Respect for the Whole Training

October 4, 2013

To have respect for the training, what we’re doing right now. You give all your attention to it and you give it top priority. This is one of the reasons why we have so much bowing down around here, is to realize that the teaching the Buddha left behind is really important. It’s something worth practicing, something worth preserving, because a teaching like this is very hard to find. Something the Buddha gave out is out of his compassion, because he didn’t need anything from anybody. On the night when he passed away, devas were dropping flowers out of the celestial heavens, playing music. He told one of the monks, “This is not how you pay respect to the Buddha, or it’s not the ideal way. The ideal way is to pay respect to the practice, practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma.” In other words, in line with the Buddha’s original intent, which was to teach us how to gain release from suffering and to wean us away from our old eating habits. That’s one of the reasons why respect is so important, because we tend to respect our old eating habits, whether it’s the food that we will and will not eat and the habits we have. We really feed heavily on our habits. We don’t like giving them up because we’ve gotten at least some nourishment from them in the past. But when the Buddha uses the word nibbida, it’s that sense of having eaten enough of that particular kind of food. You should say, “I’ve seen what it can do, and I can see its drawbacks.” And you get to the point where you just don’t want that kind of food anymore. It’s like that apple juice we got the other day. It looked like apple juice, but it was all high-fructose corn syrup. And you think, “Why on earth? When they use apple juice to sweeten other things, why do they need to use high-fructose corn syrup to sweeten apple juice?” And it said on the label in very small letters, “Yes, 5% apple juice.” And that’s why the bottle was returned. In other words, you know what’s there. You don’t want it anymore. And yet if it’s something that we really like or really go back to, or at least it’s something we habitually go back to, it’s hard to wean us off of that habit. Which is why the Buddha emphasized this value of respect so much. There’s a nice passage where a monk comes to see the Buddha and talks about how difficult it was to accept some of the rules. You can imagine what it was like to be ordained back in those days. They weren’t forewarned that there were going to be rules, because the Buddha hadn’t formulated them yet. And then, one by one by one, these rules started coming out. And he talks about how it used to be that they could eat three meals a day. They’d go for alms three times a day. You can imagine how oppressive that was for the people in the city, the people in the countryside. Then the monk said, then the Buddha said, “Okay. Give up that midday meal.” And as the monk said, he was upset for about a day. But out of his respect and love for the Buddha, he decided to give it up. Then the Buddha said, “Give up the evening meal.” That was even worse, because, as he said, the best meal is usually the evening meal. People will save special food for the evening meal. But again, out of love and respect for the Buddha, they gave it up. Then he began to realize all the benefits that came from that, particularly. Monks were not out going for alms in the dark of night. He said, in the past, when monks were going for alms at nighttime, they’d run into hooligans either on the way from having committed a crime or on the way to committing a crime. Of course, that was dangerous. Women would proposition them. Sometimes they’d fall into cesspools. Sometimes they’d trip over a sleeping cow. He tells the story of one evening he was waiting for alms outside a house. A servant woman was washing some pans, and there was a lightning flash. She suddenly saw him. She hadn’t realized he was there. She said, “Oh my gosh, the demon’s after me.” He said, “I’m not a demon. I’m a monk waiting for alms.” She said, “Well, you’re a monk whose mother is dead and whose father is dead. It would be better for your belly to be slashed open with a knife than to go prowling around at night looking for food for your belly’s sake.” And the monk concludes, as he tells the Buddha, “There are so many unpleasant things that these rules have freed us from and so many pleasant things they provided.” So it’s good to think about our old ways of eating, even though we like them and we feel upset when we have to give them up. It’s good to have a good basic respect for the Buddha, a good basic respect for the Dhamma and the Sangha, because that helps get you over your disinclination to abandon your old ways of eating. And it’s only then you begin to realize what really is better this way. So respect is one of the ways that you motivate yourself to abandon unskillful habits and work on skillful ones. So as the Buddha said, have some respect for the triple training, the precepts. Have some respect for merit-making. This is one aspect of the tradition that Westerners tend to look down on. We feel that we can go straight to discernment. And those poor people who are just so greedily looking after merit, they’ve missed the whole point. Well, no, they understand something that many of us don’t understand, which is that one of the ways of subduing your defilements is to be willing to give something away, to be willing to do just basic, everyday kinds of things as a gift, to observe the precepts that develop goodwill. All these forms of making merit are really essential for developing the character qualities we need as meditators. This willingness to give, the willingness to be generous. When that becomes a habit, then when we come to the meditation, we’re a lot more willing to give of our time, give of our energy, and be patient. I’ve told you that story of Ajahn Sawat at the retreat at IMS. After the second or third day, he turned to me and said, “You know, everybody here looks pretty grim.” And his analysis of why was because they didn’t have a good background in virtue and generosity. So a day or two later, I gave a talk on virtue and generosity, and we actually had someone leave the retreat. He said he hadn’t come here for religion. He’d come here to train his mind. Well, not realizing that virtue and generosity are important parts of training the mind. Or again, at the end of the retreat, when people asked Ajahn Sawat about meditation and daily life, he talked about the five precepts. And again, some people were upset, thinking that he was looking down and that laypeople couldn’t really meditate and all they could handle was the five precepts. He was making an important point. He was saying that adhering to the precepts is a form of meditation. And when we try to skip over the steps, we’re not really prepared for them. Virtue teaches restraint. It teaches mindfulness. It teaches alertness. It teaches you to be sensitive to your actions. One of our problems is that when we do something that’s unskilled, we have a good excuse. But here are some precepts that say, “No, no excuses at all.” It’s good to train the mind that way, to have respect for the principles of virtue. So it’s good to have respect for all aspects of the path, because they’re all needed for a complete training. And if something is missing, there’s going to be something missing in the results. Our modern tendency is to pare things down, to reduce everything to what we think is essential. But many times we drop the essentials without realizing it. So look at your practice. See which aspects of the path you’re not really respecting and try to show them a little respect. There’s more there than meets the eye.

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