Respecting What’s Noble Inside You

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One of the reasons we respect the Buddha is because he teaches us to respect something worthy of respect inside ourselves—our desire for true happiness. A happiness that doesn’t change, a happiness that doesn’t harm anyone. Everybody desires happiness. But some people are not too picky about the conditions. What they need to do in order to get it, and what impact it’s going to have on other people, other beings. There’s nothing particularly noble about that kind of happiness or the search for that happiness. But the search for happiness is blameless. The search for happiness that doesn’t change, that is noble. And so we should respect that. Don’t let the world tell us anything otherwise. And it tells us lots of things otherwise. You buy our product and you’ll get a little chill, a little satisfaction for a while, and that should be enough. That’s what they say. And it’s almost as if the world runs on the assumption that true happiness is not possible, so we can just muddle around with whatever. So it’s good to come to a place where you have a teacher like the Buddha. He says, “No, true happiness is possible.” He showed in his own lifetime that it’s possible and that it’s within human capabilities. And so as we settle down to meditate, we should reflect on that a bit, that we’re looking in the right place, looking inside. You look outside, and it’s normal for there to be a lot of disappointment in the world. The world does offer its pleasures and it does offer its good things, but they can turn so easily into something else. And so we need a place inside where the changes of the world don’t overturn the mind, because the mind is already ready to change. The mind can change in all kinds of directions. As the Buddha said, there’s no really good analogy for how quick the mind can change. And here is a master of analogies. Even the twinkling of an eye is slower than the mind can change. And the mind can change very radically, very easily. So what are you going to expect out of the world? The world can change a lot too. So what we need to do is learn how to take this area inside ourselves, this very changeable mind, and make it more reliable. Then point it in the direction of a happiness that is blameless, a happiness that is harmless, a happiness that lasts. And it turns out that that’s the best happiness of all, the happiest of happinesses. So think about that as you turn your mind inside. You’re looking in the right place for happiness. And we use the breath as a beginning step in that direction, trying to be sensitive to how the breathing feels in the body and being sensitive to the sensitive spots in the body. All too often the spots that are really sensitive tend to close themselves up because we’ve been abusing them for so long. We’ve been subconsciously pushing the breath energy in ways that are not really healthy or nourishing. So the sensitive spots, to protect themselves, just kind of close up. But now you make a point that you’re going to try to breathe in a way that’s comfortable. Breathe aware of the whole body. And begin to notice where inside, usually in the torso or in the head, are your really sensitive spots. And try to breathe in a way that comforts them or nourishes them. Why? So the mind can settle down and be with itself in the present moment and learn how to observe itself in the present moment, using the breath as a mirror. If the breath is all out of whack, it’s usually a sign that the mind is out of whack too. So calm the breath down. Make it fine, make it smooth, make it whatever feels good. And think of it going in places you might not ordinarily have thought of it going. Think of the different energy channels in the body, or the nervous system, the circulatory system, starting with the heart and going through all the different blood vessels. Think of all these things being nourished by the way you breathe. That’ll bring the mind here, right here. And when the mind is right here, then it can watch itself. It can see its movements a lot more clearly than if it’s wandering around in those movements. And then you begin to see its movements for what they are, which ones are creating problems, which ones are not. The mind has a whole repertoire. And you want to be able to choose which thoughts you’re going to run with. At the moment, the thoughts related to the breath are the ones you want to run with. As for other thoughts, no matter how good or wonderful they may be, you put them aside right now and just stay with us in this process of getting the mind together with the breath and trying to figure it out. Because it does require some figuring out. As the Buddha said, when you get into concentration, it requires what he calls direct thought and evaluation. In other words, you direct your thoughts to the breath and then you evaluate this issue of getting the mind to stay with the breath so that the breath permeates all of your awareness, all your awareness of the body, so that these things fit snugly together. It’s just a sense of snugness that gives you a sense of solidity inside. You’re not making things hard. But there’s a sense of not being pushed around easily. No matter what emotions may come through or no matter what thoughts come through, you want to be able to be impassive. Not dull, but just not dull. Not affected by things. You need this safe place inside. Because otherwise you get run over by the world, swept away by the world. And then you can’t trust yourself. Then thoughts about a true happiness tend to go out the window. But when you’re standing here solidly, here in the present moment, the thought of a true happiness begins to seem possible. You want to nurture that. That’s something inside yourself that you do want to respect. You have to be careful about what you respect inside. It’s just like what you respect outside. I was in Yosemite once. I was talking to a photographer. He was pointing out four peaks off on the horizon. He said those were his sacred mountains. Just as the Chinese have four sacred mountains, he had identified four sacred mountains in the Sierras. He was planning to climb them next year, he said. But then he wanted to say, “But then again, of course, everything is sacred. All nature is sacred.” I kept thinking, “Well, if everything is sacred, where are you going to go to the bathroom?” You have to have a sense of priorities, that some things are worthy of more respect than others. And inside yourself, the desire for true happiness is worthy of respect. So, tend to this breath right here, because that’s where it’s headed. The act of tending to the breath brings the mind into the present moment where it can see itself clearly. And it can begin to see how it moves and how it searches for pleasure in different ways. And you can evaluate which ways of looking for pleasure are actually useful, noble, and which ones are not. Then we can begin to sort through the various impulses in the mind and all the different body members, all the different voices, and go with the ones that really are deserving of respect. So in the Buddha’s saying, “Have respect for concentration, have respect for the training,” it means having respect for yourself, realizing that we do have this noble potential within us. And we do want to give it an opportunity to grow.

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