

Why We Bow Down

December 4, 2021

We bow down to the Buddha a lot around here because we believe that he is a better person than we are. He knows more than we do. We want to keep that attitude alive. Otherwise, we reduce the Buddha to our own measure, our own ideas of logic and reason. That closes off a lot of possibilities, because the Buddha himself noted that things can be reasonable or logical and yet not be true. He never claimed that he could give you a logical proof of nibbāna, for example, or of the four noble truths—even of the principles of mundane right view, that your actions really are yours. In other words, you're the one who decides what to do. It's not some outside force acting through you. And they really do have an impact. Your choices do make a difference, and they're going to depend on the quality of the mind.

The Buddha was very upfront about the fact that he couldn't prove these things logically. You're not going to know them until you've actually taken them as working hypotheses and put them into practice. But making that test requires conviction, because the path asks a lot of you. You're going to be giving up a lot, so it's good to cultivate an attitude of respect to give the path a fair chance.

Even though the Buddha didn't give a logical proof for his major teachings, he did give pragmatic proofs. They came in two kinds. One is if you do believe in the principle of action, you're bound to act in a better way. You're going to be more careful about what you do. And even if, at the end of life, it turned out that these principles were not true, you would still have a sense of honor in your choices along the way.

The same with the four noble truths: They seem very reasonable. I remember when I first learned them, that was the first thing that struck me: that they were very reasonable. But then you look into them more carefully, and there's a lot that can't be proven—aside from actually putting the path into practice.

The third noble truth is especially important. It's because there is the possibility of finding an end to suffering by developing dispassion that we actually would try to have some dispassion for our cravings. That's why we would be willing to adopt those three perceptions—inconstancy, stress, not-self—and apply them to the things we're attached to. People sometimes say we can see these things all around us: Things are always changing—but do we know that there is nothing that doesn't change? Maybe not in our range of experience, but perhaps there's something else out there that doesn't change. And is it really worthwhile to say

that these things are not-self, that you'd be better off not trying to lay claim to things? When you fabricate a really good state of concentration, what proof is there to deny that that's best there is, so that you should maintain what you've got and never let it go? After all, there were a lot of teachings in the Buddha's time and even today, a lot of teachings that say, "Maintain this state because this is the best you can do: a state of good concentration, a state of equanimity."

But the Buddha said No, there's something more, something better, which comes from not fabricating at all. Believing this requires a lot of dispassion. It requires that we accept a lot of value judgments about things we tend to hold on to very dearly, particularly when it tells us that they're not worth holding on to. Even with the path: You hold on to it for a while and then you're going to have to let go at some point. If you don't have a lot of respect for the Buddha, if you don't have a sense of conviction in that third noble truth, it's going to be hard to let go of the fourth.

So it's good to be frank with yourself about what you know and what you don't know and what possibilities are available. Given that there's a lot you don't know, it's good to look for people who seem reliable and seem to know more than you do and to cultivate actively an attitude of respect for them. That's a large part of the motivation.

With right effort, there's a lot of discernment that goes into right effort. You have to know what's skillful, what's unskillful. You have to be convinced that there is such a thing as long-term happiness and that it can be obtained through actions. And you really are motivated to work for the long-term. There's discernment there—but also conviction.

Remember, it's right *view* that we're going by—it's not right *knowledge*. These are views or opinions that we hold, and we hold on to them as long as they're useful. We've decided to adopt right view because it seems like the right thing to do—as long as we're clear about the fact that it's "seeming" at this stage of the practice—as long as we haven't gotten to the point where our conviction is confirmed.

The Buddha talks about gaining the Dhamma eye: That's the point where you have verified confidence in the Buddha—that what he taught really was true, that he really did know what he's talking about. When you reach that stage, then you're on firm ground. The image that they give is of crossing a deep river. As you swim across, you could easily get swept away by the current. But when you finally get near the other shore—you're not quite on the shore yet but you get to the point where your feet can reach the bottom—then you know you're not going to get swept away. That's the image for gaining the Dhamma eye, your first glimpse

of the deathless. That's what confirms that the Buddha did know what he was talking about, that this is the greatest possible happiness. You've seen something that doesn't arise, doesn't fall away, something that's not created. If it were created, then it would end when the conditions creating it changed.

At that point, you develop even greater faith in the Buddha, a greater sense of his knowledge—because it's not an easy thing to find. You realize that you did the practice with his help, but he didn't have anybody else to help him. In fact, everybody else in his time was telling him other things, trying to dissuade him. His first teacher said, "Get into concentration. That's as good as it gets." The five brethren who were supporting him during his period of self-torture were saying that you have to give up all sensual pleasures. He realized that was not the case, so he abandoned that self-torture—and they abandoned him. You can imagine: There he was, with nobody to support him, nobody to second his hunch that this practice of concentration—getting the mind into jhana—would actually be part of a path that would take him someplace. He was totally on his own at that point, but he was willing to take the gamble. And he won.

So, as he said, it's a gamble for us, too, until we've been confirmed in our confidence. But it's good to cultivate confidence in the meantime, because, as I said, the path asks a lot of you. It's not an easy path. It's going to ask you to give up a lot of things. Now, part of the mind has a sense that, Yes, giving up on certain things is going to be useful. We've had experiences in the past where we've been generous or given up certain ideas, and we've benefited, but that's not proof that it'll be good to give up the things the Buddha tells us to. But it gives you an inkling. Still, there's another part of the mind that says, No, you've got to hold on. Whatever good you've got, you've got to hold on. To fight that part, it helps to have a strong sense of faith in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha.

"Faith" is often the F-word in Western Buddhism but it's a necessary part of the path. But the faith needed for the path is a clear-eyed faith. We know we're operating on assumptions that we can't confirm yet but we've got a path that gives directions in how to confirm them. The Buddha says that you follow this path and in following it, you'll confirm what he's taught. At the very least, you can see that it's a noble path that doesn't ask you to do anything harmful or shameful. There's nothing grubby about the path at all. It's a path that speaks to your better nature in every way.

That's another reason why we bow down to the Buddha: He found a path that requires us to become better people in order to be able to prove whether he taught the truth. So at the very least, we have a sense that we become better as we follow his path.

So approach it with respect. Have a strong sense that this really is special.

Years back, I was at Yosemite, standing on a ridge where there were a lot of photographers. It was one of those spots that on the Internet they say that if you go to this spot at this time of day, you'll get a really great shot. It was at Glacier Point, with a great view of the Half Dome at sunset. Then as soon as the sun had set, all the photographers left except for me and one other. Yet actually that was the period when the light on Half Dome got really interesting: subtle oranges and pinks. The photographer standing next to me started pointing out different peaks off in on the distant horizon. He said, "Those are my personal four sacred mountains, like the sacred mountains in China." He added that he was hoping to climb all four of them. Then he said, "But then, of course, every place is sacred." I thought to myself, "Well, no. If everything is sacred, where are you going to go to the bathroom?" Everything deserves a certain amount of respect, but some things deserve more respect than others.

As you're practicing, you want to have a sense that the path that the Buddha taught is something that deserves your utmost respect. And the person who found it and the people who've carried on the memory of that path: They deserve your utmost respect as well. When you have that attitude, you're open to learn a lot of things that you would otherwise close off.

Because that's the second pragmatic proof: If you believe there is such a thing as nibbana, it opens the possibility that you could actually follow a path there. If you didn't believe it, that lack of belief would shut the path off. And why shut off a possibility like that when you don't know? It's wiser to leave the possibility open. Then you can explore it.

So see respect not as a close-minded thing. It's the opposite. If it's respect in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, it opens your mind, it opens your heart. It opens you to the possibility of all kinds of really good things.