

Respect for the Training

January 13, 2015

There's a chant we often recite about the forms of respect that bring you into the presence of nibbana. One of them is respect for the training. The training is very basic—virtue, concentration, discernment—and in some cases it's so basic we tend to overlook it. We want to go to the higher Dhamma, things that are more abstract that seem to be more in line with our level of intelligence. As a result, we tend to miss a lot of the really good lessons that can be learned from paying attention to the basics, giving them a lot of respect.

Like the precepts: There are a lot of people who don't like rules, who feel that rules make you a very small-minded person: that they make you think that by abiding by the rules and trying to get a good mark on your rules, you'll get by. And that's a very immature attitude towards the rules. Both of those attitudes are immature, i.e., seeing that all you have to do is abide by the rules and you'll be able to get by, and the other attitude saying that that's all there is to the rules. Actually, there's a lot more.

One is the willingness to take on the rules so that you don't just automatically assume that whatever you think is right, is right. You're here to learn lessons. You're here to learn things you didn't know before. Often, it's a little rule that'll trip you up, that'll make you notice things you used to take for granted but you can't take for granted.

Or areas where you thought every reasonable person would see an exception: What's life like if you don't take that exception? As the Buddha said, once a person has gained awakening, that person wouldn't break any of the basic rules in the precepts. As for the more minor rules, awakened people may break them, but here we're talking about the rules for the monks. Awakened people may break the minor rules but they realize that breaking them is something that you have to confess. In other words, even arahants show respect for the rules.

So it's good to learn about the rules and good to take them seriously. They force you to examine your actions carefully. When you learn how to examine your

actions carefully and begin to see that there's something not quite right about what you're doing: That's when you're learning. You don't see the rules as being beneath you. And in cases where you might see room for exceptions, take seriously the fact that if you live by this rule consistently, as the Buddha says, you're giving unlimited safety to all beings and that's how you gain unlimited safety yourself.

Then the quality of being meticulous about the rules carries over into your concentration. Any little distraction, you say, "No, I'm not going to go there. No, I'm not going to go there." You really keep with it.

Now, for this level of being meticulous to last, you have to base it on a sense of comfort and be willing to put some time in to develop that. That's why concentration is another basic part of the training. Only by sitting here for a long period of time can you see things that are very subtle. If you're in too much of a hurry to go on to insight, you'll gain some insights but they won't go very deep. For the most part, they'll be the kind of insights you expect. The whole point of the training is to learn things you didn't expect, to be open to things you didn't expect. After all, if something was just in line with what you already expected, what's there to learn? Why do you need a training? You could go off on your own and everything would be smooth.

So the attitude we have to have here is that we're putting ourselves under the training, not over the training. We submit ourselves to the training with the conviction that the Buddha knew what he was talking about. And we're here to learn.

Now, if over time you've developed all the qualities the Buddha talks about and you've reached all the attainments he talks about and you still feel there's something lacking, then you're in a position to judge. I remember going to stay with Ajaan Fuang: There were a lot of things about me that really surprised him, that in the culture in which I was raised, certain things that he took for granted that all human beings would know, I didn't know. And they were basic things. I could have overlooked them and I could have said, "Well, that's just minor stuff. It's just Thai culture," but I had the conviction that he knew what he was talking about and there were some things that were severely lacking in my education. When you take that attitude, you're going to learn.

One of the enemies of the Dhamma is narcissism, the belief that you're already good or that your opinions are special. Even though the Buddha does say that you have to learn how to judge things for yourself, that you're going to see things for yourself, that everything has to be tested, the question is: Are you trained well enough to be a fair judge? So you give things a try. You give the Buddha the benefit of the doubt, even on the little things.

People used to complain about the Buddha, even during his lifetime, that he was overly scrupulous with all the tiny little rules he was making. And I must admit when I first read the rules, I was a little taken aback by all the things that had to be memorized, all the things that had to be watched out for. But as I lived by the rules, I began to see that in cases where there was strife within the monastery—and this was particularly after Ajaan Fuang passed away—it was because one of the monks was not holding by the rules and it stirred things up.

And you'll notice, it's the little things that drive people crazy about other people. You can drive through stop signs and it doesn't bother your friends, but if you pick your nose at a meal, well... There's nothing against the law about picking your nose, but it drives people crazy. And there are a lot of other things in the rules that are that kind of thing.

As the Buddha said, the rules are there, one, for harmony within the group; and, two, so that we'll inspire faith, so that people will want to come and learn. And then three, they're there for our own defilements, to get rid of, as he said, the effluents within the heart. Now, the effluents—sensuality, becoming, ignorance—are done away with only with arahantship: sensuality with non-returning, but becoming and ignorance with arahantship. Those are high levels of attainment, which means that the rules are not a little thing. Even something as basic as contemplation of the food: As the Buddha said, if you really comprehend physical food, you'll comprehend the five strings of sensuality and why you're attracted to them. That'll take you to non-return, which is a high level of attainment.

So be willing to submit to the training. Don't think you're above it. I've seen some examples recently of senior monks who've decided that they're above the training—which means that whatever opportunity they may have had for awakening has been spoiled. So try to focus on what you need to do in order to

respect the training, what the training requires of you, and be willing to learn the lessons it's going to teach you. Often there are lessons you don't like to learn, there are lessons you didn't expect you had to learn, but they're there and they're good. The fact that they're unexpected means that they can open new vistas that you hadn't even imagined before.