

Respect

March 2003

One of Ajaan Suwat's favorite themes when he led a session in meditation like this was that we bring an attitude of respect to the practice. After all, this is a practice designed to put an end to suffering, and if you don't have a respect for a practice like that, *what* are you going to respect in your life?

We have so many things that we could do that would just pile more suffering on ourselves and other people. It's so rare that you have a practice like this: for putting an end to suffering, for looking exactly where suffering comes from in our own actions, and for training ourselves so that we can stop doing those things that cause suffering.

So what does it mean to have an attitude of respect? It means, for one thing, that we pay full attention to what we're doing, that we use care. Respect is something that has to be learned. It means being willing to put aside our preconceived notions and our old habits for the time being, and to look at the situation to see the kind of attention it requires: the care and the effort that it requires to learn new habits in the mind.

This is important, because otherwise we just go sloughing through life in whatever way we've been doing it, without stopping to look at the results of our actions, putting in a minimum of effort, just enough to get by. And it's precisely that kind of attitude that leads to problems, both in our relationships with other people and in our relationships with ourselves. We don't notice. We don't pay attention.

We come in with preconceived attitudes, and what are those but ignorance? We make up our minds beforehand, and then don't like to be told that things are different from the way we preconceived them. That's disrespect.

Respect is when you're open to learning new things. In fact, it's an attitude that's absolutely essential if you're going to learn anything at all. If you don't respect the teacher, if you don't respect the subject that's being taught, you're not going to pay attention and you're not going to learn.

So as we come to the practice of meditation, try to bring an attitude of respect, realizing that there's a lot to be learned here, even in this simple activity of watching the breath—because you learn both about the breath, and about yourself.

On the one hand, you learn to see what the breath can do for you, in terms of calming you down when you're tense, giving you energy when you're tired, providing a foundation for the mind in the present moment, making you more sensitive to the present moment—giving you an object that you can focus on in real oneness: both in the sense that you stay with one object, and that one object fills your whole awareness.

As you get more familiar with the breath, more acquainted with the breath, you begin to notice that it's not just air coming in and out of the lungs. There's a whole energy flow in the body. Energy in every part of the nervous system flows in, flows out with the rhythm of the breathing.

As you open up to that, you find that you're opening up to areas of potential awareness that in the past were blocked. We have a tendency to focus on one thing here and then one thing there, but opening our awareness up to fill everything in the present moment—that's something we rarely get to do.

The breath is an unusual object in that it allows us to do that. And in the course of doing that, we get to see who *we* are as well: in terms of our habits, in terms of the ways we allow ourselves to get distracted.

But also in our ability to bring the mind back from distraction: As you pay more and more attention to this process of trying to stay with the breath, you begin to notice that there are warning signs for when the mind is about to leave. It all happens very quickly, but the more carefully you pay attention, the more respect you have for this process, then the more you can see the signs that let you know the mind is about to lose the breath, so you'd better pay more attention—learn how to block that movement away from the breath.

So we look in both directions: We look at the breath, and we look at the mind—and we learn things about both. When Ajaan Lee describes alertness in his book *Frames of Reference*, this is precisely how he describes it. He talks about a pulley that goes back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. In other words, your intention has to go back and forth between the breath and the mind. Now, if you keep them together, there's not a lot of back and forth, because they're right next to each other, so it's a matter of simply looking both ways at once.

Having that habit of looking both ways at once is very important, because it helps prevent the blind spots that we usually bring to our lives: the tendency we have to focus on one or two things and blot out everything else around us. And what are those blind spots? What are they but ignorance?

So we use the breath to open up to the entire body, and then we use the process of staying focused on the breath, being alert to the breath, to open ourselves up both to the body and to the mind. Simply on the level of concentration, that's quite a lot right there. Because this enlarged, open awareness is very healing for the mind, healing for the body. In terms of insight, it allows us to see all kinds of things that we would have missed otherwise.

And this Janus-like awareness that goes forward and back—in other words, looking at the breath then looking back into the mind—is a pattern that carries all the way through the practice.

There's a verse where Mogharāja asked the Buddha, *How do you look at the world in order not to be seen by the King of Death?* And the kind of looking that the Buddha

recommends is an all-around looking. In fact, one of his epithets in the very earliest text is *the One with the All-around Eye*. In other words, he sees in all directions. And he says, on the one hand, to look at the world as void, as empty of anything that would be worth holding on to. That's looking out. At the same time, remove any ideas of what your *self* is: That's looking back. In that way, you avoid being seen by the King of Death.

It's a looking in two directions: looking at the phenomena that we ordinarily would latch on to, that we would grab in one way or another—in terms of our body, in terms of our ideas about this, that, and the other thing, in terms of the status, wealth, praise, all the pleasures that we run after in the world, plus loss of status, loss of praise, loss of wealth, loss of pleasure. These things come back and forth, back and forth. Learn how to see them as void, he'd say.

But also turn around and deconstruct your notion of who it is that's holding on, that's clinging. You have to look in both directions, and do a deconstruction in both directions as well if you really want to come to something that's different from the ordinary way we've been living our lives all along—as we live, as we die, and then as we get reborn all over again.

So realize that in order to practice this, you have to throw yourself totally into it and develop an all-around awareness that holds nothing back. Because the problems lie on all sides: both the things we're attached to and the mind that attaches. Those things that we latch onto, as we get to know them more and more intimately: We begin to realize that our experience of those things has an element of will, an element of intention in it.

It's not like we're presented with ready-made experiences and we have the choice of whether we like them or not. Life is not a TV show that comes already produced and all we have to do is flick the channel on or flick it off. We're intimately involved in its creation.

So in order to overcome our clings, we have to learn how to see the emptiness of the things that we create, and then learn not to identify with the urges to create, by learning how to deconstruct both of the things and the urges: That's the opening to freedom.

So it requires this all-around eye: this ability to see things in all directions, with no blind spots at all. The part that holds back—that's where all the ignorance lies.

So this is why respect is so essential. Often we think of respect as belonging to the religious side of Buddhism, and meditation as belonging to the more practical or philosophical side of the religion—as if they were two distinct things. But they're not. They go together.

The part of the mind that holds back is also the part of the mind that's the problem. That's where all the craving, the passion, and the ignorance lie. So this is why respect is required of us, because otherwise we won't sacrifice those things that hold back.

I was talking with an African-American teacher one time: He was saying that one of the things he noticed about white American Buddhism was the arrogance. We come in and we're going to change this, we're going to change that, and this and that have to be adjusted to suit our sensibilities, to suit our modern attitudes. And it's precisely that arrogance, he said, that stands in the way of our really getting anything solid out of the practice.

When I went over to stay with Ajaan Fuang, I felt that I was going with an attitude of respect, but he was able to dig out whatever buried pieces of disrespect I might have, that even I didn't know about: the parts that would hold back, the parts that would say, "Isn't this quaint, what they're doing over here." Well, it wasn't quaint. It was part of the practice—a necessary part of the practice.

So we all come to the practice with some disrespect. After all, wherever we hold onto our defilements, there's disrespect for the practice. This is not just a white American problem: Every human being comes to the practice with this problem. It's just that white Americans tend to have it in spades.

But there's always part of us that holds back from the practice, that wants to protect one particular defilement or another. We don't think of it that way, we don't see it that way, but that's what it is.

This is why respect is so important: to keep reminding ourselves, "Where are we still holding on? Where do we still pull back?" Often it's the things that we cherish most about ourselves that are precisely the things that are getting in the way.

So try to give your full attention, your full awareness, your full sensitivity to what you're doing right now—that's what respect means in the practice: this openness to learn, this openness for giving up things, for throwing yourself totally into the practice, so that you can get the all-around benefits that come from it.

Until you get swallowed up in the breath, until you get swallowed up in the practice, you don't know what this practice can do for you. This is why Ajaan Suwat kept repeating this theme over, and over, and over again: "Practice with an attitude of respect," he said. If you don't have that attitude of respect, develop it in the mind. Remind yourself of why respect is so important each time you sit down and meditate.

Because it's that attitude that keeps you on track. And it's that attitude that opens you up to the potentials that Dhamma practice can offer. It allows you to open up to things that you couldn't even imagine. As long as our practice is hampered by the limits of our imagination, it won't be able to overcome suffering.

So bring an attitude of respect. Give the practice your full attention. Breathe with your whole body, be aware with your whole mind—don't hold anything back.

Because where you hold back is where you're holding on. And it's hidden from you. It's when you turn around to look at where you're holding on, and learn how to let go—that's when this habit of respect can begin to show its real benefits.