

Accepting the Buddha's Standards

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When you come to the meditation, you should come with an attitude of respect because you're doing something important here. You're trying to master a necessary skill, a skill with standards that the Buddha set very high. You want to have respect for that fact.

People talk a lot about developing acceptance in the practice, but the main thing you have to accept is that you're constantly acting on intentions. The way you experience things is shaped by your intentions. And those intentions can be skillful or not. You have to accept the fact that you've been developing a lot of unskillful habits of intention over time, and it's very easy to justify those unskillful habits to yourself.

Our culture provides lots of justifications for them. As Ajaan Mun once said, the society of ordinary people is a culture of defilement: greed, anger, and delusion along with their justifications. People say, "If we didn't have greed, society wouldn't develop. The economy would collapse. If we didn't have anger, we couldn't bring about justice. We couldn't stand up for our rights." And even though there's no conscious defense of delusion, people are constantly defending the idea that we need a little bit of alcohol or, say, a little bit of playing around, so as to get away from our miseries, away from our suffering.

There's a lot of denial going on. People learn to live with denial as an ordinary part of everyday life. The fact that we're growing ill, aging, that we're all going to die: Society is in huge denial around this. We tend to pick up these habits from our upbringing, from the media, from everything around us. So when we sit down to meditate, all of a sudden we find ourselves face-to-face with greed, aversion, and delusion. Part of us likes to defend these things, saying that they're okay, that we have to accept them as a necessary part of life. But skillful acceptance means accepting the fact that you're creating suffering for yourself and other people when you give in to these traits. So you have to be very careful, very alert, very vigilant as you practice.

This is why the Buddha's last words were to bring about completion through heedfulness. "Completion" here means developing the factors of the path to their full power. "Heedful" means that we have to be alert to the dangers that come when our practice is not yet complete. So we're not just playing around here. We're doing something serious—but not grim. One of the things you notice about the great ajaans when you meet them is that they all have a good sense of humor. After all, one of the best ways of dealing with your defilements is learning how to laugh at them—and to laugh at yourself when you're not up to standard.

And there *are* standards. You want the mind to stay with the breath. You want to evaluate and adjust the breath, keep your attention focused on the breath until it gives rise to a sense of ease and fullness. Only when the mind is settled like this is it going to see anything clearly.

Yesterday I read somebody complaining that they had seen a passage where someone had said that jhana is necessary for awakening, and he said, "No, that can't be the case. My teacher says you see your defilements most clearly when they're really strong: strong lust, strong anger. That's when you're going to gain awakening." That's what he said, but where are you in relation to that anger, where are you in relation to that lust when you've allowed these things to grow strong? When they stir up the mind, you can't see things clearly. There has to be at least part of the mind that's standing very still and watching whatever is happening, not the least bit stirred by those things. Otherwise you just slip along with them, accepting this as the normal way of the mind. But it doesn't have to be that way. Part of the practice is learning that the mind at normalcy is not affected by those things. It's a mind that's been trained in line with the Buddha's standards.

Those standards are set out in the factors of the path, and you want to have respect for that fact. We're not here just to meditate as we please. We have to check ourselves to see if there's anything we're doing that's

causing stress, anything causing harm to ourselves or to people around us. You want to check for that. As you learn through observing the precepts to cause less and less harm, your focus moves to more subtle levels of stress in the mind, learning how to drop whatever it is that you're doing to cause them, until finally you come to the subtlest disturbances, caused by the concentration itself. In each case, you want to accept, one, that the stress is actually happening, and, two, that it's coming from something you're doing: a perception you're holding on to, an attitude you're identifying with. That's what you have to learn how to accept.

This requires having a mature attitude toward your own weak points, a mature attitude toward the areas where you're still lacking. Being mature means learning, on the one hand, not to beat yourself up over these things, but on the other hand, learning how not to just say, "That's okay. It doesn't really matter." Mature acceptance means accepting responsibility and accepting that these habits are deeply worn ruts in the mind. It's going to take time to learn to overcome them, but you do want to overcome them.

Because it's also good to accept the fact that there is something better in life. After all, the four noble truths don't point just to suffering and the cause of suffering. They also point to the path and to the cessation of suffering. Those things can be a part of life, too.

Now, a lot of people wouldn't want to be bothered, but again, that's their choice, and we should be allowed ours. Ajaan Fuang talks about the devas that get bothered by our practice, afraid that we'll go past them. But it's not just devas. There are human beings out there who don't like the idea that there really is a deathless, and that it really is attainable through human effort. They don't like to think about the challenge that poses. They prefer to think that it's not really true, and the Buddha was simply teaching us how to accept things as they are and be perfectly okay with them. Because otherwise, there's a path to follow and there's effort that has to be put forth. You have to be disciplined. A lot of people don't like to hear this. They don't want to accept that. Their idea of acceptance is very lazy and narrow.

But if you can accept the fact that there really is a deathless—that there's a dimension free of suffering, a dimension outside of space and time, and it can be reached, it can be touched through human effort—that's learning how to accept your potential. You want to learn how to accept the demands of your potential. Nobody's forcing you to do this, but if you want to make the most of your potential, this is what you've got to do. All of the Buddha's "shoulds" are conditional. He never forced anybody to do anything. But he said if you want to attain a state of peace, this is what you should do. This is what you have to do. It's required by the principle of cause and effect.

So have respect for this fact. Have respect for your own potential, respect for your desire for true happiness, and accept the fact that, Yes, it is a long path. The people for whom the path is short have already gone to the end of the path. You read the stories about all the people the Buddha taught in his time. It was as if he was picking the flowers in a field full of flowers, selecting just those that were ready to bloom, and leaving the rest behind to bloom later. We're the late bloomers. Who knows where we were at the time, hiding out under a rock someplace. You might say he picked all the fruit that was already ripe, and now we're gradually ripening ourselves.

So it may take time, it may take effort, dedication, discipline: all those virtues that tend to get short shrift in our society. But we're not here as consumers, which is apparently what our society would like us to be. We're here to make something of our potential to find true happiness, not the happiness they want us to buy. We have to discipline ourselves because that's what's required, to have respect for that fact and accept whatever comes along as part of the training. Whatever the training requires, try to be up for it.

This is the right effort that really constitutes the middle way: in other words, appropriate effort, appropriate for whatever the occasion, whatever the defilement coming up in the present, and whatever your state of mind. Sometimes this requires very delicate work, very refined, very easy. Sometimes it's hard and takes a lot of effort. You have to sit through a good amount of pain and struggle over some of your defilements. The struggle comes from the fact that the defilements aren't all obviously bad. They have their appealing side. They have their hooks. They're sticky, like Velcro. So there's going to be a struggle, back-and-

forth. Learn how to accept that as well.

Because when you do it, ultimately you get to the point where the mind doesn't need acceptance or rejection. That's one of the qualities in arahants. An arahant's mind is beyond acceptance, beyond rejection. But to get there, you have to learn how to distinguish what really needs to be accepted, what really needs to be rejected, and bring the proper amount of respect so that you do it right. Bring your practice up to standard. Don't try to pull the Buddha's standards down to your level. Try to pull yourself up to his.