Respect for the Dhamma

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The Buddha once said that a person who lives without something to respect lives in misery. Think about it. If there were nothing in the world that you respected, either inside or out, what would life be like? A lot of people live that way, totally disillusioned, totally cynical. So it’s wise to stop every now and then and think about what it is that you really respect. The Buddha gave his highest respect to the Dhamma, which on one level is simply a description of the way things are, the true nature of things. He looked at his life and he was a person who showed a lot of respect for that. Whenever he realized that the practice of the Dhamma was going to require a lot out of him, he was willing to give whatever was required, even though there were times when he didn’t really want to. Later, one of his disciples told him that the whole principle of renunciation was something that his heart didn’t leap up to. But when he realized that he would have to give up certain things for the sake of freedom, for the sake of liberation, he was willing to give them up and did what he could to give them up. That’s one meaning of having respect for the Dhamma. The Buddha was a demanding person, you know. He wasn’t the sort of person who would just sit back and say, “Well, I respect things for the way they are and just allow them to happen and just accept everything.” He was insistent. He wanted a true happiness. So that was something he respected, too, that desire for true happiness. He didn’t let the world tell him that it was impossible or that he was being immature or unrealistic. They told him those things, but he didn’t listen. And the test of his life was how to put that desire for true happiness together with the way things operate, the way things are, in such a way that he could attain his heart’s desire. Someone would describe happiness simply as that, the perfect meshing of your desires and reality. And there are two extreme ways of approaching that. One is saying, “Well, just accept the way things are already and the job is done.” But that’s like being dead. The other way is just simply to barge in and try to force everything in line with your desires without really looking to see what works and what doesn’t work. Of course, what happens is that it doesn’t work. A lot of the Buddha’s insight, a lot of his discernment lay in his realizing that there had to be a middle path, testing things to see what really was possible and what really would work, and then discovering a method for testing. Understanding the role of action in your life, what you do, the choices you make, the decisions you make, really do have power. So you’re testing to see exactly which direction they lead in. When you decide to do or say or think something, where is it going to go? Many times you’re acting in situations that you’ve encountered before, and the other time you have a fairly good idea of what’s going to work. Other times you’re not so sure, so you have to be willing to experiment. Then look at your actions while they’re happening to see, while you’re doing them, to see what results you get, and also after they’re done. And after something is done, you realize that it caused harm. You make the resolution not to repeat that mistake. You also talk it over with someone else who’s also on the path. So they get the advantage of their experience as well. And if you find that there was no harm, then you learn to take joy in what you’ve done, joy in the fact that you’re on the path. The problem that often comes, though, is that we know what should be done, but we don’t have the strength to do it. This doesn’t mean physical strength so much as mental strength, the strength of mind, the resolve to give up the things we know we should give up, or to work at the things we know need work. This is one of the reasons why concentration practice is so important, because it’s our source of strength. The metaphors for concentration are food for the mind, it’s shelter for the mind, it’s medicine for the mind. The only requisite I haven’t found in the canon is that it’s clothing for the mind. But otherwise, you could say it’s what the mind needs to keep going. Without good, solid concentration, without a sense of deep peace in the mind, everything just burns out. And then, even though you may know what to do or what should be done, you’re still not able to muster the strength to do it. So this practice of concentration is one way of showing respect, both for your desire for true happiness and for the way things are, the way things work, because you need this strength of mind in order to master the elements of the path that can take you to liberation, to that point where your desires and reality finally do mesh. So show some respect for the object of your concentration. Treat it well. If you’re going to stay with the breath, pay careful attention to the breath. Listen to the breath. See what it has to say. Not so much in words, of course, but when it’s telling you that, okay, now you’re breathing in too long, or now the breath is too light or too heavy. Try to pay careful attention to how the body feels in the present moment, how the energy level in the body feels, and how it can be improved by the different ways of breathing. Because the better the breath feels, the more likely you are to stay with it. And the longer you stay with it, the stronger it becomes. The energy level in the body gets more and more full. It has fewer gaps, fewer weaknesses, fewer weak points, fewer knots in the energy channels. You can learn this all by paying careful attention. That’s what the respect means here. You’re really giving it the time. You’re not being in too great a hurry to rush on to the next level. All too often we think, “Well, I want to gain this level in the meditation. I want to gain that level in the meditation. I’m not there yet, someplace else.” So as soon as there’s a little bit of calm, in the mind, you want to rush on to the next, and you step all over what you’ve accomplished. You’ve got to show it some respect. After all, we’re here to learn from the present moment, not to impose all of our preconceived notions of how things work onto the present moment. This was how the Buddhist showed respect. He looked at what his mind was doing. When it needed rest, he gave it rest. As he said, even skillful thinking can give the mind rest. So he allowed the mind to rest in concentration, so it would have the strength. For the next time it needed to do some skillful thinking, it would be ready. So pay attention both to the breath and to the needs of the mind. This way, those elements of respect all work together. You respect your desire for true happiness, and then you also respect what’s going on here in the present moment. Exploring how the present moment can teach you about the mind, teach you about the body, teach you about principles of cause and effect, because respect pays off. That’s another important part of the practice. Respect is what makes learning possible. If you don’t respect something, you’ll never learn anything from it. If you simply think, “Well, the breath should be this way, the breath should be that way,” and you impose your will on it without really looking or listening, you can mold it for a while, but you may not get the results you want. So try to listen carefully. Look carefully. Be careful in how you feel the body. By showing care in this way, that’s basically what it means to show respect for the training, to show respect for concentration. You give it all your attention. And you’re patient, because sometimes it’s not going to show its lessons right away. So you’re willing to look, and look again, and look again. Keep on looking as continuously as possible so the insights that you would like to gain don’t fall into the gaps. This way, you’re there. You can live life with something to respect. Your desire for happiness, you respect the principle of the way things are, and you also respect the path that enables that happiness to come through learning how to master the principles of cause and effect. It’s all right here. You don’t have to look at anything else. But you also don’t have to go stepping on to the next step. Watch this step very carefully, what you’re doing right now. And a lot of the lessons you’ll need for the next step will be right here. If you spend your time anticipating what’s coming next, what’s coming next, you miss what’s right here. And you don’t really see anything at all, except for your anticipations. So when the meditation gets dull or loses its edge, what’s usually happening is you’re not paying careful attention. So stay looking right here, carefully, moment by moment, and the insights will come. It’s like the old hunters of the past. You look at all their hunting tools and you realize they weren’t strictly functional. A lot of art went into making the tools. Their belief was that if you were respectful in the way you made your tools, you’d get rewarded. Now, however, they believed the mechanism, whether it was the rabbit god being impressed by the tools that you made and so allowing a rabbit to come by. But the fact that the hunter was paying very careful attention in how he carved his tools, how he made them, that aspect of care, attention, respect, had to carry over into the way he actually hunted. So it’s the same in our lives. As we’re practicing, the Buddha says, it’s not just respect for concentration, it’s respect for the whole training. The care you take in your life is just respect for the path. So don’t think of it simply as respect for the breath right here, but all the aspects of the path require respect, require careful attention. Because the careful attention developed in one area is sure to reinforce the attention you pay in another area. So always show respect for your tools.

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