

Recollection of the Buddha

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In the Buddha's analysis of the path, the factors associated with concentration are three: right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. And they interpenetrate. Right effort becomes ardency when you practice mindfulness. The establishing of mindfulness are the topics of concentration. The fourth jhana is where mindfulness becomes pure. So they're very closely connected. And when you're doing concentration, it's important that you work on all three.

Now one of the important elements of right effort is your motivation. In Pali, this is called *chandam janeti*, generating desire. Sometimes, when you sit down to meditate, the desire is there. It's no problem. You can get right to the breath. As Ajaan Lee says, the breath is our home base in meditation. But there are other meditation themes that are, as he said, places where the mind goes foraging. And these are mainly for motivation, for the times when the mind doesn't want to settle down with the breath. You don't feel up to it. You get discouraged, you're lazy, or other moods invade your mind. And it's at times like that when you need other meditation themes to help you convince yourself that, yes, you do want to be with the breath.

There's the set of four meditations called guardian meditations. The first one is recollection of the Buddha. This is a theme that's good for times when you're feeling discouraged or your conviction is weak. You ramp up your conviction by contemplating what kind of person the Buddha was and the fact that we live in a world that has had a Buddha: someone who found true happiness through his own efforts, who was willing to teach to anyone who was willing to listen the lessons he learned from what he had done. And he taught those lessons for free. He walked all over India. Wherever someone needed to learn his lessons, he went there.

As he said, the qualities that allowed him to find that true happiness are qualities that we all have in potential form, simply that we need to develop them. And developing them is something we can do on our own. Those facts have lots of implications for all of us, in terms both of the sense of the world in which we live and of our sense of ourselves. The sense of ourselves, of course, is that we have it within ourselves to find true happiness. When you think about that possibility, you wonder about the other pleasures you might be pursuing. What are they in comparison to the happiness of the deathless: something that doesn't change; something that doesn't require anything base or ignoble in pursuing it? In the sense of the world, given the range of the different kinds of happiness we could go for, why don't we go for the best, because the best is possible?

Those are the main features of what it means to think about the Buddha.

But you can also go into more detail. You read up on his life, see the inspiring example that he set, and you realize that this Dhamma that we're practicing comes from a really good

person. Here he was, a prince, destined to rule with all kinds of wealth, all kinds of pleasures, and yet he gave it all away, abandoned it. You can think of rich and famous people nowadays: How many people would do what the Buddha did? I can't think of anybody. People are too easily intoxicated by their wealth, by their good looks, by the possibility of power. And here was someone who saw through all of that.

His life is marked by three main qualities: his wisdom, his compassion, and his purity. The way he found happiness involves those three qualities, and those were the qualities that he then used in his teaching. You think about how many different kinds of happiness in the world would involve those three qualities: that you would have to be wise, you would have to be compassionate, you would have to be pure to find them. There're not that many. All too often, the kinds of happiness we search for in the world involve things that are not wise, not compassionate, and not pure. So you can think about the Buddha as an inspiring example to remind yourself that this is a good path. It was founded by a good person. And it makes us good people in the pursuit of it.

As the Buddha said, wisdom begins with a question: What when I do it will lead to long-term welfare and happiness?—the wisdom lying in, one, realizing that true happiness has to come from your actions. You can't just wait for it to come floating by. And then, two, long-term is possible and is better than short-term. It's a simple principle, this wisdom, but it has lots of implications in terms of compassion and purity. In terms of the compassion, if your happiness depends on the suffering of other people, they're not going to stand for it. It's not going to last. So if you want a lasting happiness, you have to think about the well-being of others. That's compassion.

And then you really have to carry through. You look at your actions again and again and again to make sure they don't harm yourself, don't harm others. Before you do the action, you ask yourself: What do you anticipate will be the result? If you anticipate any harm, you don't do it. While you're doing it, you check to see if any harm is coming up immediately—because not all actions wait until the next lifetime in order to give their results. You spit into the wind, it comes right back at you. You stick your finger in a fire, it burns right away. So if you see that you're doing something that's having bad consequences, stop. If you don't see any bad consequences, go ahead; keep with it.

And finally, when it's done, you look at the long-term results. If you realize that you did, in spite of your anticipation, cause harm, you talk it over with someone who's more advanced on the path and you resolve not to repeat the mistake. If you don't see any harm, you can take joy in the fact that you're progressing on the path. That, the Buddha said, is how you find purity.

So the Buddha was a person of wisdom, compassion, and purity both in the way he looked for the happiness and then as the result of the happiness he found. That's what compelled him to teach and what marked his teachings. And those are the qualities he teaches to us.

So when your conviction in the path is beginning to flag, it's good to stop and think about him and the Dhamma that he taught. That's the example that he sets for us. We live in a world where someone has done this. It's possible. And we're people who can do it.

If you find the example of the Buddha a little too far out of reach—in other words, you don't feel that you're up to following his example—you can also reflect on the Sangha. There are stories in the Canon about monks and nuns who were desperate, who had lots of difficulties in the practice. There was one monk who was going to commit suicide. He faced all kinds of disappointments and difficulties in the practice, but he was able to overcome them all. You can think about that. If the Buddha seems superhuman, some of these monks and nuns seem all too human. And yet they were all able to gain awakening. Reflect on the fact that you're not nearly as bad off as they are. If they can do it, so can you.

That kind of reflection helps you overcome doubt about yourself. So if you find that one of the problems in your practice is doubt, either about the practice or about yourself, reflect on the Buddha; reflect on the Sangha; reflect on the Dhamma. And you find that you can actually get the mind to settle down. As the Buddha said, these reflections can actually lead to the first jhana, which is the first level of right concentration. After you've been thinking discursively about the Buddha, you can boil everything down into just to one word: "Buddho." It means awake. Just repeat that to yourself. That's the quality you want to develop in the mind. Think of every cell in your body saying, "Buddho, Buddho." If your distractions are really insistent, you can pump it in rapid fire, like a machine gun, really fast, "Buddho, Buddho, Buddho." There are lots of ways you can vary this practice.

If the mind settles down by thinking about these things, then you can finally put the thoughts aside and get back to the breath with a much greater sense of energy, a much greater sense of confidence and conviction, having generated a desire to do what the Buddha did. After all, he gained awakening while focusing on his breath. And that's the technique he taught more than any other.

But even if you do find it easy to settle down with the breath, it's good to stop and reflect every now and then on the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha as a way of maintaining your energy, keeping your practice up—not only when you're doing formal meditation, but as you go through the day.

We live in the world where there was a Buddha. There's a story in the Canon about Anathapindika, who eventually became one of the Buddha's main lay disciples. He's visiting a friend, and the friend is engaged in getting ready for a meal that he's going to present to the Buddha and the Sangha the next day. Anandapindika asks him, "What's going on? Are you holding a wedding? Why all the big preparations?" And the friend says, "I'm presenting a meal to the Buddha tomorrow morning." And immediately on hearing the word Buddha, it's as if a lightning bolt strikes Anathapindika. He says, "Buddha? Did you say 'Buddha'? It's very rare to hear that word in the world, someone who's really a Buddha; someone who's really awake."

And for those of us who've heard his name many times, it's good to stop and think about how amazing it is we live in a world where there's been a Buddha, someone who has found awakening through his efforts and teaches that path to everybody for free. So why not take advantage of the path that he taught?