

Respect for Concentration

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An important principle in the practice is having respect for concentration. This means your own concentration and the concentration of the people around you—because concentration is the heart of the path. It was the first factor of the path that the Buddha discovered.

You probably know the story. Practicing austerities for six years, seeing that that didn't lead to the deathless happiness he was looking for, he reflected: Was there another way? He'd already tried the path of sensual pleasures and seen that that didn't go anywhere. Then he thought of another alternative. At one point in his childhood, he had spontaneously entered the first jhana. And now he asked himself, "Could this be the path?" Something inside of him said, "Yes." "So why am I afraid of that pleasure? There's nothing unskillful about it. There's nothing blameworthy about it."

So he practiced to see if that was right and, sure enough, it was. As he later said, all the other factors of the path are its requisites. In other words, they help right concentration along, but the concentration is the heart of the path because when the mind gets really still, it can see things clearly. It can understand what's going on inside.

So you really want to have respect for concentration because it connects to something else you should have respect for, which is the principle of true happiness—a happiness that doesn't harm anyone; happiness that's blameless. A happiness like that is hard to find in the world.

For most any pleasure you can think of, there's some environmental harm or some harm for other beings, but being able to sit here and get your mind still harms no one. And then this happiness leads to a deeper happiness that doesn't depend on any conditions at all: That's even more harmless.

So this is a noble path leading to a noble goal. You want to have respect for that. Our culture teaches us disrespect for almost everything. And there's a lot out there that has been masquerading as something deserving respect and has been shown to not really deserve it, so a lot of us become skeptical. But then that skepticism can spread into areas where it's really harmful. It's like being skeptical about virtue; skeptical about the path; the possibility of a true happiness. You even get some "Dhamma" teachers who say, "Well, you know, the Buddha wasn't all that awakened after all. He still had his shadow side. He still had his doubts and emotional issues." What does that leave? It leaves us nothing.

Everything else in the world just swirls around, but the Buddha insisted that this is something of essence. The word he used, *sara*, can mean heartwood. There is this essence that can be found through the path. The path doesn't create it. After all, the essence itself is uncreated. But the path gets you there. That's why you're taught to have respect for your desire for that true happiness and respect for the path—and respect for the desire of other people who practice the path, too.

We're living here in a monastery together. We've got a lot of people here—at least a lot by our standards. So you have to be very, very careful about what you do, what you say, how you interact with others, because it has an impact on their quest for happiness. So in that sense, you want to have respect for other people's concentration. When you have to be critical, try being critical in ways that don't stir things up. Try to find the right time, the right place. Think of that sign on the front of the guesthouse: "Why Am I Talking? Is your speech true? Is it beneficial? Is this the right time for that kind of speech?" Always run everything through that filter first. And if you notice that other people around you are not using the filter—well, just let that pass. But remember that the ideal is that we're practicing all the factors of the path here—including right speech, right action, right livelihood, mindfulness, effort—so that they can help the concentration along. Because when the mind is concentrated, you're taking all the elements of your experience that ordinarily cause suffering and you turn them into a path.

The breath here: We can suffer a lot around the body, but we learn how to breathe in a way that's comfortable.

Feelings: We can work ourselves up into all kinds of problems about feelings of pain, physical or mental; or remembering feelings of pleasure we had in the past that are long gone, which gives rise to more suffering. But instead, we learn to take feeling and make it part of the path. We learn how to breathe in a way that feels really good, feels really nourishing—energizing when you need energy, calming when you need to be calmed.

You use your perceptions—all the names and labels you have for things; the images you have in your mind to stand for things. Try and create a useful perception of the breath. Create a perception of yourself as a capable person—someone who's capable of meditating. Other people can do this. Why can't you?

Then there's fabrication, when you're talking to yourself about the breath—and there'll be a fair amount of talking as you try to get the mind to settle down—"inner dialogue" is too weak a word. There's a cacophony of voices in there. But you can talk to yourself about the breath. How does this breath feel? Is it good enough? If it's not, well, what would make it better? This helps you focus on what

the real issue is, which is that you've got to get the mind to settle down in a place where it likes to settle down. So you do your best to create that nice spot.

And then your consciousness, which could be aware of all kinds of things: You devote it to being conscious of this process of getting the mind to settle down. Don't pay attention to anything else, even the voice of the talk here. Let that be in the background.

These activities are called aggregates, and ordinarily we suffer a lot because of the aggregates. But it was the Buddha's insight as a strategist to see that we can take these aggregates and learn how to engage in them skillfully, because aggregates are actions. The English translation *aggregate* is kind of unfortunate. It sounds like gravel, but these are actually activities of the mind, activities of the body. So we bring them all together in a way that's really skillful.

And try to have respect for that. It's all too easy to overlook the well-being that can come from concentration. So you show some respect for this. Care for it. Look after it.

This is where the principle of heedfulness comes in. You've got to realize that your actions have a huge impact on the pleasure and pain you experience; the pleasure and pain other people experience. So you want those actions to come from a good place—a place where you're alert. Have a sense of inner strength so you don't be complacent about the weaknesses that make you give in to unwise or unskillful intentions.

So tend to this. Try to keep this going as you go through the day so that whenever the opportunity comes or the necessity comes up that you have to speak or engage with other people, you're coming from a good place—so that the karma that comes from that interaction is good karma, and your words and deeds can be a gift to the people you're engaged with.

All too often the gifts we give to other people in our words are like boxes of snakes. We slip them into their hands and they don't realize what's inside the box. Then they open the box and they're being bitten by snakes for the rest of the day. So try to get so that your words are coming from a place of concentration, from a heart of gold. So that that way when the box is opened, there it is: a nice heart of gold. That's the ideal.

And the ideals the Buddha sets out are not impossible. He really means for us to take them seriously—to show them some respect; to make them bigger than our feelings and our opinions and our notions, because this is a path that really works. But it requires sensitivity, it requires heedfulness—all your good mental powers. And the same holds for everybody around you. It requires all their good mental powers too, so you want to make sure that your interactions are conducive

to helping people stay on the path—because this is the one thing in the world that is worthiest of respect.

This is why we bow down to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha—why there's so much bowing down all over here—to teach us an attitude of respect for what's worthwhile within ourselves and what's worthwhile here in the world—in other words, the teaching that the Buddha left behind. We're fortunate that it's still around. So have some respect for that, because that's what keeps the opportunity for true happiness open.