

Respect for Heedfulness

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March/April 2001

“One who sees danger and respects being heedful”: something we chant every week. And where does that respect lead? Where does that heedfulness lead? They lead to the presence of Nibbana.

It’s because they lead there that they’re so important. And that’s why Buddhism focuses on suffering and stress: to give rise to the kind respect for heedfulness that will take us beyond suffering.

Some people accuse Buddhism of being very pessimistic and negative, focusing only on suffering and stress as if it were denying that there is any pleasure in life. But the Buddha never denies pleasure. He talks about it very openly. The problem with pleasure, though, is that it leads to being complacent. When things go well, we start getting lazy. And we just stay right there. Life doesn’t get any better than that, we think, as long as we’re complacent. It’s when we realize that there must something better than this ordinary everyday pleasure, something not mixed up with ordinary everyday pain, and that this something better is going to have to depend on *us*: that’s when we start getting heedful.

We realize that unless we do something about the state of our minds we’re not going to get any better than this. And so for the purpose of learning how to get to Nibbana, the Buddha has us focus on pain, suffering, stress - however you want to translate *dukkha*. If we can understand how the mind puts suffering together, we begin to untangle all the mind’s attachments, all the ways it makes and creates unnecessary problems for itself.

At the same time we start opening ourselves up to something better.

So we focus on suffering because it’s a learning opportunity. In fact, the Buddha actually has us treat suffering with respect. He calls it a Noble Truth. It’s not just any everyday, ordinary old truth. He says to look at it as a Noble Truth, something worthy of respect, something worthy of comprehension. Really look into it. Don’t dismiss it. Don’t try to run away from it. Open yourself up to learning from it.

There’s room for respect for happiness as well. If you search around in the Noble Truths you find happiness—pleasure and rapture—tucked away under the fourth Noble Truth, in Right Concentration. That’s the kind of happiness you can learn from, the happiness that comes together with mindfulness and real clarity. Because on the one hand it puts the mind in a state where it can see suffering and not be threatened by it; and at the same time that kind of happiness itself ultimately becomes an object you want to explore. You use it as a tool and then,

when you've taken it as far as it can take you, you turn around and start exploring it as well. You begin to see that there's even some stress and suffering in there.

So these are the things we should respect: suffering and the right kind of happiness. That's why the Buddha calls them Noble Truths. If we don't have respect for these things, where does our complacency lead us? As the Buddha says, complacency is the path to death. And the complacent are as if already dead. In other words, they're not alive to the opportunities lying before them. If we really do follow the path, if we're diligent at it, keep with it, stick with it, it opens us up to Nibbana. And when people reach Nibbana they look back on the pleasures of their daily lives before and see that they were an awful lot of burden, an awful lot of stress compared to what they've found.

Our problem is that we haven't reached the point where they are, so pleasures look pleasurable to us, they look pretty good. We don't want to give them up quite yet. We get a nice spot in our meditation and say, "This isn't so bad. We can stay right here for a fair while." But it's all so precarious. Stress is built in to not only the first Noble Truth but also the second and the fourth. This is part of the Buddha's genius. Once he'd attained, or experienced, what is uncompounded or unconditioned, he looked back at conditioned reality and saw that in comparison to what he had attained, all of it was stressful, all of it was burdensome. But he also saw that you can't take the uncompounded and use it as a path to the uncompounded. Things won't work that way. You have to learn how to take the compounded and use it as a path. So he divided compounded reality, things made up of causes and conditions, into three things: stress, its cause, and the path to its end. And he gave us a task for each of them. Our task is to comprehend the stress and suffering, to abandon the cause, and to develop the path. Ultimately, though, you get to the point where stress has been comprehended, its cause has been abandoned, and the only thing left is to relinquish the path itself.

This is why the Buddha has us focus on the issue of stress, and particularly the stress and suffering that come with clinging. When you actually see them, you stop being so complacent about your clingings, about your attachments. You begin to realize that even the most subtle form of pleasure on the everyday level has some clinging mixed into it, and that that particular clinging opens the bridge for all kinds of suffering to come into the mind. Once you build that kind of bridge to things, anybody can come over the bridge. Pleasure can come over the bridge; pain can come over the bridge. Once you latch on to the body and say, "This is me, this is mine," you lay claim to it. Then whatever happens to the body suddenly becomes a burden to the mind. We latch onto it because we find there are certain pleasures in the body. Once that bridge is open, though, all the pains can come along as well.

So try to get the mind in to a state of good, solid concentration. That way it can look back on those attachments with some detachment, some objectivity,

and see all the things you cling to that you really like, that you really identify with. When you look objectively, you see that there really is some problem in holding on in that way. And when the mind is in good enough shape, it's willing to let go.

So when the Buddha has us focus on the stress and the suffering that come from clinging, it's not that he's trying to bad mouth the world or to deny pleasure. It's just that there's something better than this. And the way to find that something better is to focus on the way the mind reacts to pain. If you really want to understand the mind, that's the place to understand it. There are all the issues in the mind that come thronging around the pain, whereas ordinary, everyday pleasures just tend to cover things up, so that they're not as clear.

This is why the Buddha has us have respect for the sufferings we undergo, because we can learn from them. There's an interesting passage in the Canon where the Buddha talks about the reason for respect and it's basically to learn. When there's respect, you open up your mind. There's the possibility of learning something new. If there's no respect, the mind is closed. It dismisses things really easily. And as a result, it loses a really good opportunity to learn.

This is why the attitude of respect is built into the Buddha's teachings. A lot of people think that Buddhism is an interesting philosophy, perhaps a very good philosophy, that somehow got religion tacked on to it, with all the bowing and all the other paraphernalia that go along with religion. And they'd like to separate the two: "Can't we just have the philosophy without the religion?" But if you look at the nature of the Buddha's philosophy, his teachings on the Four Noble Truths, the whole attitude of respect is built into the teaching itself. When you realize that the big issue here is the possibility of a great deal of pain or a lot of pleasure, true pleasure, it puts an edge on the teachings. It's not just an interesting description of things. It points out a dilemma we're all placed in. We've got to do something about it, for otherwise we just keep cranking out suffering all the time.

If you've got any concern for your own wellbeing, you've got to take these truths seriously. And fortunately, the nature of suffering is something you can learn from and something you can do something about. The whole teaching on causality—the fact that your experience of the present is a combination of past factors plus your present input—means that you can develop skill in this area. If everything were totally predetermined, everything would be like a machine and there'd be no reason for respect because you couldn't learn anything useful about it, you'd just be stuck in the machine, unable to do anything about it. On the other hand, if everything were totally uncaused or totally random, again, there'd be no reason for respect. There'd be nothing to learn because what you learned that worked today wouldn't necessarily work tomorrow.

But our experience is shaped by patterns of causality with some influence coming to it from the past but also with the possibility for us to add influences in the present, right here, right now. That's why respect is built into that causality:

respect for the principle itself, that there's something to learn from. But it's complex. After all, the kind of causality the Buddha talks about is the same kind that creates chaos theory—which means that causes aren't all that simple. There's a lot to be learned. But it's all right here in the present moment, which means you have to have respect for your own ability to learn as well. After all, all the causes the Buddha talks about are things right here. When he describes causality he says: "This comes with that; when there is this there is that." The "this" and the "that" are things right here in front of us.

So knowing that, you have to have respect for your own ability. But, since it's complex and such an important issue, we'd be wise to have respect for people who have followed the path and gotten results. That's why we pay so much respect to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, so that we don't have to keep reinventing the Dhamma Wheel.

So, based on this principle of causality, there are three things we need to respect. First, the principle itself because reality's not totally arbitrary. You can't just make up things. You can't decide, "Well, today I'm going to act on desire and I'm going to make desire a good thing." If it's an unskillful quality in the mind, it's going to lead to unskillful actions. There's no way around that. That's a part of reality against which you just keep banging your head unless you learn to have some respect for it.

Secondly, respect for yourself, your own ability to do the practice. And also, at the same time, having respect for your desire to gain true happiness. The ordinary way of the world is to say, "Oh, true happiness, unchanging happiness: forget about it. Focus instead on the things we can sell to you. Lower your sights." That's what the world says. The Buddha says, "No, have respect for your desire for true happiness." When you get complacent, you've lost respect for that desire. When you're heedful, you're keeping that desire in mind, showing it the proper respect. So, respect for yourself means two things: one, respect for your desire for true happiness and, two, respect for your ability to do something about it. That's built in to the principle of causality as well.

And finally, given the complexity of the principle, you need respect for those who have followed the path: someone like the Buddha who discovered the path and the Sangha, people who followed the Buddha's example and found the same freedom, total freedom from suffering, the same true happiness. Respect for the teaching that the Buddha and the Sangha have passed on.

When you have this proper attitude of respect, respect for heedfulness, the proper respect for stress and pain, respect for the kind of happiness that forms the heart of the path, and respect for concentration—that's also in the chant—that's the attitude that will bring you to the presence of Nibbana.

So there's no clear-cut line between Buddhism as a philosophy and the more religious side of Buddhism where the etiquette of respect comes in. What's important, though, is that we understand the attitude of respect. There's one passage where the Buddha talks about how, one, the attitude of respect gives you a grounding and, two, it enables you to learn. The purpose of respect is to learn, to open your mind. Not only does it open your mind, but also when other people see that you're respectful of the truth, they're happy to teach. Whoever has any knowledge is willing to share it. In fact, for the monks, they're supposed to have respect for everybody. If someone criticizes a monk, the monk is supposed to treat that person with respect, whether the person's right or wrong. Try to keep an open mind because many times you learn from unlikely people, unexpected sources. They might have something good to say. So we're taught never to be dismissive when we're criticized.

After all, the principle of causality is right here in the present, not only for you to observe but for other people to observe as well. So everyone has that potential to have some very useful observations. This is why Ajaan Fuang one time said that an attitude of respect is a sign of intelligence. If you want to learn, if you want to master the way to the end of suffering, an attitude of respect is a very important quality.

Respect for heedfulness: Understand that the principle of causality means that there's great potential for danger. If we misuse that principle, we can cause ourselves a lot of unnecessary suffering. But the respect for the training, the respect for concentration: that's respect for our potential to use that principle of causality for very good ends. Total release. Total freedom.

So instead of being negative or pessimistic, the Buddha's teachings are extremely positive, much more positive than anything else in the world. They say that our desire for true happiness is realistic, worthy of the highest respect.