Respect Your Happiness

July 4, 2023

As the Buddha once said, people who live without an object of respect are miserable. Think about it. If there was no one in the human race that you respected, this would not be a good place to live. For a lot of people, that’s the way it is. Their lives are very mean and harsh. So it’s good that we have the Buddha himself to respect. He respected the Dhamma. And what is the Dhamma? It’s teachings on how to find happiness that doesn’t harm anybody, happiness that’s stable, secure, that has no drawbacks at all. And when we have the desire for that happiness in ourselves, he teaches us to respect that. Respect him. He allows us to be responsible and teaches us how we can do it. It’s not just an idea in the sky. He gives us the steps. He analyzes why we’re suffering. And it comes down to how we put together the experience of the present moment. We have raw material coming in from the past, from our actions. But how we actually experience that is determined by how we put it together right here, right now. We put it together out of desire. We put it together with a purpose or with many purposes. This is one of the problems. We have to look into what our purpose is in putting things together right now. What are we trying to do? This is going to be limited by our sense of what we can accomplish or what human beings in general can accomplish. This is another reason why we respect the Buddha. He opens our horizons, seeing that true happiness is possible, a harmless happiness is possible. So we’re going to make that our intention. It’s the basic intention of goodwill. Goodwill for ourselves, goodwill for everybody. Just developing that attitude, that’s a very nourishing activity itself. We’re looking for happiness that harms no one. So we can regard the whole human race as our brothers and sisters, good brothers and good sisters, people that we want to be a good brother or sister to as well, and people who may not be behaving well. That’s one of the things we have to accept. We can’t make our goodwill depend on other people being good. But we have to nourish ourselves with our goodwill. We have to use our goodwill so that we can learn how to depend on ourselves. Because if we let ourselves have ill will for anyone, we’re going to start behaving unskillfully toward that person. And that unskillful action then becomes more of the raw material we’ve got to deal with. This is why every night before the meditation we develop thoughts of goodwill, thoughts of compassion, empathetic joy, and thoughts of equanimity for cases where, even though we want people to be happy, it’s not going to happen right away. So we don’t waste our time focusing on things that are impossible. We focus on what is possible. And what is possible is that we can learn how not to suffer even when bad things are happening. But as I said, it depends on what we’re doing right now. This is why the Buddhist analysis of suffering doesn’t try to trace things back to our childhood. Who said what? It traces it down to when we put something together right now, when we have a desire right now. What’s inspiring it? When the mind latches on to something right now. Why is it latching on right now? And we say that we put these things together, three kinds of what the Buddha called sankara, or fabrication. Bodily, the way we breathe. Verbal, the way we talk to ourselves. And the mental, our feelings, i.e., feeling, tones of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain. And our perceptions, the images that flash through the mind. They can be either words, individual words, short phrases, or pictures that go through the mind. They influence how we see situations. And the Buddha is telling us that we may have some unskillful ways of doing this, but we’re not stuck in those. We can learn new ways of doing it. Like with the breathing. We can breathe in a way where we’re aware of the whole body. We can breathe in ways that give rise to refreshment, a sense of pleasure, ease. Breathe in ways that gladden the mind, concentrate the mind, release the mind. There’s a lot of potential simply in the way we breathe in and breathe out. And working with the breath gives us a way of stepping out of our conversations. It’s one of the best ways of seeing how an unhealthy way of talking to yourself is unhealthy and is unnecessary. It’s just getting out of the talking entirely. If you’re going to talk, talk to yourself about how the breath is going. It’s an interesting present moment in the body itself. The way you breathe is going to have an impact on your health. And if you get sensitive to the spots in the body that are in turn sensitive to the way you breathe, you can breathe in ways that feel really gratifying, really riveting in the present moment. You’re stepping out, but you’re giving yourself a good place to stay, nourishing yourself with a sense of well-being right here, right now. Because a lot of our unskillful behavior comes from a sense of dis-ease in the present moment. So we can counteract that by learning how to breathe in ways that are comfortable, ways that are really satisfying. Ask yourself, which part of your body feels starved of breath energy right now? Well, you can breathe through it. Give it breath. Allow it to do the breathing if it wants. This is your home base. Now, sometimes there is a problem getting to home base. Your thoughts tell you that you’re not a good meditator, you don’t deserve happiness. So you have to deal with those thoughts. This is where the verbal fabrication comes in. When you’re talking to yourself, ask yourself, what is the impact that the way you talk has on you? You’re beginning to realize that there are lots of different voices coming from lots of different people in your past. And it’s good to be able to question them. I know when I first went to Thailand and was meditating, I had a lot of time on the mountain up above the monastery I was staying. And a lot of issues from my childhood and from teenage years, college years, would come rushing in. And out of nowhere, it seemed to me, there were unresolved issues. Particularly the voices that would say, “You shouldn’t be meditating. There are other things you should be doing with your life. This is selfish, this is narrow, this is unhelpful.” And so I simply learned to label those voices. Whose voice was that? Whose attitude was that? And did they really know? It’s good to learn how to disidentify with the voices in your mind. Not that you’re blaming the other people for not knowing, but simply realizing they don’t need to have power in the mind. And then the images that you use. There are some images that make it difficult to meditate, because the meditation makes you feel unworthy. But remember that the Buddha never asked people before he taught them, “By the way, are you worthy of my teachings? Are you worthy to learn how not to suffer?” He offered this as a skill to everybody. Because in learning this skill, you become a more skillful person, not only in managing your own inner conversations and your own inner happiness, but also in the way you deal with other people. The Buddha puts a lot of emphasis on generosity, a lot of emphasis on virtue. And as you take on his teachings, you find that there’s a sense of inner worth that comes from them. So you’re not just looking after yourself here. You’re doing something that’s going to have a good impact on the world. Now, it may not have an impact on the world at large that somebody on the internet is going to notice. But the people around you will find it easier to live with you and more inspiring. We live in a world where there are so few inspiring people. This can be your gift to the world. This ability to step back from your thoughts can also be useful as you learn how to step back from the rules you have to play in the world. Because there are times when you’re dealing with difficult people. I noticed that Jon Furon could have a real shield around himself when he dealt with some people that he felt were unskillful. Not that he was unkind, but simply realizing that he had to protect himself, both to protect his well-being and to make sure that he didn’t do anything unskillful. So in that way he’s protecting the other person. But then when the time came to drop that shield when the other person had gone, he was very quick to drop it. I mentioned today that dream I had of him where he had a closet, came out of the closet wearing one hat, then went back into the closet, came back wearing a different hat. I peeked in the closet and the closet was full of different hats. So as a meditator, you have to learn how to use your breath as a shield. And then learn how to dissolve the shield when you no longer need it. If you find that part of the shield meant adopting a stern expression, learn to change your expression as you meditate. They’ve done studies where they show that people’s moods are really affected by the expression on their faces. So it’s okay to sit here and meditate with a goofy smile. You’re doing the mass that you have to wear. Or it doesn’t have to be goofy, but just a slight smile. In this way you develop a range of skills in the way you breathe, in the way you talk to yourself, in the images you hold in mind, and the way you combine these things. So you find you really can put together what’s needed to be truly happy right here, not to suffer from whatever’s happening right here. Because you’re not causing any suffering, as the Buddha said. It’s the suffering we create for ourselves. That’s what weighs down the mind. If we could learn how not to create that suffering, then no matter what happens in the world, it wouldn’t weigh down on us. So he has our best interest at heart. He sees potentials in us that we don’t see. So it’s up to us to gain a sense of what those potentials are, so that we can have our own best interest at heart as well.

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