Respect for the Training

October 17, 2004

Now we have a phrase in the chanting, one with strong respect for the training. It means you have respect for virtue, respect for concentration, respect for discernment. It’s very easy for us to overlook these things or to underestimate them. Virtue sounds pretty simple. The word sila can also mean normalcy or the normal habits of the mind. Keeping the mind at normalcy is an important part of sila, because it’s not just a matter of what you do and what you say. If it were just that, it would be ritualistic. But what’s important is the element of intention, learning how to keep your intentions normal. Not killing, not stealing, not cheating, not lying. These are all very normal things. Other things are normal in the sense that they happen. The opposite, of course, is that there is killing and stealing and cheating and lying. That’s pretty normal for the human race. But for the mind to do those things, it has to go out of a normal state. It’s stirred to do things that are deep down inside, and those are horrible. So what we’re trying to do is keep the mind from being stirred in those directions and having respect for them, the ability to keep the mind from being stirred in those directions. It all seems pretty unassuming, but if you stick with it, you’ll begin to see it’s that life becomes a lot easier. You strengthen your powers of mindfulness, you strengthen your alertness. In other words, you have to keep the precept in mind and you have to be alert to what you’re doing. In this very simple process, you create a much better life for yourself, a better life for the people around you, and you’re developing important qualities in the mind. Again, these are qualities we tend to overlook. Simple mindfulness, simple alertness, keeping something in mind, being alert to what you’re doing. They’re pretty unassuming, but you take them to the next level through concentration practice. In other words, you keep your object of meditation in mind, and then you’re alert to how the mind is doing. One, you’re alert to the object, and two, you’re alert to the mind as it relates to the object. Again, it doesn’t seem like all that much. It’s through simple mindfulness and alertness that you can develop really strong qualities of mind, strong concentration, strong discernment. They depend on these qualities. So you have respect for them, even when they seem pretty weak and pretty unassuming. You show them respect. It’s like showing respect to people that are ordinarily shown disrespect in society. You’d be amazed at how well they respond. It’s like the story of the mouse and the lion. The mouse was able to chew through the net and free the lion, even though the lion had just laughed at it to begin with. So these little qualities of mindfulness and alertness, if you work at them and show them respect, will be very helpful, both now and in the long run. So you do this by sticking with your object of meditation. It happens so often that people get a little bit of concentration, and they say, “Okay, what’s next? Let’s go on to insight.” Well, the insight’s going to come only if you really stick with the concentration. You get the mind in a particular state that seems interesting, seems calm, but then you lose interest because you want to go on to the next state. You’re afraid of getting stuck there. One of the things you’ve got to learn to deal with in the meditation is to let go of that impulse to move on, move on. Because many times, the important things you’re going to discover in concentration come from just staying right here for long periods of time. The mind settles down. There’s the preliminary groundwork as you try to make the breath comfortable and move your attention around in the body to work out any entanglements in the energy flow. Once those things are worked out, then you settle down. Once you settle down, then the skill lies in staying there and resisting the impulse to want to move on to what’s next. Concentration acts like a marinade. If you put something in marinade, it works best if you let it stay there overnight. You dip it in for a few minutes and then pull it out. The marinade hasn’t seeped in. It hasn’t really had much of a chance to have that much effect on the food. It’s the same with the mind. It dips a little bit into concentration, but it hasn’t really learned much from concentration and wants to go on to the next step. It hasn’t had a chance to seep in and change things. This is another way you learn how to show respect for concentration is by just sticking with it, staying there, being very patient. Once you’re able to get the mind in a particular state of calm, let it stay there for a while so you can really see it. At the same time, the habits of the mind will change. These can’t help but be reflected in the way you speak, the way you act, the way you deal with other people. There’s an element of calm. There’s an element of solidity. Once the mind is marinated in the breath, marinated in the sense of the body here in the present moment, you find that the effects seep through your whole life, not just as you’re sitting here in the minute on the cushion. The way you speak, the way you act, are going to be permeated with more and more of that stillness unless you dip into the concentration and get impatient and want to move on to the next state because you’ve read about the next state and you don’t want to be the sort of person that just sits around and does nothing. You want to see results for the amount of time you’ve been here. Well, that’s showing more respect for your preconceived notions than you are actually showing respect for the training. So you learn how to sit with the concentration because what you see after a while, you begin to see elements of stress that you didn’t see before. It’s seen right here in the concentration. Look, if you allow the mind to settle down and see what’s right here when you stay for long periods of time, the subtleties begin to show up. John Lee makes a comparison with traveling back and forth on a particular path. If it’s a path you’re familiar with, you begin to see little things, slight changes. Yesterday you were here. You walked on the path and the vines on the side of the path were only so long. Today you walk in there and it seems to be a little bit longer. There’s a vine on the path that I come up from my hut every day. It’s sending out little tendrils and it’s trying to grab onto the avocado tree just above it. You’d be amazed at how much it grows in the course of a day. Yesterday there were no tendrils reaching to the branches and today they’re touching the branches. If you’re not careful tomorrow, they will have wound themselves around the branches. For someone who didn’t walk the path every day, you wouldn’t notice it. But when you walk back and forth on the same path day after day after day, you notice the little things. That’s what discernment is. It’s all about seeing the little things. Again, discernment is something we tend to overlook. You see where there’s stress. It’s all pretty simple. Everyone says, “Well, where is the oneness? Where are the lights, the cameras, and the action in this meditation?” The Buddha said, “Look for something very simple. Where is there stress? And then what are you doing to contribute to that stress? Is the stress necessary? Is it a necessary part of the three characteristics?” Everything that’s fabricated has to be stressful this way, or is it something you’re adding on top of it? If you’re adding on top of it, why? It shows that you’re not alert, you’re not mindful. So this is where the mindfulness and alertness come in. Remembering that this is the issue, stress, and your alertness is to see what you’re doing that’s contributing to the stress. Because so many of our choices, so many of our actions, are subconscious. What we’re trying to do as we meditate is bring them up to the clear light of consciousness, or bring the clear light of consciousness down to deeper levels in the mind. When you make a choice that’s related to craving, you want to see it. It’s not just part of the background noise. As the mind gets more and more still, you begin to be sensitive to the background noise, and you begin to see which parts you’re actually contributing yourself. It’s like tuning in on a radio station. The more precisely you’re tuned in, the less static there is. And the less static there is, the more you hear the subtleties of the music or whatever is being transmitted. When you see where you’re adding stress unnecessarily to your own mind, you think you wouldn’t do that, but you do. That makes you more sensitive to how you’re adding stress to the world around you. When you can resolve this question, you find that you resolve a lot of other issues as well. Then you come to appreciate that fact only when you’ve pursued this particular question as far as it can take you, and find out how much it opens up in the mind, how much you begin to see of what you didn’t see before. And how valuable the things are that appear when you peel away these layers of craving and stress. This is why those who’ve followed this particular question, followed this particular line of training as far as it can go, bow down with total sincerity to the Dhamma, because they’ve seen what this one line of questioning can open up in the mind. John Swatman made an interesting comment. He said, “While you’re on the path, you want to make sure the path is as free of weeds as possible.” In other words, your own training in virtue, concentration, and discernment, you want to keep the weeds away, because the weeds hide a lot of interesting and important things. He says, “Once you follow the path to the goal, then as far as you’re concerned, it is possible that the weeds can grow back if they want to, because the path has done its work.” But he says, “Then you look back and you see other people on the path as well. And you hate to see them put weeds in their way or weeds in the way of other people.” While he was here, it was interesting to get a rise out of that. I remember telling him something about how American Dhamma was taking new shapes and new forms. And he could see right through it. Whereas many times it was an issue of defilement and more weeds on the path. He got some of his most interesting Dhamma lessons by telling them, “So-and-so is doing this or saying that.” It was his concern about those weeds on the path. It was his respect for the training. As I said, it’s those who’ve followed the training all the way who know how truly worthy of respect it is. We find that even if we haven’t gotten that far, if we learn to show respect for these very simple things—virtue, concentration, discernment, very simple things like mindfulness and alertness—if you show them respect, they’ll like them out. They’ll eat away at the net that’s holding you, got you trapped. And that’s when you realize how really useful they are and how truly worthy of respect they are. So give it a try. Try to show them some real respect. Stick with the precepts, no matter what. Stick with concentration. Even when it doesn’t seem to be going anywhere, you’re just sitting there very still. Learn to show more respect. Show respect for the concentration than you do for your impatience. Show respect for these questions that come out of the Four Noble Truths. Where is the stress right now? Where is the cause of that stress? How can I learn how to comprehend the stress? By watching it, poking it here, poking it there, until you see where the craving is that underlies it. Then what do you do with that? You put your head in it. When you have respect for these things, they show you a lot of things you wouldn’t expect otherwise. They free you from the net. What else do you know can do that?

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