

Respect for the Mind

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Why do we show so much respect for the Buddha? Because he teaches us to have respect for our own minds, and two aspects of the mind in particular. One is our *desire* for true happiness. And the other is our *ability* to attain that true happiness. Some places you'll hear it said that true happiness is impossible. "You have to accept whatever little things come your way. Accept the good with the bad. Don't expect anything really permanent. Satisfy yourself with the pleasure that comes from things or relationships"—even though that pleasure is doomed to end at some point, and usually comes mixed up with a lot of suffering along the way.

Sometimes you hear it said that to desire your own true happiness is a selfish desire. You should put your happiness aside for the happiness of other people. But the Buddha never saw that your true happiness had to be detrimental to anybody else's true happiness. After all, true happiness comes from within. If it were a material object, then there would be an issue. If you've got the object, then other people don't. That would be selfish. But when true happiness comes from within, you're not taking anything away from anyone else. And if you really reflect on the issue of happiness, looking at it seriously, you begin to see that the pursuit of true happiness develops a lot of good qualities in the mind. It requires that you be very heedful, very careful about what you do.

The Buddha talks about reflecting on your actions: reflect on your intentions first before you act, then look at the action while you're doing it. If you see any desire for causing anyone else any suffering in your intentions, he says not to act on that intention, whether it's going to cause suffering for yourself or other people, or both. But if the intention looks okay, you can follow through with it.

But then as you start acting on it, if you see any harmful results coming, you should stop. If you don't see any harmful results, you keep on carrying through with the action until you're done. But you're still not really done. You have to look at the long-term results of the action. If you see any unexpected bad consequences, you make up your mind not to repeat that mistake again. This is how you learn. As the Buddha said, this is how people purify themselves.

The notion of purity here means that there are no detrimental effects arising from your actions. In this way, if you take your desire for happiness seriously, your actions become pure. And you have to become heedful. Simply the fact of taking your happiness seriously, the Buddha said, is a sign of wisdom. Because wisdom

begins by asking this question: “What when I do will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” You ask this question to people who have found true happiness.

So taking the issue of happiness seriously like this, realizing that some forms of happiness may seem attractive to begin with, but they’re short-term, so you should be willing to sacrifice them for something longer-term: That, he says, is the beginning of wisdom.

There’s a verse to this effect in the Dhammapada. If you see a greater happiness that comes from sacrificing a lesser happiness, be willing to sacrifice the lesser one. There was a scholar who translated this verse one time, and he said this couldn’t possibly be the meaning of this verse. It’s so obvious. So he tried to find a hidden meaning in the verse. But the problem is, even though it’s an obvious principle, look at people’s behavior: Not that many people in the world act on this principle. So whether it’s obvious or not, you have to keep reminding yourself that some forms of happiness will require that you sacrifice other, lesser forms of happiness. And you have to be happy to make the sacrifice.

That right there is the essence of wisdom. When we think about Buddha’s wisdom, we usually think about dependent co-arising or emptiness—all very abstract ideas. But if you trace them back to their beginnings, they come from this one principle. Dependent co-arising doesn’t mean anything unless it’s applied to the quest for true happiness. The same with the teaching of emptiness: It doesn’t mean anything unless it’s really useful in the pursuit of true happiness.

So that’s another good quality that comes from pursuing happiness, pursuing your desire for true happiness, showing respect for that desire. It helps you to become wise.

Then you reflect on the fact that because you desire happiness, are you different from anybody else around you? Everybody desires happiness. This is something we all have in common.

There are two ways of reacting to this realization. One is to work on the principle of sympathy. You recognize that desire in other people as well. You know that you wouldn’t want to have that desire thwarted; they don’t want to have that desire thwarted, either. So you begin to sympathize with them.

In a more practical sense, you realize that if your happiness depends on their suffering, they’re going to do everything they can to destroy your happiness. So at the very least, this makes you take their happiness into consideration. This is the beginning of compassion.

These three qualities—purity, wisdom, and compassion—are qualities that we attribute to the Buddha. They’re qualities that he embodied in a very full way, and this is where they come from: taking the desire for true happiness really seriously.

This is why we should respect that desire: because leads us to develop within ourselves the qualities the Buddha developed. This is how we take refuge—not in the person of the Buddha, but in the qualities of the Buddha that we can develop within ourselves.

This, of course, relates to the second point: having respect for our ability to bring true happiness about.

In order to bring it about, we need to train the mind. You look around, you look at your life, and you see that when the mind isn't trained, it can create a lot of havoc, do a lot of damage. Even if it *is* trained, but trained in the wrong direction, that can make the damage even worse.

This means you have to take very good care of the mind. It's one of the reasons why we meditate: to develop those good qualities in the mind. And also to keep the mind in good shape. You focus on an object when you meditate. The Pali word for object, *arammana*, means support. The image is of a place where you put the mind. Think of the mind as something valuable. It's like having gold in your house. You want to put the gold in a very good place where it's safe. Or if you have an expensive heirloom, you want to take good care of it. If it's silver, you want to polish it properly. If it's made of leather, you want to oil it properly and put in a good place where it doesn't get damaged.

The mind is much more valuable than silver or leather, yet look at where we place it in the course of the day. We just toss it around in any old place. A thought comes bubbling up in the mind, and then you place your mind on the bubble. Sometimes those bubbles turn out to be swamp gas. They're poisonous. So you have to move the mind and put it someplace else, but again, you put it just any old place. That's the way most people are. Whatever comes up in the mind, good or bad, that's where they place their attention. Then they find that they can't stay there for long. Not only can they not stay there, but often it's really harmful to the mind. Greed, anger, delusion come bubbling up, and you place your mind on the greed, anger, and delusion. They eat through the mind like an acid.

This is why we place the mind on the breath. Adjust the breath so that it feels comfortable coming in, going out. Place your mind there, both with the breath and with the sense of ease that comes from breathing comfortably. Spend a lot of time with the breath so that you get to know it well, seeing what kind of breathing is good for the body, what kind of breathing is not; what kind of breathing is good for helping balance out any imbalance in the body, as when you're tired, or when you're nervous, when you're tense, when you're irritable. What kind of breathing helps to balance out those qualities?

If you pay attention to the breath, you'll know, you'll find out. It really can have an impact not only on the body, but also on the state of the mind. And then pay attention to the fact that you want to be careful of the mind not only while you're sitting here meditating. You want to be careful of it throughout the day.

When you look the training for the monks, you see that this principle of being very careful, showing respect for your things, is an important part of the training. In some cases, it may look obsessive, but there's an important lesson there. If you learn how to take care of your things, you're developing good habits. Then you can apply those habits to the mind.

The rules about, say, the bowl that monks use for the alms round: You don't place it next to a ledge, for fear that it might fall off. If you're going to open a door, you don't open the door while you're holding the bowl in your hands. You put it down first. When you dry it, when you put it away, there are very precise rules in how you should do this—because you want to show respect for the bowl. For two reasons: One, it's something you've been given. It's the fruit of somebody's generosity. Everything here in the monastery is a fruit of somebody's generosity. So treat it with respect. And two, for the monks, each monk has only one bowl. You want to make it last as long as you can.

Bring the same line of thought to your mind. The fact that you've got a human mind is a result of a lot of good things you've done in the past, all the merit from past lifetimes. So you don't want to just toss it away. And two, when you get the mind into a good shape, you want to keep it that way, because you have only one mind. You can't trade it in for a better mind.

So be careful how and where you place the mind, how you polish the mind, how you look after the mind. Show the mind respect, because the state of the mind will determine your ability to follow the path of practice that leads to the end of suffering. When the mind is in good shape, it's more likely to do what it knows should be done. When it's in bad shape, when it's irritable, when it's in a foul mood, it could care less. Because it could care less, of course, it's careless. It starts to do all kinds of detrimental things, detrimental both to itself and to other people. But if you get the mind in good shape and keep it in good shape, then no matter how difficult the right thing may be, you find you've got the resources to do it.

Ultimately, this is how we show respect for the Buddha: by taking good care of our minds, showing respect for our own minds, respect for our desire for true happiness, respect for our ability to bring true happiness about. As the Buddha once said, the best way of showing respect and homage to him is through practicing his teachings. And as you practice his teachings, you're taking good care

of your mind. So in this way, respect for the Buddha and respect for your mind are basically are the same thing.