

The Buddha's Qualities

January 16, 2005

The chants we just had are designed to get the mind in the right mood for meditating. We chant about the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha to remind ourselves of the values behind the practice. Some people have characterized Buddhism as a religion no need for faith. Well, there *is* an element of faith, an element of belief, believing that the Buddha was awakened. The implication there is that he did it through his own efforts, and he did it through the qualities he said were not peculiar to him, qualities that anybody could develop.

So when we show respect to him, we're showing respect to those qualities within our own minds as well. For us at the moment, they're still just potentials, but we can develop them to a heightened level where we can gain awakening, too. The three ones he focused on are being ardent, resolute, and heedful.

Ardent means really giving yourself to what you're doing. In other words, right now you're with the breath. You're not holding anything back. Don't let your memories of past meditations come in and clutter up the mind in any unnecessary way. Sometimes those memories do give pointers. You don't want to totally forget them. But you want to watch out for any memories that get in the way, especially the ones that say, "I don't like this. I liked the way it was the other day." Give the mind time to settle down. Stick with it.

That's what being *resolute* is all about. Just keep with the practice and adjust it for what seems right for right now, right now, right now. And don't get upset when the results don't come right away. Sometimes good things take time. As you go from day to day, the mind starts out the meditation in a different state. Some days it's ready to settle down; other days it's got a lot of other issues. Sometimes you have to back off a little bit and deal with those issues first.

That's one of the reasons why we have the chant on metta, because often those issues involve other people: "This person said this, that person said that, how could they do that?" You get yourself all entangled in those issues. So ask yourself, do you really want to be entangled over that person, that kind of issue, that kind of thought in your mind? Direct some goodwill to yourself: "May I be happy. I don't need this thought right now. May that other person be happy as well." Then it's a lot easier to get back to the breath.

Sometimes you'll need other contemplations. There's the chant on the 32 parts the body, as they call them, to remind you that if there's lust in the mind, this is what you're lusting for: these 32 things. You go down the list. It's amazing how

selective lust can be. It focuses on just a few details of the body—this part, that part—and you forget the whole. This chant is to remind you: This is what the whole thing is. Is it really worth lusting over, especially now that you're sitting here meditating? If you had your body taken apart and all the pieces lined up very neatly on the floor here, what would your reaction be? You'd come in, you'd see it, and you'd run away. Yet here you are, sitting in this body, perfectly fine. And everybody else's body is just like that.

So these are some reflections to help you get the mind to settle down. If you run into obstacles in your pursuit of the breath, you have these other tools for dealing with the obstacles.

Once they're out of the way, then you can focus on the breath 100%. Just be with the breathing. That's all you need to know about right now. There's nothing else. In fact, you don't even have to listen to the talk. Let it just be in the background as a kind of fence that you run into when your mind leaves the breath, pointing you to go back.

Heedfulness here is a sense of how important it is to protect the good things you get in the meditation, because sometimes they start out as small things. There's a little bit of concentration or a little bit of mindfulness. Don't be careless with those things. If you tend to them, they grow, they get stronger. And this is a path of developing strength. Often we tend to forget that here in the West. A lot of the Dhamma is expressed in really nice, fuzzy ideas; soft, warm ideas. But you look at the kind of person the Buddha was. He was a very strong person. Everybody told him, "There's no way that you can find an absolute happiness. Content yourself with what you've got." He said, "No, there's got to be something better than this. If I live my life without trying to find that, it's a life wasted."

So he left all of his wealth and went out into the forest. He had to go through all the adjustments that any wealthy well-born person would have to go through, leaving all the comforts of the palace and suddenly finding himself eating almsfood out in the forest without any protection. But he didn't let that deter him. He went to all the best teachers of the time, found that he wasn't satisfied with them, and then pursued the path of extreme austerities. In other words, he had exhausted all the options that were there at that time, to no avail, and yet he still didn't let himself get discouraged. "There's got to be a way," he thought. And ultimately he found it.

So, think about these things as you practice. When you find your mind straying away from the breath, think about those three qualities the Buddha talked about: being ardent, resolute, heedful. You really give yourself to the practice, stick with it, and learn to value whatever good things you have. Don't

toss them away. When your mindfulness and concentration get stronger and stronger, they really can provide you with a good solid foundation inside. As your discernment gets stronger, it really can cut away all the dangers in the mind. That's the other side of heedfulness, not only appreciating the good things you've got, but being aware that there are dangers out there and dangers in here. You've got to protect the state of your mind. This is your most important possession.

Ajaan Lee gives the image of people having to migrate. All of a sudden, word comes that you've got to pick up what you've got and go. You can pick up only what you can carry. And what can you really carry around in your life better than the qualities you build into the mind?

So ask yourself, what kind of qualities *are* you building into your mind? If you let yourself be lazy and complacent, those are the qualities you're building in your mind. You're building laziness, you're building complacency, and what good do they do you? Focus on developing qualities that are really of use, so that no matter where you find yourself, no matter what the situation, you've got what you need to deal with it right at hand.

So these three qualities work together. The more heedful you are, the more you want to be ardent, the more you want to be resolute in developing what's good and strong in the mind—so that when you're bowing down to these qualities as actualized in the Buddha, you find that they're getting more and more actualized in your mind, in yourself, through your practice. That's where they really do a lot of good.

So keep these qualities in mind as you practice and live them in your practice. They are qualities. They're not just ideas; they're not just words. Give yourself to the breath. Stick with it. Watch out for any inclination to go wandering off and sniffing the flowers and getting distracted. Protect whatever good things you have in the mind. Make sure they stay solid and strong.

In that way, you take the story about the Buddha and you may make it, at least some extent, your own story. It's not just some mythic archetype from the past, it's an actuality right here. That was a whole purpose in his teaching. That's the whole purpose of your sitting here meditating.