

The Buddha Respects Your Potential

November 17, 2018

Try to focus on your breath, and bring the attitude that something good will come of it. In other words, it's not just a game. It's not just a pastime. The ability to get the mind concentrated can do an awful lot for the mind, for your life, and for the people around you, so bring an attitude of respect to what we're doing here—respect for concentration, as we said in the chant just now. It seems such a little thing—the mind, still. We think that most of the great things in the world come because of the mind thinking, but for the mind to think clearly, it needs a place to rest. It needs a foundation. Otherwise, its thinking gets scattered all over the place—in some cases true; in some cases, very false. It gets out of control.

You want to have this space in the mind where you can be quiet, where you can look at your thoughts and judge them for yourself, developing your powers of judgment so that you can see what kind of thinking is useful, what kind of thinking is not. So this is a very important skill to develop. As I said, have a lot of respect for it.

You may notice we do a lot of bowing around here. We bow to the Buddha. Lay people bow to the monks. Junior monks bow to senior monks. It's not that we're worshipping or we're saying that we're going to obey the person we're bowing down to. We're showing an attitude of respect. We bow down to the Buddha because he teaches us to respect something in ourselves that's worthy of respect, which is our desire for true happiness: a happiness that won't change, a happiness that won't disappoint us, and a happiness that harms no one. There's so much out there in the world saying that that kind of happiness is impossible. They tell you to content yourself with whatever they're trying to sell you. They're showing disrespect for you, for your potential as a human being.

In this way, the Buddha respected us. He respected human beings enough to teach them. He said that if human beings couldn't develop skillful qualities or abandon unskillful qualities, there would be no reason to teach. But he saw that we do have this potential within us, that we can train ourselves and develop our skill in looking after the mind so that we can put an end to suffering, totally. And because he respected that potential within us, he taught for forty-five years.

The question is, do we respect that potential within ourselves? It's all too easy to say, "Well, I'm not up to this," or "I just don't have the potential." We think that somehow that lets us off the hook, but there are lots of other hooks out there that will catch us if we don't take our own potential seriously.

So we do have it within us, and the Buddha gives instructions on how to find it. In some cases, it involves following his instructions. In other cases, it involves developing our own insights, developing our own powers of judgment, our own ingenuity, because the teachings he left behind, even though there are a lot of them, often sketch things out in very broad outlines, and we have to fill in the details. After all, even though human minds have lots of things in common, we do have our individuality. So it's going to take a while for us to figure out, when we read a basic instruction or basic principle, how it applies to our own minds, our own words, our own deeds, our own thoughts. That requires that we put effort into it, that we use our intelligence.

So this is a teaching where there's respect on both sides. The Buddha respects us and our potential, and we respect him for what he did, for the example that he set, which means that we're open to learn from him. All too often, the etiquette of respect around here seems to be like an Asian custom, but we maintain it for a very important reason: When you have respect for something, you can learn from it fully. Ajaan Fuang used to say that an attitude of respect is a sign of intelligence. It means you're open to learn. You haven't closed your mind. When you show respect, the person who is teaching you will give more. Of course, you can judge whether the teaching is worth following or not, but the fact that you show you're open to receive it puts you in a position where you can learn things that otherwise you wouldn't have a chance to know.

It's the same with the breath. There's a lot to learn here. Have some respect for the potential of a mind focused on the breath with a sense of the breath filling the whole body, the pleasure of breathing filling the whole body, your awareness filling the whole body, and learning how to maintain this state. There will be a lot of voices in the mind that say, "Hey, you're not thinking about anything right now, and what you're doing is nothing very unusual or ingenious or creative or whatever." But still it's a skill, and the more you develop this skill, the more you come to appreciate it.

In fact, it's so important that it was the first factor of the path that the Buddha discovered. You may know the story. After having studied with two teachers and realizing that the types of concentration they taught were not the goal that he sought, he went off on his own and practiced austerities for six years with the idea that if he could get his mind free from its desire for sensual pleasures, it would be purified. So he denied himself every possible pleasure. After six years of that, he almost died. He realized that if he pushed himself any further, he wouldn't gain anything, so he had to ask himself, "Is there any other way?" He thought of a time when he was young. He had been sitting under a tree, and his mind had

spontaneously entered the first jhana, a state of seclusion with no thoughts of sensuality at all, but the mind was thinking about something inside—in this case, it probably was the breath—developing a sense of ease, a sense of well-being, a sense of rapture filling the body. And he asked himself, when he remembered this: Could this be the path? Something inside him said, yes, it could. So he was willing to give up the pride of his austerities and the respect of the monks who respected him for his austerities, and try this new path. Ultimately, around right concentration, he developed all the other factors of the path as well.

So it starts here. This is the basic skill: being with the breath, getting sensitive to the breath, having a sense of being aware of the whole body as you breathe in and breathe out, so that you can breathe in a way that feels good throughout the body. That way, your awareness can fill the body with a sense of well-being, sense of ease. And when you have this ease that comes from within, you realize that it's harmless, blameless. It's not the goal—it's the path—but already on this path you're discovering a sense of well-being that doesn't have to take anything away from anyone else.

This is why, when we spread thoughts of goodwill—"May all beings be happy"—there's no hypocrisy and there's no conflict. If we were out grubbing around trying to take things away from other people and then coming back and saying, "May all beings be happy," there would be a conflict and it would be hypocritical. But here our true well-being is something that comes from within. Other people's true well-being will have to come within them, so there's no conflict there at all, which is why even this much—goodwill backed up with concentration—the Buddha said, is part of a noble path. It's noble because it leads to a good goal, but also because the path itself involves developing noble qualities of mind.

An important part of the equation is that he found an inner happiness that's totally harmless, and unlike many other pleasures, keeps the mind clear. In fact, it aids the mind in developing more and more discernment, more and more insight into what's going on inside itself, to see the even subtler ways in which it's causing trouble for itself. And when you cause trouble for yourself, you're going to cause trouble for people outside.

So, have some respect for the state of concentration. Have some respect for your ability to do it. In the beginning, it may seem daunting. Your mind is used to thinking sixty, seventy, eighty miles per hour. Now you're going to suddenly stop, and it's going to take a while for the momentum to wear down, for the mind to be willing to circle in and finally settle down. But it is something we can do. Human beings can do this. And it's a way in which we show respect for ourselves. We

don't lower our sights and say, "Well, I'll just content myself with whatever little pleasures come my way or whatever things I can buy, or try to find happiness in things that are eventually going to have to leave me," and think that that's all the human being can do.

Sometimes you hear that attitude attributed even to Buddhism, saying that "Well, the world is imperfect. There's a lot of stress and suffering, so you just have to content yourself with the way things are, and if you can learn contentment, then you'll be okay." But that's not what the Buddha taught. The Buddha wasn't that kind of person—defeatist, apathetic—and he's telling us not to be that kind of person, either. He said it is possible to find a happiness that is deathless, a happiness that does not disappoint, and it involves developing good qualities like wisdom, compassion, and purity as you pursue that happiness.

He's telling us to raise our sights as to what we can do, what we as human beings have in our potential. So have some respect for the potential that the Buddha saw within you, and if you look carefully enough, you can see it yourself.