Respect

December 19, 2011

You may have noticed that we do a lot of bowing around here. It’s to induce a sense of respect—respect for the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha. Why do we respect them? One is to just see that the Buddha was a really excellent teacher. If you want to learn from him, you have to respect what he has to say. Respect his example. It’s not just his words. His actions also spoke. And it’s a basic principle in learning that if you want to learn from somebody, you have to respect them. That means putting the lessons they have to offer you ahead of your immediate reactions as to what’s difficult, what’s possible, what’s impossible, what you want to do, what you don’t want to do. That’s one reason. But it also goes deeper than that. Because the example of the Buddha, what he respected in himself, is teaching you to respect something in yourself as well—your desire for true happiness. And that’s something we have to keep reminding ourselves over and over again, because the message of society is that it’s a waste of time. There’s no such thing as a true happiness. The best you can do is to take the happiness you can find in things, in status, in money, all the ways of the world, all the things that can pull you off course, and teach you that the noble qualities of the mind that are needed for true happiness are not really worthy of respect. Everyone’s looking to see how admirable people have feet of clay in hopes of undoing the sense of what they had to say and what they were actually doing really was admirable. And of course what that does is it fits you into their machine, the machine of society that wants you to be a consumer. You have to ask yourself, “What’s that you want in life?” And the Buddha’s pointing out that you have within you the capability of finding a true happiness, a totally harmless happiness, one that’s derived from developing qualities you have within yourself and ultimately don’t need to take anything away from anybody else at all, and actually put you in a position where you have more to offer. So it’s not just your happiness here. When you’re talking about true happiness, the boundaries between your happiness and other people’s happiness begin to dissolve away. If your happiness is based on status, the boundaries go up. If it’s based on wealth, the boundaries go up. If it’s based on generosity, based on virtue, based on concentration, discernment, there’s no need for those boundaries. Which is why the Buddha said that when you train your mind, you’re also helping others. And when you help others, you’re training your mind. The two processes go together when you’re looking for this kind of happiness. And it’s something really worthy of respect. So when you bow down to the Buddha, you’re bowing down to that part of your mind as well. It’s always good to keep that attitude in mind to bring it to meditation, because we’re doing something here that’s worthy of respect. And when you respect something, you pay full attention. You really notice what you’re doing. You really put your heart into what you’re doing. You’ve really got to be alert. You’ve really got to be mindful. And you’ve got to be ardent. You may have noticed those three qualities were mentioned in the chant just now. The analysis of the path. When you’re practicing mindfulness, you want to be ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. In other words, with reference to the ordinary happiness you’d find out in the world. And you’re focusing instead on four things. And you’d bring three qualities to those four things. The four things, of course, are the body in and of itself. The feelings in and of themselves. Mind states, mental qualities in and of themselves. That’s your focus. That’s your frame of reference. In other words, you’re not concerned about the body, or the feelings, or your mind states in the context of the world. They become the context themselves. And then you’re ardent, alert, and mindful. This is where the quality of respect comes in. You’re ardent and mindful. You’re trying to do this well. You’re trying to do it skillfully. Anything unskillful comes up in the mind, you want to abandon it. If you notice any skillful qualities, you try to develop them. You don’t just simply watch them arise and pass away. You try to nurture them, give rise to them if they’re not there, and then maintain them when they are, so they can grow. And among those skillful qualities, two really important ones are alertness and mindfulness. Mindfulness is the ability to keep something in mind. For instance, we’re going to keep the breath in mind. But keeping the breath in mind encompasses the other frames of reference as well. As you’re focusing on the breath, you want to pay attention to how the feelings in the body and the feelings in the mind relate to the breath, what way of breathing is comfortable. What way of breathing is good for the mind? You’ve got three of the frames of reference right there. You’ve got the body and the breath, the feelings, and then the mind states. The Buddha is describing how you develop that third frame of reference. It’s not just watching whatever comes up. You actually try to notice, what does the mind need right now? If the mind has trouble settling down, what’s wrong? Is there something wrong with the breath? What kind of feelings are you developing in the body by the way you breathe? You want to be as sensitive to that as possible. I was talking this evening to someone who has a problem sensing any breath energy in his torso. He can feel breath energy in his arms and his legs, but his torso seems to be just a block. So what do you do if you find you have that problem? Try to ask questions. When you breathe in, how does the right side of your body feel? When you breathe out, how does the right side feel? Then look at the left. When you breathe in, how does the left side feel? How does it feel when you breathe out? Compare the two sides. Compare the in and out. This is where the alertness comes in. You want to be alert to any differences you can detect. Once you can detect the differences, then you can evaluate them. What kind of breathing feels good on your right side? What kind of breathing feels good on your left side? Which side is holding more tension? The way to notice is to ask questions and watch. It’s through asking questions that your discernment develops. And then you try to notice the impact that this has on the mind. Is the mind settling down or is it not settling down? Should you change the way you breathe? What kind of feelings should you try to be nurturing inside the body? It’s not that you’re going to create the feelings out of nothing. You’ve got the potential for rapture here in the body. You’ve got the potential for ease and pleasure in the body. You’ve got the potential for pain. Different ways of breathing are going to nurture those different potentials. So watch to see how the way you breathe is having an impact. And when you begin to discern differences, then you’re going to try to make the connection with the questions. What kind of breathing causes a feeling of ease in the body that’s easy to settle down with? What kind of breathing creates too much energy where you’re feeling wired? What kind of breathing puts you to sleep? And if you find that you have trouble attacking the problem from the side of the breathing, the Buddha recommends that you put the breath aside for the time being and try to think about something that you find inspiring. Why you have respect for this process to begin with. Some people find thinking about the Buddha is inspiring. Other people find thinking about the Dhamma is inspiring, or the Sangha. Thinking about the Buddha is a little bit too unreal for you. You can’t really relate to the Buddha and put yourself in his place. Well, put yourself in the place of members of the noble Sangha who started out with a lot of problems. You read about them in the Theragatha and the Therigatha. The verses of the elder monks and the elder nuns. A lot of them had problems. Some were actually getting suicidal. Their meditation wasn’t going the way they wanted it to. And yet they were able to overcome that sense of crisis inside. And you haven’t reached the point where you’re suicidal yet, so you’re in a better position than they were to start out with. Anything you find inspiring about the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. Feeling discouraged about yourself? Think about your generosity, the times when you’ve been generous and you didn’t have to be. The times when you observed the precepts and you didn’t have to. You could have gotten away with something, but you didn’t. Stoop to that. In other words, find some dharma topic that gives you encouragement, helps the mind to settle down and feel at ease in the present moment, feel at ease with itself, feel at ease with the practice. And then you turn back to the breath. Because it is important that on the one hand you are nurturing good qualities in the body and the mind, but on the other hand you have to be patient, realizing that there are things that take time. You’ve got a cake in the oven and you want to eat it quickly. You don’t want to just turn up the heat so it gets cooked fast. What you do is you burn it if you do it that way. Some things you realize are going to take time, so you stick with it, stick with it, give yourself encouragement, develop a skill of patience, knowing how to be patient. You stick with a task and keep yourself at it with a sense of joy. This is the other kind of balance you need to bring. On the one hand, you want to be serious about your practice. After all, this is true happiness we’re talking about. It’s not just a game. But at the same time, you have to enjoy what you’re doing. If you’re grim about the meditation, it grinds to a halt really fast. So part of the meditation is knowing the right techniques, and the other part is knowing the right attitudes to develop. In the beginning, you may want to focus on these three frames of reference—the breath, i.e., the body, the feelings that are created by the breath, and then the state of the mind as it’s focusing on the breath and the feelings. So its energy level is just right. Be able to stick with it with a sense of interest, a sense of well-being, and a sense of purpose. We’re doing something important here, something noble, something kind. Something that’s good for ourselves and good for other people. This fits under a rubric that Ajahn Lee had one time. He said you have to have the right object, you have to have the right intention, and you have to get the right quality. And the quality here is related to the quality of the breath and also to the quality of the mind that you bring. You want to make sure it’s all high quality, because that’s when the meditation becomes nourishing and it really starts getting results. And that’s when you begin to realize that this really is worthy of the respect that we give to it, as we show respect for our desire for true happiness. So it all comes together. The custom of bowing is not just a quaint custom that somehow happened to get tacked on to the Buddhist tradition. The attitude of respect goes all the way through.

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