Respect Your Practice

November 19, 2012

We come to the monastery to learn skills—skills in how we act, in how we speak, in how we direct our minds. Like right now, we’re meditating. It’s primarily an issue of the mind. Of course, the mind is involved in all the other skills as well. When you speak, the mind decides what to say. When you act, the mind decides what to do. So it’s primarily an issue of the mind, which is why the meditation is the most important of the skills, because it focuses directly on the mind. Of course, in the beginning, you don’t focus right on the mind. You have to focus on something right near the mind, because the mind itself is something very hard to pin down. You focus on the breath. Right here, coming in and going out all the time. And because it’s so close to the mind, it gives a good reflection. You notice when greed or anger, fear, come into the mind, the breath is going to be affected. So it’s a good barometer of what kind of state the mind is in right now. When you get very sensitive to the breathing, you get more sensitive to what’s going on in the mind. So the little tiny germs of greed, aversion, delusion, and all the other unskillful mental qualities are things that you can discern immediately as they arise. You don’t have to wait until they’ve taken over. So a lot of the skills that you have in the meditation that we master here are focused on the breath. How to get sensitive to how you feel the breath, where you feel the breath, what kind of breathing feels good, what kind of breathing feels good and is good for the body, what kind of breathing may feel good for a while but is not so good for the body. These are things you have to learn how to observe. And so while we’re here focusing on the breath, you want to put aside all other concerns. What you’re going to do tomorrow, what you did today. Just let those issues fall away. Even the thought of who you are right now, let that fall away too. There’s awareness and there’s the breath. If you’re going to do any thinking, think about the breath. If it doesn’t feel comfortable, what could feel more comfortable? Even if it does feel comfortable, can it get still more comfortable? You want to experiment and see. Because the meditation is not a lesson in being passive. It’s a lesson in being observant and also being proactive. Because after all, the mind is proactive, the way we experience it. The way we experience the world around us has a lot to do with what we bring to it. The way we experience the world inside has a lot to do with our expectations. So as you meditate, you want to learn how to observe the mind in action. In fact, everything the Buddha teaches is about action. He teaches us to have respect for our actions in the sense that they really do have an impact on ourselves and the people around us. So you have to respect the power of your choices. You notice we bow down a lot here at the monastery. It’s to induce an attitude of respect. After all, the Buddha teaches us to respect something within ourselves that is worthy of respect—our desire for true happiness. The desire not to settle for what the world is trying to sell us. We want something better than that. Better both in the sense that the happiness goes deeper into the mind, and in the sense that it doesn’t have any harm. It doesn’t cause any harm to ourselves, it doesn’t cause any harm to other people. It’s called a noble happiness. That’s a desire that should be respected. It’s something that we have to learn how to keep going within ourselves, because the world isn’t going to do it for us. We have so many other desires that go in other directions. In a lot of ways, the Buddha is a lot more concerned with our happiness than we are. He wants to see all the beings in the world attain true happiness. And if he could have done it for them, he would have. He was that kind of person. But it’s something that each of us has to do for him or herself alone. And yet you look at the way we treat our actions. It’s almost like they’re throwaway. We treat our desire for true happiness almost like we throw that away, too. And part of it is because of outside influences, and part of it is because there’s that part of the mind that is so prey to outside influences. So you have to protect your practice. And you show respect for it by protecting it. That one who sees danger and respects being heedful—that chant we had just now. There are all sorts of dangers inside and out that could divert ourselves from the desire for true happiness. So what do you do? You try to be heedful. The quality of heedfulness comes down to this set of beliefs. One, your actions are important. Two, there are dangers out there, but the way you act can determine whether you’re going to fall prey to those dangers or whether you’re going to escape them. If you couldn’t escape them, there’d be no need to be heedful. You’d just have to accept whatever came. But the Buddha wasn’t the sort of person who taught us just to accept exactly what came at us. He also teaches us to accept the fact that we do shape things in our experience, and we have the power within us to shape them in a skillful way so that we can avoid both external and internal dangers. That’s why heedfulness really matters. That’s why it’s so important. So there are many layers of skill here that we’re practicing. One is the meditation itself. Two, it covers the activities in our daily lives that can either help the meditation or hinder the meditation. And three, you’ve got to protect the attitude that sees how important the meditation is. And a careless attitude that says, “Well, I know better than this,” or, “I can do without this.” That’s really dangerous. Because, after all, where do the main dangers lie? It’s not out there in society. It’s in the mind. If the mind didn’t already have these tendencies to greed, aversion, and delusion, the outside world wouldn’t have any effect on it. If your resistance is down, many times the germs you’re already carrying around with you are going to cause trouble. You don’t have to be infected from outside. So respect is this protective shell that you put around your practice, not the shell in which you hide away from the world. It’s more like a force field. You can go out into the world, and if your protective shell is good, you can see things and listen to things and hear things all around you, engage in the world. But it won’t be able to make inroads in the mind. Because you want to keep respecting this desire to find true happiness. No one else is going to respect it for you. No one else is going to protect it for you. It’s a matter of your own priorities. And so you do what you can to keep this sense of priorities alive, while you’re here at the monastery and when you go back home. It’s not the case that true happiness matters here and doesn’t matter outside. It matters everywhere. It’s just that the world can be very pressing, can be very insistent. You’ve got to do this, you’ve got to do that, you’ve got to pay attention to this, you’ve got to please these people. But you have to look down into yourself and ask yourself, “Well, why? What is it that I’m respecting when I give in to those desires, those concerns, those influences? And what am I respecting when I try to maintain this direction toward true happiness?” Jhana Mahaprabhu has a fine passage where he says that even though we don’t say it, many times it’s gilesang sonanangacchami, “I take refuge in my defilements.” So you have to ask yourself, “To whom are you paying respect when you say something or do something or think something?” In what direction are you training yourself? Sometimes we’re training ourselves toward greed, aversion, and delusion. We don’t think of it as a training. But as we keep giving in to them, our actions keep going in that direction, the mind will get trained in that direction. So these are questions you have to ask yourself in which you’ve decided that your priorities are for genuine happiness. You want to protect that because it really is valuable, it really is worthy of respect. Because it’s only through that desire that you can find the happiness that causes no harm to yourself, no harm to anybody else, and really is worth all the effort that goes into it. A happiness like that is hard to find in this world. A path leading to that kind of happiness is hard to find in this world. So when you do find it, it’s something good to cherish.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2012/121119_Respect_Your_Practice.mp3>