

# *Respect*

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Respect is an important part of the practice and it centers on respect for our own desire for true happiness. This is why every evening, before we meditate, we have the chant, “May I be happy.” It’s not simply a desire for ordinary happiness, it’s a desire for true happiness, the kind that comes from within, the kind that doesn’t take anything away from anyone else. That’s a desire worthy of respect.

The reason we respect the Buddha is because he teaches us to honor this desire, this aspiration—and also to respect the quality of our minds that can bring that happiness into being, that can make it a truth within us: something that’s really there and not just an aspiration.

So it comes down to respect for three things. One is respect for our own ability to attain that happiness. Two is respect for the basic principles of cause and effect that can lead us there. It’s not simply by wishing or wanting that we can get there; we have to develop skillful qualities in the mind—like we’re doing right now: training the mind in mindfulness, training the mind in alertness. Keep the breath in mind—that’s mindfulness—and be alert to what the breath is doing. Know when it’s coming in, know when it’s going out, know when it’s comfortable, know when it’s not comfortable. If it’s not comfortable, you can change. You’re not condemned to having to put up with whatever breath happens to present itself.

If you find the breathing feels a little too short, you can make it longer. If it’s too long, you can make it a little shorter. You can adjust the texture; you can adjust the rhythm. You can adjust your conception of what it means to breathe.

When the breath energy comes flowing in the body, where does it come from? You can think of the breath coming in and out every pore. What does that do to the way the breathing feels? What does that do to the way the body feels as a whole? There’s a lot to experiment with. And it’s through experimentation that we learn about the principle of cause and effect.

Meditation is not simply a process of doing as you’re told. It’s learning about cause and effect in your mind by experimenting, by playing around: focusing in different spots to see what difference that makes; adjusting the sensation in the breathing, adjusting your conception of the breathing to see what difference *that* makes.

This way, you get a sense of what causes what in the mind, what causes what in the body, and how the body and the mind affect each other. As you develop skill with this principle, it enables you to be more and more adept at using the causal principles in body and mind to take you to ever more refined levels of well-being, more refined levels of peace. It's called having respect for cause and effect, respect for the way things are.

And finally there's respect for people who've been on the path, people who have mastered those principles and have good advice they can give you. This is why we read Dhamma books, listen to Dhamma tapes, why we have question and answers from other people who've practiced: so that we can benefit from their experience as well.

The respect has to cover all three areas: our own abilities; respect for just the way things are—there are certain things that no matter how much you wish them, just can't happen, so you've got to respect the principle of cause and effect; and then respect for the people who have also experimented with that principle and gained results. When you can combine all these things, that's the proper attitude of respect.

On the one hand, you don't simply listen to what other people say without listening to your own heart. On the other hand, you don't listen to your own heart without listening to what other people say. And both of these things have to be tested against what actually works.

It's like learning any skill. You respect your own ability to do it. If you don't have confidence in your own ability, it's hard to tackle it. You run into a few difficulties and you give up. So you've got to have respect for yourself, in particular respect for your good qualities.

One of the good things about the Buddha's teaching is, as he says, that the path is good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end. In other words, it's not just good in the end. In the process of trying to find true happiness, we develop qualities within the mind of which we can be proud.

Which is very different from the way of the world. Out there they say, "Get what you can. Do whatever you need to do in order to get ahead of other people"—in the course of which, you develop a lot of personal qualities that you don't really feel good about. But here you're developing kindness, compassion, mindfulness, discernment, alertness, persistence, reliability: all good qualities, qualities that feel good in and of themselves and are conducive to true happiness.

So it's not only a good goal, but it's also a good path. And you develop a greater sense of self-esteem, self-worth as you follow the path. That's the beginning of any skill: self-respect.

Second is respect for the principles of the skill in and of itself—the principles of cause and effect, because there are certain things you cannot change. No matter how much you would like things to be different, you have respect for the way they behave. If the path going to take a long time, okay, you're willing to give it a long time. If it takes a lot of effort, you're willing to give the effort—whatever effort is required.

When the Buddha talks about the right effort of the middle way, it's not just a halfway effort or a mediocre effort. It's an effort appropriate to whatever is needed. Sometimes it's a very gentle effort; sometimes it requires a lot more willpower and strength. But you have respect for whatever is required and you do your best to fulfill the requirements.

After all, when the Buddha pointed out the path, it's not that he made up the path. He just pointed out what he had found in experience: that this was the way things were.

So it's not simply a matter of opinion, it's a matter of experience, something that's been tried and tested. And we have to try and test ourselves against those principles, too, if we want to gain results that are really satisfying.

This is combined with respect for the wise. We look for people who seem to have gained results on the path, who have the qualities that we would like to develop within ourselves, and we listen to them; we pay them respect.

Ajaan Fuang had a nice story about paying respect. He told me about one time when he was living with Ajaan Lee and they were building an ordination hall. Typically in Thailand, when you build an ordination hall, you have the Buddha image in the west side of the hall facing east, because that's supposed to be the direction the Buddha was facing on the night of his awakening. So they decided that under the Buddha image they would place their equivalent of what we would call a cornerstone: a large box planted down in the ground, filled with all kinds of auspicious things—texts, relics, amulets, and Buddha images, precious items all sealed up.

But then, as they were building the hall, about halfway through the construction, Ajaan Lee changed his mind: He wanted to have the Buddha image in the east side of the hall facing west. Apparently he had a message—Buddhism was going to go West.

But when the hall was finished, they suddenly realized that the box was under the west side of the hall but the Buddha image was on the east side of the hall—which meant that people walking in and out the west side of the hall would be stepping right over the box. And the Thai's have a very strong sense of above and below, and know it's not appropriate to step over

things that are considered sacred.

So when someone pointed this out to Ajaan Lee, he turned to Ajaan Fuang and said, “Okay get the monks down there and move it.” Ajaan Fuang knew there was no way you could move that box. It was planted firmly in the ground. But he also knew if he said that to Ajaan Lee right at that point, Ajaan Lee would say, “Well, if you don’t have the conviction to do it, I’ll find someone else who does.”

So Ajaan Fuang didn’t say anything. The next day he got all the able-bodied monks and novices in the monastery down under the ordination hall, which was a just crawl space with a lot of mud. They wrapped ropes around the box and tried to pull it. They tried crowbars. They tried all day long but couldn’t budge it an inch.

So that evening, Ajaan Fuang went to see Ajaan Lee and said, “How about if we make a new box under the Buddha image, open up the old box and take all the auspicious things out of that and put them in the new box and seal it up?” Ajaan Lee was chewing some betel nut, so he just nodded slightly. When Ajaan Fuang told me the story he added, “That’s how you show respect to your teacher.”

In other words, it’s not that the teacher’s always going to be right, but you give the teacher the benefit of the doubt. If things don’t work, then out you go back and say, “Okay, I’ve tried this, this and this; things didn’t work out. And I’ve tried to think of a solution. Is there another approach?”

So it’s a question of balancing all three things: the respect for yourself, your respect for people with experience on the path, and your respect simply for what works in terms of cause and effect; what works when you put it into practice. The skill lies in balancing those three.

Because there are times when the teachings say one thing, but your experience says something else, and you’ve got to check: Okay, who’s more reliable here? After all, books can be mistaken. There can be mistakes in translation, mistakes in transmission. But you could be mistaken, too.

This is why the Buddha once said, “Bring me someone who is honest and no deceiver and I’ll teach that person the Dhamma.” It comes down to your own honesty: your own honesty about what you do, your own honesty about your intentions, your own honesty about the results you really get.

This is the quality you really have to depend on, because it’s what makes all the difference in the practice. If you’re very clear about what you’re doing in the practice and what the results

are, what gets connected with what—in other words, what cause is connected with what effect—then it's a lot easier to make progress in the practice. It's a lot easier to judge what's skillful and what's not.

It's interesting that in the book of the Jataka tales—the stories that were collected and said to be stories of the Buddha's previous lifetimes—there are times when the Buddha-to-be doesn't act in all that honorable a way: times when he actually breaks some of the five precepts. But the interesting thing is, there is one precept that's never broken, and that's the precept against lying; in these stories the Buddha-to-be never lies, no matter what the situation. So truthfulness is an essential quality all across the board. This is *the basic quality*. Once you have truthfulness, then the other qualities follow.

As Ajaan Lee once said, "If you want to find the truth, you have to be true." This is what that means: honest with yourself. Once you've made up your mind to do something, you stick with it; you're no traitor to yourself. If you find places where the mind is not all that open and aboveboard with itself, you try to open up the walls that the mind has erected there, so that you can be really clear and straightforward about what you're doing; what's working, what's not working. With this kind of openness, this kind of respect, this kind of truthfulness, that's how progress happens.

So when we have that chant about having respect for the Buddha and the Dhamma and the Sangha, what it comes down to is respect for the good qualities they developed so that we can use them as examples to develop the same good qualities within ourselves.

The qualities are there in potential form; we all have skillful qualities. It's simply a difference in the extent to which we develop them, the extent to which we put them to use.

The meditation we're doing right now: That's a skill. Use the same principles in developing it as you would in any skill. Encourage yourself in doing it, stick with it, pay careful attention to what you're doing. If things don't work out, use your ingenuity to find other approaches. These are the basic principles that work in any skill, and they apply here, too.

Notice when desire is helpful in the practice; notice when desire is not helpful, when it gets in the way. Learn how to make use of desire so that it assists in your meditation. In other words, focus your desires on the causes: the causes here being mindful of the breath, being alert to the breath, and being ardent in keeping that mindfulness going, keeping that alertness sharp. Once you've got the causes down, the results will have to come.

All too often, we focus our desires on the results. We'd like things to turn out this way or

that, and we get frustrated when it doesn't happen. But if you're focusing just on the results, then what happened to the causes? They've been abandoned. So, turn around and focus on the causes.

Once you've got those mastered, everything you want out of the practice will have to come. So again, it's a matter of having respect for the principle of cause and effect, respect for your ability to learn how to master that principle.

We sometimes hear that the Buddha said to follow your own sense of right and wrong. But if you look at the passage that they quote, that's not what he really said. He said, *Look at what works in practice. When you see for yourself that certain ways of behavior give good results, follow those ways. If you see that they don't, learn to abandon them.*

In other words, you have to be really alert to cause and effect. He also says to take into account what the wise say as well. Of course, this means you have to figure out who's wise and who's not wise. But take into consideration the lessons that have been learned by other people on the path, because the principle of cause and effect is the same for them as it is for you. And learning from the lessons they've learned helps a lot, so that you don't have to keep reinventing the Dhamma wheel.

When you learn how to balance these different forms of respect, that's when the meditation grows, when your own skillful qualities grow, and you get a better, and better sense of what's skillful and what's unskillful in your own mind.

Ajaan Fuang once said that respect is a sign of intelligence, and this is the kind of respect he was talking about.