stick with a commitment (e.g., routine exercise, no junky sweets, less alcohol, daily meditation) unless you specifically tell him or her that you have changed that commitment.
- Get a little angry at the tendencies, addictions, sloth, etc. that arise in the mind to divert you from your virtue or purpose.
- Write a letter to yourself to be read if you start to fade in your commitment.
- If it works for you, imagine a friend, teacher, group of people, body of teaching (e.g., the Bible, Buddhadharma), or perhaps spirit or God, who stand for virtues or purposes you want to live by, and basically, do what they tell you to do.
- In general, surrender to your highest virtues and purposes. Give yourself over to them and let them run your life. In a deep sense, real will is surrender to a higher purpose.

#### Setting virtue and purpose before the mind

- Do things that remind you of your highest intentions. For example, in the morning, write out some key purposes for yourself for the day. At the end of the day, write in a journal, perhaps in a structured format (e.g., How did I live by my highest purposes today? How did I not? What do I want to focus on tomorrow?). Post

intentions, admonitions, inspiring quotes from others, motivating pictures or collages, etc. where you will see them regularly. Name your highest commitments to yourself just before sleep and upon waking.

- Notice the benefits of your virtues and purposes; really soak in the experience of those benefits so that you will naturally be attracted in that direction in the future.
- In general, surrender to your highest virtues and purposes; give yourself over to them; give up, and let them run your life.
- If it works for you, imagine a friend, teacher, group of people, body of teaching (e.g., the Bible, Buddhadharma), or perhaps spirit or God, who stand for virtues or purposes you want to live by, and basically, do what they tell you to do.

### **Making it easy for yourself**

- Seek “good company.” This includes: friends who support you; an exercise buddy; mentors/ teachers who inspire you; communities of like-minded people; routine involvement in a church, synagogue, runner’s group, meditation class, etc.
- Prime the pump: do things that put yourself in a place where it is easier, or you are more inclined, to do the right thing (e.g., go to bed sooner, meditate or read inspirational/spiritual literature in the morning).
- Create routines that embody your virtues and good purposes – like a blessing before a meal, a regular volunteer commitment on the first Saturday morning of each month, or ten minutes of yoga after coming home from work – and which are woven into the fabric of daily life so they’re easy to do, and so the people you live with expect you to do them.
- Remove temptations (e.g., don’t bring alcohol into the house, stay out of the dessert aisle at the supermarket, put the alarm clock across the room from the bed so you have to get up to turn it off).
- If feelings or desires come up that would divert you from a commitment – like a craving for a food or the urge to turn the alarm off and skip the gym this morning – notice them as an experience . . . and then just ignore them. You could think or say to yourself things like: “It’s just a craving, it’s just sloth or laziness . . . SO WHAT?!”
- As a broad principle: do activities that intensify the will, like concentration practices, exercise, intense physical activity, or doing at least one thing each day that opposes a habit or tendency in yourself.

- Take things one day at a time. Or make an agreement with yourself that you will do things a certain way for a specific amount of time, and then reevaluate.