

Immersed in the Body

February 2, 2021

In the verses on respect that we chant often, the Buddha mentions respect for the triple training, which is training and heightened virtue, heightened mind or concentration, and heightened discernment. But he also mentions respect for concentration. It's as if he wanted to make sure you know, that you're doubly sure, that concentration is important. Maybe he foresaw that, in later centuries, people would try to drop concentration from the path.

I saw one person write one time that basically the Buddha taught two paths. There was a sevenfold path and a sixfold path. The sevenfold path dropped right mindfulness, the sixfold path dropped right effort and right concentration. And in the commentaries they talk about the dry insight arahant, who doesn't get any of the jhanas, which is basically the definition of right concentration.

So maybe the Buddha foresaw this, which is why he stressed the importance of concentration. You really do want to get the mind into concentration because it's an important part of the path. It's your food on the path. It's your foundation. If you're going to see the mind clearly, you have to see it when it's still—or as the Buddha used another term, when your mindfulness is immersed in the body. You're fully right here.

So we respect concentration, one, by respecting it in theory, reminding ourselves that it's something we've got to do. And two, while you're doing it, you want to give yourself to it fully. Don't hold anything back. Immerse yourself in your object. Here we're working with the breath. When we say to focus on the breath, it's an unfortunate image. It gives the impression that your mind is like a camera, and you're going to focus the lens of the camera on something outside of the camera. It'd be better to say, "Wear the breath. Put it on, wear it. Think of it being all around you." And you want to develop an all-around awareness as well. So you don't hold anything back. If you hold anything back, you're off to the side. Be in the middle.

When you hold things back, there are big blind spots in the mind. Those blind spots are ignorance, and it's precisely because of the ignorance that we suffer. So as you begin to settle down and the breath begins to feel good, allow yourself to plunge into the body. Put the breath on. Wear it. Remember that image of the man with the white cloth surrounding his body. You want your awareness to be all-around like that. Then allow it to stay there. That's another aspect of respect

for concentration. All too many people, when they get the mind to settle down a little bit, say, “Okay, enough of that. What’s next? When do the insights come?”

As the Buddha said, stay with the concentration. Settle in. Indulge in it. The first defilements you’re going to be dealing with are the ones that try to get you out of concentration. They’ll give you reasons for moving on. They sound like Dhamma. After all, we know that concentration is not the goal, so they can talk you into thinking that you’ve got to be really in a hurry to get the insights. After all, that’s heedfulness, right?

But this is meticulous work. And one of the lessons of concentration is that you can’t believe everything you think, even the lessons of Dhamma that tell you you’ve got to move on. You’ve got to bring in other lessons of Dhamma that say, “No, we’ve got to respect the concentration. Give it some space; give it some time. And question those other voices.” As you question them, you’ll have to gain some insight into how the mind works. How do these voices come? How do they gather? How do they get articulate? How do they have a message? And who are they talking to?

As you breathe through these things, you begin to see how there’s a little stirring in the breath energy, and then the mind slaps a label on it, either as a physical sensation or as the seed of a thought. Then, if you decide it’s going to be a thought, you nurture it and slap a few more labels on. And then you ride with it.

So if you say No to these voices and resist their message, you’re going to start seeing the workings of the mind, which is precisely what we’re here for. This is one of the ways in which concentration gives rise to discernment. It may not be in terms of what you’ve heard about what discernment should be: the three characteristics or dependent co-arising. It actually embodies those teachings, but you don’t have to keep the words of those teachings in mind. Just notice: Where’s there a disturbance? And what can you do to undercut the disturbance? That’s when you’re doing the work of insight.

So you respect concentration in theory, and then you respect it in practice, and then you respect it in protecting it as you try to develop this all-around gaze. That was one of the epithets of the Buddha: the All-Around Eye. This concept had a peculiar meaning in Indian culture. They had the belief that if a deva saw you, you were blessed. And if you happened to see a deva, if you saw any part of a deva’s body, the deva’s body was all eye. If you saw the hand, you saw the foot, even that would be enough. You could rest assured that the deva had seen you. So on the one hand, when they said the Buddha was an all-around eye, they were saying he had the same power as a deva.

But what's more relevant for us is the idea that the Buddha was aware all around, and you want your awareness to be all-around like his. You want so that anything coming up in the mind that used to hide in the shadows, used to hide behind screens that the mind puts up, is now out in the open and clear. You see it for what it is, no matter which direction it comes from.

So don't hold anything back. Don't be the camera off to the side, taking a picture of the breath. Get into the breath. Immerse yourself in the body. Try to get this awareness that's all-around. Then you understand why the Buddha was so insistent that we have respect for concentration, because it can do us so much good.