

Respect for the Path

November 7, 2021

Close your eyes and focus on your breath. Watch the breath coming in, all the way in, all the way out. Try some deep, long breathing to begin with. Think of the breath energizing your entire torso. And if deep breathing feels good, keep it up. If it doesn't feel good, you can change. Try shorter breathing, or in short out long, in long out short. In short, out long tends to be relaxing; in long out short tends to be more energizing. Fast, slow, heavy light. Deeper, more shallow. Try to notice what kind of breathing feels good for the body right now.

When we start meditating, we try to develop concentration. To concentrate the mind, to get the mind to be willing to settle down, you have to give it a place where it likes to stay. So give it a comfortable place, a place that feels good right here in the body. You can arrange that place by the rhythm and texture of the breathing. You can also arrange it by the thoughts you think. Remind yourself that you're sitting here finding happiness simply by closing your eyes and breathing. You're finding happiness in a way that doesn't harm anybody—and has the potential to be a long-term happiness.

So this is a good place to be, and this is a good time to be here. As the breath gets comfortable, you can think of that sense of comfort spreading throughout the body: down the spine, out the legs, down the shoulders, the arms, down the front of the body, all through the head. If you notice any patterns of tension anywhere, allow them to dissolve away as you breathe right through them.

As you're doing this, you're showing respect for yourself. Because we all want happiness, and yet there's a lot in the world out there that tells us that true happiness is impossible, so content yourself with what you can buy from us and with what positions in society we can give you.

But think of the Buddha. He was a prince. He had all kinds of pleasures, he had all kinds of status, yet he still wasn't content. He realized that the heart and the mind craved something deeper than that: a happiness that's more reliable. Human beings are subject to aging, illness, and death, and if we look for happiness in things that are also subject to aging, illness, and death, nothing special is attained. But if we can find happiness as something that doesn't age, doesn't grow ill, doesn't die, then the effort that goes into that is effort well spent. And our search for happiness becomes something noble, because we realize that what's getting in the way of our happiness is our cravings.

As the Buddha said, cravings are the cause of our suffering. And to admit that to yourself, and to be willing to overcome some of your cravings, is a noble act. All too often we just want to follow our cravings. The Buddha says they're our constant companions, whispering in our ears, telling us what to do, and for the most part we believe them. We like to go along with them. But when you finally realize that they've been taking you to bad places, you've got to pull out of that companionship and take as your companions the noble ones: the ones who say that true happiness is possible, and that you should respect your desire for true happiness.

It's not that all desires are bad. The craving that leads to the deathless, the craving that gets you to practice the path to the deathless: That's a good craving. Ultimately, when you arrive, you can put that craving aside. But that's a craving that's really worth the effort that goes into following it.

So when we're looking for happiness inside, we're showing respect for something deep in our own hearts. This is why we have so much respect for the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. They set an example that this is a possible way of happiness, and it's the best possible way of finding happiness. And they're telling us to respect that within ourselves. When you look inside your mind, what is most worthy of respect? If you can't respect your desire for true happiness, you begin to think there's nothing in the world that's really worthy of respect. The world becomes a very dark place.

But when you have the conviction that true happiness is possible and it can be found through human effort, then you're going to have more respect for yourself. And, having more respect for yourself, you have more respect for your thoughts, your words, your deeds—all the elements that go into the path: virtue, concentration, discernment, based on generosity.

So you show your respect for yourself by showing respect for what you do. Be careful in what you do, because it will have a big impact on not only the present moment, but also the future.

When you take on the precepts, you're being careful in what you do. No killing, no stealing, no illicit sex. No lying. No taking of intoxicants. You realize that careless behavior harms other people and harms your own mind. When you engage in it, you're treating your actions as if they didn't have any value. But if you are careful about what you do, you show respect for this power you have. As the Buddha said, the mind comes first. It's not just the side effect of physical processes. The determinations of the mind are what shape your reality. Ask yourself, do you want a really well-shaped reality, or do you want something shoddy and careless? You want something well-shaped, like a craftsman trying to

put together a good wall or a good set of drawers. You show your respect for yourself and for the people around you by doing it well.

The same with concentration: You try to find a place in the mind, a place in the body right now, where it really feels good to stay focused. Then you do your best to protect that spot. Sounds may come in; sounds go away. Thoughts come into the mind; thoughts go away. But don't drop your focus to follow those things, because what do they have to offer? Not much. They come flashing by, but then they go. Whereas a spot that you're trying to maintain here right now: This has potential.

In the beginning, it may not seem like much, just a sense of ease in one spot of the body, but as you protect that sense of ease and breathe in a way that doesn't disturb it, you find that it begins to grow. It gets stronger, and as it gets stronger, you can think of it spilling out into the rest of the body. So you can sit here with a sense of ease washing over the body as you breathe in, washing over the body as you breathe out. It requires a sense of balance to stay here. You're intent on keeping the mind balanced, keeping your awareness balanced in this way. That's how you show your respect for concentration.

The same for discernment: One of the principles the Buddha said that keeps the Dhamma alive, keeps the practice alive, is following the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. In other words, you don't follow it in terms of your own likes and dislikes. You look at your mind objectively, to see where you're causing suffering, where you're causing stress, even the least little bit of stress. You ask yourself, "Why am I doing that?" Usually it's force of habit. The mind has its old pathways that it keeps following again and again and again. They become like ruts in the mind. And because they're ruts, they're easier to follow. You turn a blind eye to the stress and harm that you're sometimes causing by allowing the mind to go in its old ways. It's going to take an effort to pull out of those old ways.

But if you really have respect for your potential as a human being, your potential for finding happiness, you want to have some respect for your discernment. It's going to show you that there are things that you like to do and give good results: Those are no brainers. Things you don't like to do and give bad results: Those are no brainers. The difficult ones are the things that you don't like to do but will give good results, or that you do like to do but give bad results. That's where you have to take the results as your guide.

In this way, you're showing respect for your power to shape your life. You're not apathetic. You're not callous. You really care. Think about the Buddha. He really cared about true happiness. No one forced him to look for the deathless. As Ajaan Fuang liked to say, no one is forcing us here to practice. No one is paying us

wages to practice. We're doing it because we're inspired. We see that this is a good way to find happiness. It's a harmless way, and it's a true way. In other words, it gives real results.

You look at the Dhamma the Buddha taught and you realize that it covers all the problems in life. Once you've solved this problem—the mind's ignorant ways of causing itself stress and suffering—then nothing else is going to be a problem to weigh down the mind. The Dhamma is that large. It covers all problems, takes care of all problems that weigh down the mind, all the ways in which we cause ourselves stress and suffering. When we take care of the ways that we're doing that, the disagreeable things that happen outside are not going to weigh on the mind. We're the ones who bring the disagreeable things in and turn them into suffering inside the mind. So when we learn how to undo that habit, we're totally safe. That's why we say the Dhamma is large.

It's like walking around the Earth. You walk on the Earth with your bare feet and you'll find there are stones and brambles and thorns. Some people might say we've got to cover the whole Earth with leather so that it's nice and soft to walk on. You try that and you'll never come to the end of the problem. But all you have to do is realize: Just put leather under your feet. In other words, put on some shoes. Then no matter where you step, you're protected.

So even though it may seem like we're doing a small thing here, getting the mind under control, it covers everything we're going to experience in life, in the world at large—because when we don't take the events of the world and turn them into suffering for the mind, nobody else can make us suffer.

Now, there are parts of the Dhamma that go against the grain, because, after all, we will be practicing and seeing the many ways in which our cravings, the things that we want the most, things that we desire the most, are actually causing us suffering. As I said, not all forms of desire are bad, but many of our strongest desires, we have to realize, are not in line with the Dhamma. Which is why in the forest tradition they put a strong emphasis on the teaching that you have to practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma, and not in accordance with your likes and dislikes. That's where you have to make a sacrifice.

All too many people in the world want to change the Dhamma. Every generation comes along and says, "The previous generation did it wrong. We're going to make a Dhamma that we want." But if you shape it in accordance with what you want, it's not going to be Dhamma anymore. Dhamma is found by learning what the Buddha taught us about why we're suffering and taking that to heart, looking inside, trusting him when he says that's something wrong with

what we're doing. We're ignorant about what we're doing. If we can end this ignorance, then we would stop our unskillful actions.

This is a teaching that's been maintained now for 2,600 years through this principle of practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. This is what attracted me to the forest tradition to begin with. Both of my teachers, Ajaan Fuang and Ajaan Suwat, kept saying that whatever good they had found in life was because they were willing to submit to what the Dhamma had to say. That went against their desires, but they were willing to give it a try—a serious try. Not grim, not glum, but sincere. And they found that the truth that you put into the practice rewards you with truth. In other words, the more you're true in practicing virtue, concentration, discernment, the truer the happiness you'll find.

This is one aspect of what's called the miracle of instruction. The Buddha was asked one time why he didn't display his psychic powers more. He replied that when you just display psychic powers, people get suspicious: "What kind of trick is this person playing on us?" But if you teach the Dhamma in a way where you point out to people, "You have this defilement, you let go of it, you get these results," they follow the instructions and they do get the results: That teaching is miraculous. And in the case of the Dhamma, the happiness it leads to is something that ultimately gets beyond space and time. Doesn't age, doesn't grow ill, doesn't die. A happiness that's totally satisfactory.

They say that you end your hunger at that point. Not by denying your hunger, but by finding something that's totally satisfying—so satisfying, that the mind feels no hunger ever again.