

Respect, Confidence, & Patience

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Ajaan Suwat often would begin his Dhamma talks by saying that we should approach the practice with an attitude of respect, an attitude of confidence. Now the respect and the confidence go both ways: respect for the path and respect for ourselves; confidence in the path, confidence in ourselves. Because, after all, what is the basic message of the Buddha's teachings? It's that through human effort we can achieve total happiness, an unconditioned happiness. The results of our efforts can go that far. So we should have respect for this potential within ourselves.

At the same time, we should have respect for the experience of people who have been on the path before us, because they can show us a lot, help us save a lot of time and a lot of grief, help keep us on the path. And then we should have respect for the principle of cause and effect itself, for that's what the Buddha awakened to on the night of his Awakening: the role that human action plays in shaping our experience. It's not an arbitrary role. It may be complex, but it does follow certain rules. We should have respect for that principle as well.

The principle of kamma means that sometimes our actions bear immediate results and sometimes they take time. In light of that fact, we have to bring not only an attitude of respect and confidence to the practice, but also one of patience. We're here to learn, and it may take time to learn. So when things aren't going well, remind yourself that this process takes time. That way you don't browbeat yourself or get down on yourself. You can be more realistic about what you're undertaking here, which is the total re-training of the mind, learning radically new habits in how you relate to the body, how you relate to your feelings, how you relate to your perceptions, your thought-constructs, even how you relate to consciousness.

The Buddha points out that we tend to relate to these things in unskillful ways, so we've got to learn new skills. Following the path means that, instead of making a burden out of these things, we actually turn them into the path of true happiness. Now that's going to take time, because some of these issues are very subtle. What is your relationship to feelings? What is your relationship to consciousness? These are subtle issues. It takes time to work them through.

So before you settle down to the meditation, try to develop an attitude of patience, an attitude of respect, an attitude of confidence. We often think of patience and confidence as the end-products of the meditation, but we should have some skill in developing these attitudes already. In ordinary daily life, how do you build up an attitude of confidence? How do you build up an attitude of respect? How do you build up an attitude of patience? You've been doing it all along in some areas of your life to a greater or lesser extent, so try to bring these skills to bear on this practice. After all, this is a practice that requires precision. It's not something you can rush into or bluff your way through. It takes time and patience to develop the kind of detailed skills, the detailed sensitivities that are really required.

When you're clear about this fact, you find it a lot easier to overcome obstacles on the path. You're here to learn a skill, and skills often require trial and error, learning from mistakes. A friend of mine once went to Japan to study pottery with one of the living national treasures they have over there. At the beginning of her stay she'd often get frustrated because she'd send her pots into the kiln every evening, and the next morning find that many of them had come out broken or unevenly burnt, whereas her teacher's pots seemed to come out perfectly every time, every time. Then one morning she came into the studio and found him sitting in the middle of the kiln: Many of his pots from the previous night's batch had exploded in the kiln, but he wasn't upset. He was simply sitting there trying to figure out why. That's what makes the difference between a person who really does develop a skill and a person who can't quite make it: the ability not to get upset by your mistakes but simply to look at them as learning experiences. If you have that much respect for yourself, that much respect for the principle of cause and effect, you find it easier and easier to be patient.

In other words you don't take it as a reflection on yourself that you made a mistake, because everybody makes mistakes. Look at the Buddha's life up until

the night of his Awakening: Many times it was one mistake after another. He tried different methods that just didn't work out, didn't work out. He listened to other people to learn what they had to offer, and then when that didn't satisfy him he went off into the forest to make his own mistakes. Only after many years of mistakes did he finally get on the right path. What saw him through this period was his sense of confidence, that there must be a way to true happiness and that if it existed he was going to find it.

Patience, confidence, respect: These things all go together. So try to develop them as an attitude that you bring to the practice, every time, every time, every time.

We sometimes think of the bowing and the chanting here as something extraneous to the meditation, but that's not the case at all. They help us to develop the right attitude. When we bow to show respect to the Buddha, we're showing respect for the potential of human beings. It's like a mirror that reflects back on us. We respect him because he teaches us to respect the best things in ourselves: our desire for true happiness, our abilities in terms of our powers of observation, mindfulness, concentration, compassion, and goodwill. So it's good to bow down to that reminder everyday. As for the chanting—respect for the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha, and then the various reflections we chant in translation—these remind of us of why we are practicing.

The chant this evening on aging, illness, and death encourages an attitude of samvega, which is difficult to translate. It means a combination of dismay over the meaninglessness of life as it's ordinarily lived, coupled with a sense of awe and a sense of urgency to find a way out. But the chant doesn't end there. It also reminds us of the principle of kamma in order to develop another attitude: one of confidence. Our actions, and nothing else, are the factors that are going to get us out of this dilemma. So our actions are important.

There are so many voices in the world telling us that our actions aren't important: politicians who say that they don't care about what people think, that they're just going to do what they want to do; scientists who tell us that nothing we can do can change the general course of nature. Then there's cosmological time, geological time, in which our efforts seem to be very puny and insignificant. But the teaching on kamma reminds us that cosmological time may apply to the

world out there, but the world of your lived experience is shaped by your actions, and this is the world that matters. And it's because it matters that we want to develop these skills, however much time it may take, however much patience it may require. These are skills that are worth mastering even if you don't get all the way to the end of the path in this lifetime. Whatever progress you do make on the path means that much less suffering, that much more skill in how you relate to the things that would normally cause you to suffer or would normally bring about reactions that would make you suffer.

So a lot of the practice lies in the attitude, the right attitude that underlies all the other right factors of the path. If you catch yourself in the midst of the meditation with the wrong kind of attitude, stop. Think for a while about what you're doing here and why you're doing it. You can drop your meditation object for that period of time if you want to. You can change to another topic.

There are classical lists of topics for recollection when you find that you're frustrated, when there's aversion, lust, fear, anxiety. There are specific topics you can think about. You can think about the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha to develop a sense of confidence, to overcome any sense of aversion you may have either to your meditation object or to yourself. Think about the members of the Noble Sangha in the past who went through lots of difficulties, years of effort, and couldn't make any headway, and yet ultimately were able to gain Awakening. They developed the patience needed to do that. They were human beings; you're a human being. You can develop that patience as well. Once you find that your attitude is more appropriate, then you can get back to the breath.

All of the ten topics for recollection are types of meditation. We tend to think of meditation as only one or two vipassana techniques, but that's not true. There are lots of techniques for dealing with all different kinds of problems in the mind. When teachers give you just one technique, it's sort of one-size-fits-all, or Henry Ford's old maxim: People can have whatever color car they want as long as it's black. Given the complexity of the mind, there's no way that one single technique is going to work in all cases, or that one particular person will have to stick to one technique all the time. You have to realize that the Buddha offers a whole toolbox here, lots of different methods, lots of different approaches.

Even within the one topic of breath meditation, Ajaan Lee's Seven Steps provide many different ways of approaching the mind when it's out of balance. Sometimes you need to focus on the length of the breath; other times you focus on spreading the breath throughout the body; other times you have to be very careful about where you're focused in the body. All of these are component factors. Ajaan Fuang once noted that when someone is having trouble in concentration practice, or the concentration of the practice is getting out of balance, it's usually because one of these factors is lacking.

So it's not that you blindly follow steps one, two, three, four, five, six, seven. You find which aspect of the mind is out of balance and then focus on the appropriate step until you find that you've got all of them covered. Again, this is a question of trial and error, testing to see which recommendation is appropriate for which particular problem. And as I said at the being, trial and error require patience. Equanimity. The willingness to learn. The ability to step back a bit from whatever is going on, when it's not going well, and taking a good, long look at it.

And try and put yourself in good humor. One of the things I noticed about all the really great meditation teachers in Thailand was that they had good senses of humor. They found it easy to direct that humor at themselves. And as someone has pointed out, the ability to step back from things is what allows a sense of humor to begin with. If you're totally immersed in your problem, you begin to lose perspective and nothing is funny at all. Step back a bit, learn to laugh at yourself in a good-humored way—not in a sarcastic way, but a good-humored way, a sympathetic way—and then get on with the practice. You'll find then that things go a lot better.

So all of this comes under the issue of right attitude. It's not listed as one of the factors of the path, but it underlies everything. After all, the Buddha taught the four noble truths because he had the right attitude toward suffering: that there must be a way for human beings to overcome suffering, to gain release from suffering. He had the right attitude toward the amount of work it might take to do this, at the same time seeing that once this task was accomplished it would be more than worth the effort. Once this one problem was dealt with, there would be no other problems in life.

All problems come down to this one: the unskillful ways we relate to the things we identify with as me or mine. The practice means learning to relate to those things in new ways that are skillful, so that instead of causing suffering they turn into the path to the end of suffering.

So look at this as a friendly path. Think of all the people who have tried the path before as your friends: They are happy to have you join them. And think of the things within body and mind that you'd like to be friendly with, too: your breath, the good qualities of your mind. This is a practice that allows you to develop those friendships—friendships that will never leave you, that will never turn on you, where your friends keep on giving. That kind of friendship takes time but it's more than worth the effort. To develop that kind of friendship you have to be giving, too. What are you asked to give? You're asked to give of your patience, give of your respect, give of your confidence. Those are good things to give, because you never run out. When you find the proper object for your respect, you find that respect becomes a strength—something you can rely on, something you can depend on, all the way to the end of suffering.