Showing Respect for Concentration

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The training we’re undergoing here has three aspects. There’s virtue, concentration, and discernment. There are passages where the Buddha calls it “heightened virtue,” “heightened mind,” and “heightened discernment.” In other words, you’re trying to take these qualities and make them special. And you want to have respect for them. This takes us out of the culture immediately. The culture doesn’t show much respect for virtuous people. It certainly doesn’t show much respect for our concentration. It’s trying to scatter our attention all over the place. And as for discernment, well, there’s not much. People are very clever. You can get training in being clever, but that’s not what the Buddha’s talking about here. Discernment is how to put an end to suffering, how to put an end to stress, in a way that’s blameless and effective. That’s not the goal. It’s interesting, though, in that verse we chanted just now, where the Buddha talks about having respect for the training. He covers all three of those aspects. And then he repeats, “Respect for concentration.” To be ardent and have respect for concentration, that’s a separate quality. He’s taking it out and emphasizing it. Because of the three, concentration is something we don’t respect that much. It starts out as such a little tiny thing. For most of us, when we’re practicing, there are moments when the mind settles down. And then you get distracted and run off to something else. And then you settle down again a bit, and then you get distracted again. And in the beginning, those little moments don’t seem like much. You have to be very careful to look after them. It’s like trying to start a fire in the wind. You have to cup your hands around flame with a match. And then once the kindling has been ignited, you have to cup your hands around the kindling. Finally, the fire is big enough so it can protect itself with its own heat. It’s the same with your concentration. When your concentration is tender, you have to be very, very protective of it. This means not only while you’re sitting here meditating, but also as you go through the day. Whatever moments of stillness, whatever moments of quiet and ease you encounter, you have to protect them. Like right now, there may be just a little bit of ease in the breath. Protect that. Try to figure out a way that you can breathe in, breathe out, and create a sense of ease in those centers that Ajahn Lee refers to. In the middle of the head, on the palate, base of the throat, just below the breastbone, just around the navel. Where in your body is there a sense of stillness that you can keep still as you breathe in, breathe out, without squeezing it? Whether it’s still with a sense of fullness. It may not seem like much to begin with, but you’ve got to respect it. Look after it. Tend to it. In the same way, in the other verse that we chant often, where the Buddha says you look after a good friend, you’ve got to respect the fact that you’ve got a good friend. A good friend is special. Concentration is special. It’s only when you have those little moments of concentration and you begin to stitch them together that they can grow large and they can grow strong. Ajahn Foong used to use the word prakong. It’s a Thai word that means “protect.” I asked him once what it meant. It was a word I hadn’t heard much prior to being with him. He gave the image of a parent looking after a child. The child is just beginning to walk. So you hover around the child to make sure the child doesn’t fall. At the same time, though, you can’t hold on tight to the child because the child will never learn to walk on his own. So you look after it, you hover around it, and it will begin to grow, like a tiny seedling that you’re very careful to make sure that nobody steps on. Make sure you don’t step on it. You water it. You look after it. Make sure the bugs don’t eat it. And the tree will have a chance to grow. Then when you get out from here, you try to maintain that. That helps in two ways. You’re showing respect for your own concentration, and you’re showing respect for other people’s concentration, too. If you’re maintaining your quiet, one of the first things you learn is you’ve got to cut down on the amount that you talk. And John Fung had a good test. He said, “If something is not necessary, you don’t say it.” Those questions that the Buddha has you pose before you say something, is it true, is it beneficial, and is it timely? And John Fung adds an extra test. Is it necessary? Do you really have to say it? If you look at most of your speech, you realize that most of it is not necessary, and you can cut down a lot on your talking. That disturbs your own concentration less, and it disturbs the concentration of other people less, too. This is one way of showing not only respect for them, but also goodwill. We think that goodwill, metta, which is close to the word mitta, which means friendly, to be a friend, means that you chat them up, you say the sorts of things that people in the world like to hear when they’re friendly. That’s not friendliness in the Buddha’s way. Friendliness means you respect other people’s practice. You respect their need to develop virtue, concentration, and discernment as well. So just as you provide a protective space around your own concentration, you try to protect other people’s concentration, too. Because if you can’t show respect for your own concentration, how are you going to respect other people’s? And how are you going to be a good friend? The word the Buddha uses is “admirable friend,” kalyana-mitta. And that’s not just a nice, friendly guy, someone who has the well-being of everyone around him in mind. On the one hand, through your own behavior, you want to provide a good example. And you also want to help create the conditions where other people can train themselves. We can’t do the work for one another, but we can help with the environment. So remember, as you go through the day, we’re all here to practice. And you want to show a little respect for other people’s practice. Ours is a culture that doesn’t know much about respect. We say, “I respect so-and-so.” But what does that mean? How do we show it? We’re not very good at showing respect. And here’s one good way of doing it. Remember, each person is practicing. Each person has defilements. Each person is suffering, wanting to work on the causes of their suffering. So make sure your actions and your words and your attitudes, at the very least, don’t create obstacles for them. And in whatever way you can, create a better environment for the practice for yourself and for other people. And this is important. Creating a better environment for yourself and for other people usually involves the same sorts of things. Cutting back on your speech, cutting back on unskillful behavior is good for you and all the people around you. So if you’re going to be breaking silence, make sure it’s for a purpose. If you’re going to be interfering with other people’s concentration by what you say, make sure that’s really necessary. Otherwise, we show our friendliness by being quiet and respecting one another’s concentration.

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