

Respect for Emptiness

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Respect for concentration. It's interesting that of the factors of the path—virtue, concentration, and discernment—the Buddha singled out concentration as something worthy of respect. At one point he called it the heart of the path. And yet the reason he needs to remind us to respect it is because we tend to overlook it, tend to step on it. Those little moments of stillness in the mind: We tend to ignore them, we don't pay them much attention. We're so much more interested in running after *things*: thinking about this thing, thinking about that thing, looking at this, looking at that, getting the mind all stirred up, yet ignoring those little moments of stillness between what basically come down to moments of disturbance in the mind.

We see the disturbance as interesting and the stillness as boring, and so we keep running after whatever flashes in and promises to look interesting. We look at it for a while and see that there's not much there, so we drop that, the mind goes still for a moment, and then we move to something else. Those little moments of stillness are pushed so far in the background that we hardly even see them—and yet these little moments of stillness are what the Buddha wants us to work with, to respect.

Without these little moments, for one thing, the mind would go crazy. It wouldn't have any rest at all. Secondly, if you're going to develop stronger concentration, you've got to start with these little moments. Start connecting them up. Resist the temptation to go running after any new disturbance that comes barging into the mind. Make up your mind that you're going to stay right here with the breath. The breath is not that colorful an object—at least on the surface. You find, though, as you get to know it, that the more you spend time with it, the more it has to offer, the more absorbing it gets. But to get to that state of absorption, you have to start out with small moments of concentration, of stillness. Pay attention to them, look after them.

To describe this process, Ajaan Fuang often used the Thai word *prakawng*, which describes what you would do if a child was learning to walk and you were standing behind it. You want it to learn how to walk on its own, but you don't want it to fall, so you're gently hovering around it to make sure it doesn't fall,

while at the same time not preventing it from walking on its own. That's the kind of attitude you should have toward your concentration.

In the beginning you have to take it on faith that the concentration is going to be a good thing. You read passages in the texts and they're there to give you inspiration. "A sense of rapture permeating the body." The image they give is of a spring of water welling up, permeating a lake, or of lotuses saturated with water from the tip of their roots to the tip of their buds. Sounds good. Something you'd like to experience. The images are attractive for a reason. One: they really are descriptive of a state of concentration. Two: they're designed to make you want to go there, to remind you that these little states of concentration that seem so unpromising on their own, if you stitch them together, develop a strength, develop a depth, create a sense of intense gratification that they wouldn't have otherwise. When you take these lessons to heart and carry them through, you find that the sense of space in the mind becomes more and more attractive. You want to move into that sense of space for good.

The Buddha calls this taking emptiness as your dwelling. Instead of focusing on the figures in the foreground, you focus on the space around them. You realize that this space is an appealing space. It's quiet, undisturbed. "There's only this modicum of disturbance": focusing on the breath, or whatever your topic of meditation is. You let go of all other concerns. When you do that, you realize how much weight you've been carrying around, how many unnecessary burdens you've been creating for your self. You come to appreciate how nice it is to have this still space in the mind surrounding everything else. You want it to become more and more pervasive. It's so easy to lose, though, because you've still got all those old habits of running after things you think are important or interesting, things you think have a lot of value, things you've got to look into, to look after all the time.

So the Buddha gives you tools—the three characteristics—for undoing those habits, to help you realize that those things aren't really worth all that much worry, worth all that much care. They're not worth burdening the mind. It's important to note, though, that he doesn't have you contemplate things radically in terms of the three characteristics until you've got this state of concentration and you appreciate it. Now, sometimes he does have you use the three characteristics in a less radical way to help you get into a state of concentration, to help clear away the entanglements that keep the mind from settling down in the first place. But for the really radical analysis, he has you wait until concentration is solid.

Some people start analyzing things radically in terms of their impermanence, or their inherent stress and suffering, or the fact that they're not really yours, not under your control, before they have sufficient skill in concentration, and it can get pretty depressing, pretty disorienting. But if you contemplate the three characteristics in the context of the concentration, it becomes liberating. You begin to realize that these disturbances in the mind that tend to wipe out the emptiness, create problems in the emptiness, destroy the emptiness, cut it up in little pieces, are not worth all that much care. They're not worth all that much worry. You don't have to go flowing out after them. That's the point in the practice where the Buddha has you think about the three characteristics in a radical way, to see that the things that you really worried about, the things that you really held on to tight, are pretty empty, too. This is where their emptiness becomes a positive thing instead of being depressing or nihilistic. It means you don't have to burden yourself with them. You can live with them in a way that they don't put any weight on the mind.

When the Buddha talks about emptiness in the Pali Canon, he does so in two contexts. One is this sense of dwelling in emptiness as the mind gets still and the emptiness begins to permeate things, surround things. That's the side of emptiness that's obviously positive. Then there are other passages where he talks about emptiness in the sense that things are empty of self or anything pertaining to self. In other words, they're not you, not yours. They don't belong to you. Out of context, that sounds kind of negative. The things you used to pin your hopes on: they're not really you or yours. If you take this teaching out of context, it sounds like you're depriving yourself of something or that these things are negative.

Actually, the things in and of themselves are not the problem. The problem is our attachment to them, the attachment that keeps destroying our concentration, destroying our stillness of mind. When you see things as inconstant, stressful, and empty of self from the perspective of trying to maintain this dwelling in emptiness, then the contemplation of their emptiness serves a positive purpose. It all begins to connect. You can maintain this spacious sense of emptiness and, at the same time, the things that used to bother you, the things that used to weigh you down, become empty too. Because they're empty, they don't disturb the emptiness of your awareness. So you can live together. You can live with these things but not be weighed down by them. The emptiness of your mental dwelling isn't disturbed by the emptiness of the things that used to disturb it.

That's when the two different meanings or the two different contexts for emptiness come together in a way that creates freedom for the mind.

This positive intent applies to all the passages where the Buddha focuses on the negative side of things. There's a passage in the Sutta Nipata where the Buddha describes how, as a young man, he looked at the world and it seemed like fish fighting in a dwindling puddle of water. There's not enough water, so all the fish are struggling with each other. He said that's the way the world is: People are constantly struggling as if there weren't enough in the world to feed everybody, to clothe everybody, to give everybody shelter. It's a constant competition, and everywhere he looked he found that everything was laid claim to. There wasn't a spot in the world where you could simply be free. There wasn't a spot in the world where you wouldn't be squeezed out by somebody else. It gave him a sense of *samvega*, a sense of dismay. But then he realized that the problem was not in the world, it lay in the heart, that there was an "arrow in the heart," as he called it. If you could pull that arrow out, then there would be no more problem.

His description of the world may sound pessimistic, but it's there for a positive purpose. If we didn't see the world as confining, then that would indicate that our hearts are small. But our hearts are large. Our problem is that we're trying to use the world to fill up the heart and that's impossible. The world isn't large enough for the heart. The only thing that can fill the heart is the sense of emptiness—the peace, the lack of disturbance—that comes from concentration, from focusing the mind on a particular object, and even more so from letting go of attachments. Our problem is that we're trying to fill up our lives with the wrong things. We're trying to fill them up with *things*, rather than filling them up with the space and peace that can come as we work with the concentration, as we develop discernment.

There's another negative-seeming passage where the Buddha talks about the body in terms of its 32 parts. You take the body apart, look at each piece, and realize that there's nothing there in the body that you'd want to get attached to. You've got lungs, you've got a liver, you've got intestines, and you've got the contents of your intestines—all the way down the list. Many people object that this is a negative way of looking at the body, but the purpose is to free the mind, to give it a sense of lightness, to help you realize that you don't have to take such obsessive care of the body. You don't have to be so attached to it; you don't have to regard it as a really valuable possession. It's a useful tool and we need it in the practice, but when we make it an end in itself we burden the mind, we weigh it

down. The purpose of this analysis is to free the mind, to give it a sense of lightness, to fill the mind up with the space of concentration.

So these ways of looking at the world that seem so negative are actually there for a very positive purpose: to remind ourselves of the happiness that comes when we don't confine ourselves to narrow desires, narrow obsessions; when we can free the mind from the straitjackets it's imposed on itself; when we can pull out that arrow, the arrow of the craving based on the ignorant notion that somehow we're going to get satisfaction out of our body, satisfaction out of our possessions, satisfaction out of our relationships, satisfaction out of building a nice coherent philosophy. We look at these things in this way to see through them, to realize that our attachments, our clingings, are nothing but forms of confinement for the mind.

When we have the concentration as a counterbalance, it's easy to follow through with this sort of analysis and not get depressed because it opens the mind back up to stronger, more lasting, more solid, more spacious states of peace. So whatever stage you are in the practice, remember that respect for concentration is what forms the basis for everything else: appreciation for the stillness in the mind, those little spaces that may not seem all that impressive in the beginning but can lead to true happiness if you take them seriously, if you treat them with respect.

This is another common theme throughout the Buddha's teachings: that little things in the mind that seem pretty unimpressive to begin with, if you pay them attention, if you look after them—if you, in Ajaan Fuang's word, *prakawng* them—can more than repay the effort needed to develop them. The potential for happiness lies in little, unexpected things that may seem unremarkable but really show their true colors when you pay them respect. As in those fairy tales where there's a little ugly troll that everybody despises: When a little child takes the time to show a little respect to the troll, the troll reveals his treasure of gold and gives it to the child. It's the same with these qualities of the mind: When you show them respect, they give you their gold.