Worthy of Respect

September 4, 2004

Why all this respect for the Buddha? Because he teaches us to respect ourselves, and particularly to respect our desire for true happiness, which is very different from the way of the world. The world tells us to be happy. We’re very avid in pursuing lesser forms of happiness. Sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations that get us excited. The world tells us to pursue those because it’s possible for the economy to make money if everybody pursues those things. And as for the idea of a true happiness that comes from digging down inside, there’s very little encouragement in that direction. But when you ask yourself, “What do you really want in life?” You want a happiness that doesn’t change on you, a happiness that doesn’t let you down. And the Buddha teaches you to respect that desire. That kind of happiness, of course, has to come from within. We use things. We use the body. We use the breath as our object of meditation. But the whole purpose of this is to develop qualities in the mind that we can depend on, because it’s the quality of the mind that underlies your happiness. If you get all the material things you want but your mind is filled with greed, anger, and delusion, there’s no real happiness. There’s no real peace. If, on the other hand, you’ve got that inner peace, then it doesn’t really matter what you’ve got outside. So we share respect to the Buddha as a way of reminding ourselves of what we should respect within ourselves, the qualities that led the Buddha to become the Buddha, and the qualities that we can develop within ourselves as well. The Buddha is the sole possessor of those qualities. These are the qualities of effort, persistence, resolution, ardency—things that everybody can develop. And it’s those qualities that turn your potential for mindfulness and concentration and discernment and insight into realities. So that’s what we’re doing here. We’re trying to respect those qualities. Give them time in our lives. Give them space. That’s why we come to a quiet place like this. Ajaan Sawat, the monk who founded the monastery, called this a little quiet corner. When we think about that, we think of it as a place where people may come to hide and get away. But the real purpose here is to develop the skills that you can take back with you wherever you go. In other words, so you have a quiet corner inside that you can always go to. When the mind needs nourishment, when the mind needs healing, when the mind needs strengthening, this is where you go. And it’s not far away. It’s right here at the breath. So we focus on the breath coming in and the breath coming out, which is nothing especially remarkable. What makes it remarkable is if you stick with it. If you catch yourself wandering off, bring yourself back to the breath. If you’re wandering off again, bring yourself back to the breath again. Don’t give up. Don’t get discouraged. It’s the continuity of your awareness that makes the breath special. It makes your awareness in the present moment special. If you keep flitting in and out of the present moment, there’s nothing special. You’ve been here many, many times before. But you’ve never really noticed what’s going on here because you haven’t stayed here. This is what we’re trying to develop as we meditate. It’s this ability to stay here in the present moment consistently without gaps, without faltering. So try to keep your gaze as steady as possible, your inner gaze on the breath. You can focus on any spot in the body where it feels comfortable to stay focused. Just watch it. If you don’t jump around a lot, just the simple fact of watching consistently can get the breath more and more refined, make it more comfortable. As soon as it gets more comfortable, try to think of that sense of comfort seeping out through the rest of your body. You can either work on specific sections of the body, section by section, or you can think of the whole body all at once. Whichever you find works for yourself. What you’re ultimately working for is an awareness of the whole body that’s well-centered. It’s the whole body awareness that helps keep you anchored in the present moment so you don’t go running off to other places. And the center is what keeps you from blurring out. So work on these two qualities, being centered in the breath and then expanding whatever sense of comfort or ease or stillness you develop with the breath. That’s really all you have to worry about. This is your quiet corner. And don’t worry about what level of concentration you’re in. People get too wound up sometimes when they read about the different levels of jhana you can attain. Remember, jhana is not the object of your meditation. The breath is your object of your meditation. If you stay focused on the breath in the proper way, then the jhana happens. If you keep worrying about, “Is this the first? Is this the second level of jhana?” You’re not with your breath. That’s the continual focus. Focus on the breath that makes all the difference. The longer you stay here, the more you see. That’s the whole purpose of insight, to see what’s going on in the present moment. It’s like quality control in a factory. You keep watching things as they come off the line. Every now and then something different comes off. You have to be very alert but very patient so you don’t miss the defects. You try to maintain your level of interest. It helps when the breath is comfortable. It gets a lot more interesting when the breathing gets more comfortable. It gets dry. So you want to evaluate the breathing, just in the sense of, “Does it feel good breathing in right now?” If it doesn’t feel good, this is your breath. This is your body. Why are you allowing the breath to come in and out in a way that doesn’t feel good? Nobody’s forcing you to breathe in an uncomfortable way. If it’s uncomfortable, it’s largely because you have no control. You’ve been paying attention. You’ve let yourself get distracted by other things. But this is a time to show respect for the breath, what it can do for you. And from the breath, you can start exploring what the whole body feels like from the inside, because it’s all connected. The in and out breathing, the sense of energy flow in the body through the nerves, along the blood vessels. These things are all connected. And once you get a sense of that, then it’s fun to explore. So this is a time to explore what the breath has to offer. Show it some respect. After all, it’s the force that keeps you alive, keeps the body and the mind together. It can keep you anchored to it. It can keep you anchored here in the present moment, which is where all the important things in life are happening. When death comes, death will come here in the present moment, too. If you really know the present moment well, then you can handle it when it comes. It’s like knowing you’re going to be mugged in a certain corner. You go down to that corner and you look at it very carefully to see where the escape routes are. In the meantime, the longer you stay here, the more you can settle in, the more it feels like home. This way you have a home wherever you go. You’ve got that quiet corner inside where you can go for rest, nourishment, strength in the mind and the body. After all, looking after the breath is good for the body as well. If you allow yourself to get absorbed in the breath, really curious about what it’s doing. This process has been happening all of your life. Where does it start? Where does it finish? How many levels of breath energy are there in the body? Take the time to look. In taking care of your breath, having respect for your breath in this way, you find that you develop more and more respect for your mind and the mind’s own potential for being able to find a true happiness for itself. So you’ve got the whole hour. And then after the hour is done, you’ve still got the breath. You can take this skill with you wherever you go. So no matter how noisy and confusing the world gets, you’ve got your quiet corner with you at all times.

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