Respect for the Mind

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Why do we show much respect for the Buddha? Because he teaches us to have respect for our own minds in two aspects of the mind in particular. One is our desire for true happiness. And the second is our ability to attain that true happiness. In some places, you’ll hear it said that true happiness is impossible. You have to accept whatever little things come your way. Accept the good with the bad. Don’t expect anything really permanent. Satisfy yourself with the pleasure that comes from things or relationships, even though that pleasure is doomed to end at some point. It usually comes mixed up with a lot of suffering along the way. Or sometimes you’ll hear it said that to desire your own true happiness is a selfish thing. You should put your happiness aside for the happiness of other people. But the Buddha never saw that the issue of your true happiness was going to be detrimental to anybody else’s true happiness. After all, true happiness comes from within. If you were an object, then there would be an issue. If you got the object, then other people wouldn’t get the object, and then it would be selfish. But when true happiness comes from within, you’re not taking anything away from anyone else. And if you really reflect on the issue of happiness, look at it seriously, you’ll begin to see that the pursuit of true happiness develops a lot of good qualities in the mind. It requires that you be very heedful, very careful about what you do. The Buddha talks about reflecting on your actions. Reflect on your intentions first before you act, and then look at the action while you’re doing it. If you see any desire for causing anyone else any suffering in your intention, he says, don’t act on that intention. Whether it’s going to cause suffering for yourself or other people or both, if the intention looks okay, follow through with it. But then as you start acting on it, if you see any undesirable results coming, you should stop. If you don’t see any undesirable results, you keep on carrying through the action until you’re done. But if you’re not really done, then you look at the long-term results of the action. If you see any unexpected bad consequences, you make up your mind you’re not going to repeat that mistake again. This is how you learn. As the Buddha said, this is how people purify themselves. The notion of purity here means that there are no detrimental effects arising from your actions. So if you take your desire for happiness seriously, your actions become pure, and you have to become heedful. Simply the fact of taking your happiness seriously, the Buddha said, is a sign of wisdom. Wisdom begins by asking this question, “What, when I do what, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” And you ask this question of people who have found that happiness. So taking the issue of happiness seriously like this, realizing that some forms of happiness may seem attractive to begin with, but they’re short-term, and you should be willing to sacrifice them for something longer-term, that, he says, is the beginning of wisdom. There’s a verse to this effect in the Dhammapada. If you see a long-term or great happiness that comes from sacrificing a lesser happiness, be willing to sacrifice the lesser one. There was a scholar who translated this verse one time. He said, “This couldn’t possibly be the meaning of this verse. It’s so obvious.” So he tried to find a hidden meaning in the verse. The problem is that it’s an obvious principle, but you look at people’s behavior. There are not that many people in the world who act on this principle. So whether it’s obvious or not, you have to keep reminding yourself that some forms of happiness are going to require that you sacrifice other, lesser forms of happiness, and you have to be happy to make the sacrifice. That right there is the essence of wisdom. When we think about Buddhist wisdom, we think about depending on the core arising, we think about emptiness—all very abstract ideas. But if you trace them back to their beginnings, they come from this one principle. Depending on the core arising doesn’t mean anything unless it’s applied to the quest for true happiness. The same with the teaching on emptiness. It really doesn’t mean anything unless it’s really useful in the pursuit of true happiness. So that’s another good quality that comes from pursuing happiness. Pursuing your desire for true happiness, showing respect for that desire, helps you to become wise. Then you reflect on the fact that since you desire happiness, are you different from anybody else around you? Everybody desires happiness. This is something we all have in common. There are two ways of reacting to this. One is to work on the principle of sympathy. You recognize that desire in other people as well. And you know that you wouldn’t want to have that desire thwarted, and they don’t want to have that desire thwarted either. You begin to sympathize with them. In a more practical sense, you realize that if your happiness depends on their suffering, they’re going to do everything they can to destroy your happiness. So at the very least, this makes you take their happiness into consideration. This is the beginning of compassion. So these three qualities—purity, wisdom, and compassion—are qualities that we attribute to the Buddha. They’re qualities that he embodied in a very full way. This is where they come from, the desire for true happiness. This is why we should respect that desire, because it leads us to develop within ourselves the qualities that the Buddha developed. This is how we take refuge, not in the person of the Buddha, but in the qualities of the Buddha within ourselves. This, of course, relates to that second aspect of having respect for our ability to bring about true happiness. In order to bring it about, we need to train the mind. Because you look around you, you look in your own life, you see that when the mind isn’t trained, it can create a lot of happiness. It can create havoc, do a lot of damage. We’ve heard that it is trained, but if it’s trained in the wrong direction, it makes the damage even worse. So it means you have to take very good care of the mind. That’s one of the reasons why we meditate, to develop those good qualities of the mind and also to keep the mind in good shape. You focus on an object when you meditate. The Pali word for object, aramma, means support. The image is of a place where you put the mind. Think of the mind as something valuable. It’s like having gold in your house. You want to put the gold in a very good place where it’s safe. Or if you have some expensive heirloom, you want to take good care of it. If it’s silver, you want to polish it properly. If it’s made out of leather, you want to oil it properly and put it in a good place where it doesn’t get damaged. The mind is much more valuable than silver or leather. And yet, look at where we place it in the course of a day. We just toss it around any old place. A thought comes bubbling up in the mind, and there you place your mind on the bubble. And sometimes those bubbles turn out to be swamp gas. I mean, they’re poisonous. So you have to move the mind and put it someplace else, just any old place. That’s the way most people are. Whatever comes up in their mind, that’s where they place it. It’s their attention. And then they find out that it can’t stay there. Not only can it not stay there many times, it’s really harmful to the mind. Greed, anger, and delusion come bubbling up, and you place your mind in the greed, anger, and delusion. And they eat through the mind like an acid. So this is why we place the mind on the breath. Adjust the breath so that it feels comfortable coming in and going out, and place your mind there, both with the breath and with a sense of ease that comes from the breath. And spend a lot of time with the breath so you get to know it well. Find out what kind of breathing is good for the body, what kind of breathing is not, what kind of breathing could help balance out any imbalance in the body. When you’re tired or when you’re nervous, when you’re tense, when you’re irritable, what kind of breathing helps to balance out those qualities? If you pay attention to the breath, you’ll know. You’ll find that it really can have an impact not only on the body but also on the state of the mind. Then pay attention to the fact that you don’t want to be careful of the mind only while you’re sitting or meditating. You want to be careful of it throughout the day. When you look at the training for the monks, you’ll see that this principle of being very careful, showing respect for your things, is an important part of the training. In some cases, it may look obsessive, but there’s an important lesson there. If you learn how to take care of your things, then that develops good habits. Apply those habits to the mind. There are rules about, say, the bowl that the monks use for their alms round. You don’t place it next to a ledge for fear that it might fall off. You’re going to open a door. You don’t open the door while you’re holding the bowl in your hand. You put it down first. When you dry it, when you put it away, there are very precise rules on how you should do it. First, respect for the bowl. For two reasons. One, it’s something you’ve been given. It’s the fruit of somebody’s generosity. Everything here in the monastery is the fruit of somebody’s generosity, so treat it with respect. Secondly, for the monks, each monk has only one bowl. So you want to make it last as long as you can. So you bring the same line of thought to your mind. The fact that you’ve got a human mind is a result of a lot of good things you’ve done in the past, all the merit from past lifetimes. So you don’t want to just toss it away. Secondly, when you get the mind into a good shape, you want to keep it that way, because you have only one mind. You can’t trade it in for a better mind. So be careful where you place the mind, how you polish the mind, how you look after the mind. Show the mind respect, because the state of the mind is going to determine your ability to follow that path of practice that leads to the end of suffering. When the mind is in good shape, it’s more likely to do what it knows should be done. When it’s in bad shape, when it’s irritable, when it’s in a foul mood, it could care less. Because it could care less, of course, it’s careless. It starts doing all kinds of detrimental things, both detrimental to itself and detrimental to other people. But if you get the mind in good shape and keep it in good shape, then no matter how difficult the right thing may be, you find that you’ve got the resources to do it. Ultimately, this is how we show respect for the Buddha. It’s by taking good care of our own minds, showing respect for our own minds, respect for our desire for happiness, respect for our ability to bring about true happiness. As the Buddha once said, “The best way of showing respect and homage to him is through practicing his teachings.” And as you practice his teachings, you’re taking good care of the mind. So in this way, respect for the Buddha and respect for your mind are basically the same thing.

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