

Respect for Emptiness

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Respect for concentration: It's interesting that of the factors of the path—virtue, concentration, and discernment—the Buddha singled out concentration as something worthy of respect. At one point he called it the heart of the path. Yet he needs to remind us to respect it because we tend to overlook it, to step on it. Those little moments of stillness in the mind: We tend to ignore them; we don't pay them much attention. We're so much more interested in running after *things*, getting the mind all stirred up, while ignoring those little moments of stillness between what basically come down to moments of disturbance in the mind.

We see the disturbance as interesting and the stillness as boring, so we keep running after whatever flashes in and looks interesting. But after we look at it for a while, we see that there's not much there. So we drop that, the mind goes still for a moment, and then we move to something else. Those little moments of stillness are pushed so far in the background that we hardly even see them—yet these little moments of stillness are what the Buddha wants us to work with, to respect.

Without these little moments, for one thing, the mind would go crazy. It wouldn't have any rest at all. At the same time, if you're going to develop stronger concentration, you've got to start with these little moments, connecting them up. Resist the temptation to go running after any new flashy distraction that comes barging into the mind. Make up your mind that you're not going to fall for the hype. You're going to stay right here with the breath. The breath is not that colorful an object—at least on the surface. You find, though, as you get to know it, that the more you spend time with it, the more it has to offer, the more absorbing it gets. But to reach that state of absorption, you have to start out with small moments of concentration, of stillness. Pay attention to them. Look after them.

To describe this process, Ajaan Fuang often used the Thai word *prakhawng*, which describes what you would do if a child was learning to walk and you were standing behind it. You want it to learn how to walk on its own, but you don't want it to fall. So you're gently hovering around it to make sure it doesn't fall, while at the same time not preventing it from walking on its own. That's the kind of attitude you should have toward your concentration.

In the beginning, you need to have faith that the concentration will be a good thing. The passages you've read in the texts are there to give you inspiration: “a sense of rapture permeating the body.” The image they give is of a spring of water welling up, permeating a lake; or of lotuses saturated with water from the tip of

their roots to the tip of their buds. Sounds good. Something you'd like to experience. The images are attractive for a reason. One: They're really precise descriptions of the levels of concentration. Two: They're designed to make you want to go there, to remind you that these little states of concentration that seem so unpromising on their own, if you stitch them together, develop a strength, a depth, a sense of intense gratification that they wouldn't if left on their own. When you take these lessons to heart and carry them through, you find that the sense of peace, space, and stillness in the mind becomes more and more attractive. You want to move into that sense of peace for good.

The Buddha calls this taking emptiness as your dwelling. Instead of focusing on the figures in the foreground, you focus on the still space around them. You realize that this space is an appealing space. It's quiet. Undisturbed. "There's only this modicum of disturbance": the singleness of mind focused on the breath, or whatever your topic of meditation is. You let go of all other concerns.

When you do that, you realize how much weight you've been carrying around, how many unnecessary burdens you've been creating for yourself. You come to appreciate how good it is to have this still space in the mind surrounding everything else. You want it to become more and more pervasive. It's so easy to lose, though, because you've still got that old habit of running after things you think are important or interesting, things you think have a lot of value, things you've got to look into, to look after all the time.

So the Buddha gives you tools—the three characteristics—for undoing those habits, to help you realize that those things aren't really worth all that much worry, worth all that much care. They're not worth burdening the mind. It's important to note, though, that he doesn't have you contemplate things radically in terms of the three characteristics until you've got this state of concentration and you appreciate it. Now, sometimes he does have you use the three characteristics in a less radical way to help you get into a state of concentration, to help clear away the entanglements that keep the mind from settling down in the first place. But for the really radical analysis, he has you wait until concentration is solid.

Some people start analyzing things radically in terms of the three characteristics before they have sufficient skill in concentration, and it can get pretty depressing, pretty disorienting. It can short-circuit the practice. You manage a little bit of concentration and then you lose it, so you console yourself by saying that you've gained all the insight you need from concentration. You've seen that it's impermanent, so you don't have to do it anymore. That short-circuits the path.

But if you contemplate the three characteristics in the context of a well-mastered state of concentration, the contemplation actually accomplishes something

positive. It becomes liberating. You begin to realize that these disturbances in the mind that tend to wipe out the emptiness—creating problems in the emptiness, destroying the emptiness, cutting it up in little pieces—are not worth all that much worry or concern. You don't have to go flowing out after them. That's the point in the practice where the Buddha has you think about the three characteristics in a radical way, to see that the things you've really worried about, the things that you've really held on to tight, are pretty empty, too. This is where their emptiness becomes a positive thing instead of being depressing or nihilistic. It means you don't have to burden yourself with them. You can live with them in such a way that they don't put any weight on the mind.

When the Buddha talks about emptiness in the Pali Canon, he does so in two major contexts. One is this sense of dwelling in emptiness as the mind gets still and the emptiness begins to surround things. That's the side of emptiness that's obviously positive. Then there are other passages where he talks about emptiness in the sense that things are empty of self or anything pertaining to self. In other words, they're not you, not yours. They don't belong to you. Out of context, that sounds kind of negative. The things you used to pin your hopes on are not really you or yours, they're not under your control. If you take this teaching out of context, it sounds like you're depriving yourself of something or that these things are negative.

Actually, the things in and of themselves are not the problem. The problem is our attachment to them, the attachment that keeps destroying our concentration, destroying our stillness of mind. When you see things as inconstant, stressful, and empty of self from the perspective of trying to maintain this dwelling in emptiness, then the contemplation of their emptiness serves a positive purpose. It makes it easier not to get disturbed by them. The two different types of emptiness begin to connect. You can maintain this spacious sense of dwelling in emptiness and, at the same time, the things that used to bother you, the things that used to weigh you down, become empty, too: empty of self. Because they're empty, they don't disturb the emptiness of your awareness. You can live together. You can live with these things but not be weighed down by them. The emptiness of your mental dwelling isn't disturbed by the emptiness of the things that used to disturb it.

When it's not disturbed, you can look into it more carefully, to the point where you see that even the emptiness of concentration is fabricated. It, too, is empty of anything worth taking as you or yours. When you see this, you lose the passion that keeps you fabricating it, and in that way the mind is released. That's when these two different meanings or the two different contexts for emptiness come together in a way that creates freedom for the mind.

This positive intent applies to all the passages where the Buddha focuses on the negative side of things. There's a passage in the *Sutta Nipata* where he describes how, as a young man, he looked at the world with dismay. The human race as a whole seemed like fish fighting in a dwindling puddle of water. There's not enough water for them, so all the fish are struggling with each other. That's the way the world is. People are constantly struggling as if there weren't enough in the world to feed everybody, to clothe everybody, to give everybody shelter. It's a constant competition. Everywhere he looked, he found that everything was laid claim to. There wasn't a spot in the world where you could simply be free. There wasn't a spot in the world where you wouldn't be squeezed out by somebody else. This gave him a strong sense of *samvega*, a strong sense of dismay. But then he realized that the problem was not in the world. It lay in the heart. There was an "arrow in the heart," as he called it. If you could pull that arrow out, then there would be no more problem.

His description of the world may sound pessimistic, but it's there for a positive purpose. If we didn't see the world as confining, that would indicate that our hearts are small. But our hearts are large. Our problem is that we're trying to use the world to fill up the heart, and that's impossible. The world isn't large enough for the heart. The only thing that can fill the heart is the sense of emptiness—the peace, the lack of disturbance—that comes from concentration, from focusing the mind on a particular object, and even more so from letting go of attachments. Our problem is that we're trying to fill up our lives with the wrong things. We're trying to fill them up with *things*, rather than filling them up with the space and peace that can come as we work with the concentration, as we develop discernment.

Another negative-seeming passage is the one where the Buddha talks about the body in terms of its 32 parts. You take the body apart, look at each piece, and realize that there's nothing there in the body that you'd want to get attached to. You've got lungs, you've got a liver, you've got intestines, and you've got the contents of your intestines—all the way down the list. Many people object to this contemplation, saying that this is a negative way of looking at the body, but the purpose of this contemplation is to free the mind. It leads to a sense of lightness; it helps you realize that you don't have to take such obsessive care of the body. You don't have to be so attached to it; you don't have to regard it as an end in and of itself. It's a useful tool, and we need it in the practice, but when we make it an end in itself, we burden the mind, we weigh it down. The purpose of this analysis is to free the mind, to give it a sense of lightness, to fill the mind up with the space of concentration.

So these ways of looking at the world that seem so negative actually serve a very positive purpose: to remind us of the happiness that comes when we don't confine ourselves to narrow desires, narrow obsessions; when we can free the mind from the straitjackets it's imposed on itself; when we can pull out that arrow, the arrow of the craving based on the ignorant notion that somehow we're going to get satisfaction out of our body, satisfaction out of our possessions, satisfaction out of our relationships, satisfaction out of building a nice coherent philosophy, satisfaction out of the world. We look at these things in this way to see through them, to realize that our attachments, our clingings, are nothing but forms of confinement for the mind.

When we have concentration as a counterbalance, it's easy to follow through with this sort of analysis and not get depressed, for it opens the mind to stronger, more lasting, more solid, more spacious states of peace.

So at whatever stage you are in the practice, remember that respect for concentration forms the basis for everything else, starting with appreciation for the stillness in the mind, those little spaces that may not seem all that impressive in the beginning but can lead to true happiness if you take them seriously, if you treat them with respect.

This is another common theme throughout the Buddha's teachings: that little, unimpressive things in the mind, if you pay them attention, if you look after them—if you, in Ajaan Fuang's word, *prakhawng* them—can more than repay the effort needed to develop them. The potential for happiness lies in little, unexpected things that may seem unremarkable but really show their true colors when you pay them respect. As in those fairy tales where there's a little ugly troll whom everybody despises: When a little child takes the time to show a little respect to the troll, the troll reveals his treasure of gold and gives it to the child. It's the same with these qualities of the mind. When you show them respect, they give you their gold.