

## *Respect as a Sign of Intelligence*

*April 15, 2019*

One evening, when I was talking with Ajaan Fuang, we got on the topic of some local teenagers who had been showing extreme disrespect for their parents. And Ajaan Fuang made an interesting comment. He said that willingness to show respect is a sign of intelligence. The smart people are the ones who show respect.

That struck me, because I thought back to my high school days, and the attitude among the kids in high school seemed to be that the smart kids were the ones who showed disrespect. But although they may have been smart in one way, they weren't really intelligent. After all, if you show disrespect to other people, then if they have something of value to teach you, they're not going to be inclined to want to tell you. You're closing off an avenue by which you can gain knowledge and the benefit of their experience.

For the monks it's even a rule: If someone criticizes you, if you show disrespect you commit an offense. Now, you don't have to agree with them. But the Buddha said even in cases where the other person is wrong, you don't show disrespect. Because just because that person is wrong now doesn't mean he or she will always be wrong.

So it's good to think about what it means to show respect. You show you care about the other person's opinions, you care about that person's well-being, and you respect whatever knowledge that person might have. That gives you access to the knowledge. They're more likely to share. If you show respect for their well-being, they're more likely to show respect for yours. If you treat them like garbage people, they might treat you like garbage.

We had the chant just now on respect for the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. What that means in practice is that you resist the urge to change them. Instead, you try to change yourself to see if by fitting into the Dhamma you benefit. And we show respect for the Buddha because he basically has us show respect to ourselves. Look inside yourself: What do you feel is most worthy of respect inside you? The Buddha would say that it's your desire for true happiness, with the realization that true happiness can't harm other beings if it's going to last.

There's a story in the Canon of a king who was up in his private apartment with his queen. And in a tender moment he turns to her and says, "Is there anyone you love more than yourself?" And, being a king, he's probably expecting her to say, "Yes, your majesty. I love you more than I love myself." But the queen says,

“No. There’s nobody I love more than I love myself. And how about you? Is there anyone you love more than you love yourself?” The king has to admit that there’s nobody he loves more than himself. So that’s the end of the tender scene.

The king goes down to see the Buddha and reports the conversation. And the Buddha says, “You know, she’s right. You can search the whole world over and not find anyone you love more than you love yourself.” But then the Buddha’s lesson from that is interesting. It’s not that you should abuse other people or disrespect them or mistreat them to get what you want out of them. Because after all, he says, they love themselves just as fiercely as you love yourself. If your happiness harms theirs, they won’t stand for it. So the lesson he draws from that is: Never harm anyone or cause them to cause harm. In other words, you have to respect *their* desire for true happiness, too.

So looking for your true happiness is not a selfish thing. It’s something you want to do wisely. Now, the world out there often will tell you that true happiness isn’t possible, that the effort it requires is a waste. But why? A lot of the people in the world have something they want to sell you instead, so they’re not really showing you respect. All those advertisements that say you would look pretty if you wore this, or you’d look attractive if you drove that car, or if you bought this or bought that: They’re not showing you any respect. They’re trying to go straight for your greed, aversion, delusion. So you have to resist their message.

This is why we try to keep the Buddha’s teachings in mind. He says true happiness is possible. Sometimes it comes by having to do without, but you gain a lot in return. There are greater happinesses and lesser happinesses in life, and the wise person realizes that sometimes you have to give up the lesser happiness for the sake of the greater one. But it’s a good trade. Think of it as if you’re playing a game of chess: You can’t hold onto all your pieces and win. You’ve got to be willing to sacrifice some of the pieces and then you can come out winning. So look into your life to see what’s really valuable and what’s not. And show respect for your desire for true happiness, and respect for any teaching that would help you in that way.

That’s why the chant just now endorses respect for the Dhamma, respect for the training, respect for concentration. Respect for heedfulness: That means the realization that there are dangers out there in the world, but you can avoid those dangers if you develop skills, and so you want to learn those skills. If you try to pretend that there are no dangers out there at all, you’re going to get hit over the head pretty easily by all kinds of unexpected things. But if you prepare beforehand and you can be confident that you know the necessary skills, then when a danger

comes up you're not blown away by it. So we practice in preparation for the dangers that can come.

One of our other chants is, "May you look after yourself with ease." That doesn't mean simply, "May you just meet with nice things all the time." It means that when difficulties come up in life, may you have the skills to handle them properly. That requires that you've got to train yourself, and meditation is part of that training. When you stay here with the breath and you keep reminding yourself, "Okay, stay with the breath, stay with the breath, don't forget," that's mindfulness. As you develop your mindfulness, other lessons that you've learned in life will be easy to keep in mind.

When you're with the breath, sensing the breath as it is right here in the body, right here, right now, without a lot of stories and other things that would pull you away, that's alertness. You see what you're doing. As you try to master the skills of life, you want to see clearly: What are you doing? That way, if something happens as a result of your actions, you know why. You know what you did. All too often, we're doing things and our minds are half here and half someplace else, so our actions get only half of our attention, if that. When the results come, we can't really be sure where they came from, because we don't even know what we did, or we have a confused notion of what we did. But if you learn how to be alert, fully alert to the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out, you learn to be alert all-around.

As you stick with this, you develop the quality called ardency. Ardency is what keeps you going. It's fired by heedfulness, the realization that you can't let up in your desire for true happiness. It's going to come through your actions, so you have to be very careful about what you do. If you see any weakness in your actions, you're happy to do what you can to make up for the weakness. Where there are strengths, you try to maintain them, to respect your abilities, respect your skills.

This is why we start out with respect for those who know, respect for those who've gone beyond us. They can teach us an awful lot. Now, there's a lot of new information that comes in the world all the time, and often younger people are ahead of the older people in terms of the information. But in terms of values, of what's really important in life, what it means to be heedful, what you've got to do in order to be happy regardless of what the information is: That kind of knowledge comes only with time and experience, so you want to learn how to take advantage of other people's experience, because they can have a lot to offer. And even if you show respect for someone you find out later didn't deserve it, well, you haven't lost anything. At the very least, that person will appreciate your respect, and you have your own self-respect.

There's a rule among the monks that you have to bow down according to seniority, to whoever was ordained before you. And in Thailand there were some monks with seniority whose behavior was not the kind I respected. But I would still bow down to them as a sign that I was well-trained. That kind of respect reflects back well on your teachers, reflects well on your parents.

So, by showing respect you never lose. And if you show respect to the right people—in other words, instead of just showing the manners of respect you also have a deep sense inside that you really do respect that other person—they'll show you the way to show true respect for yourself: that you're a person of worth, your true happiness is possible, and there's no reason to be ashamed that you want true happiness.

In fact, the desire for true happiness is the beginning of wisdom. If you're able to find true happiness, you can be a lot more compassionate to other people, too. Often, the reason people are harsh and unkind to one another is because they've been disappointed in their happiness. They feel that when they don't get any happiness, why should anybody else have any? But when you find true happiness inside, you're more likely to think about other people's true happiness and to see that theirs is worthwhile as well.

You also realize in your own quest for true happiness that it's going to require good qualities of the mind. It's not something you get by being greedy or by mistreating other people. Now, there are pleasures you can get that way, but they don't last. The lasting ones are the ones that come from being good: good in your generosity, good in your virtue, good in your meditation. That's the kind of happiness that feels good deep down inside. It's a happiness that's worthy of respect.

So have a strong sense that your happiness is something very worthwhile. Take it seriously, not in the sense of being grim but in the sense of really wanting to do what needs to be done. That's when your attitude of respect shows its rewards.