

Respect

Gil Fronsdal

November 28, 2021

Keywords: Dhamma, anukampā, karuṇā, Maṅgala Sutta, respect, deference, veneration, saṅgha, kamma, loving-kindness

I wanted to start today with the three little vignettes, for they were important for me in my life. The first one was when I was a relatively new Zen student. I was living at a Zen center, San Francisco Zen Center. This was back in the nineteen seventies, and there were not very many Zen masters in the United States at that time. They decided to have a meeting among themselves, a gathering to talk about whatever they had in common, or issues they had, or something. So they gathered for two or three days and had private meetings among themselves.

But then one evening they offered to be available as a panel to maybe take questions from the students who lived there, students who were taking care of them and hosting them and all that. So that was nice, and I was in the audience, and they were all kind of sitting behind these long tables, seven or nine of them. For me, as a young and impressionable person, it was a pretty formidable group of teachers sitting there. I was watching them. At some point, someone came along to give them tea or water, each of them, maybe came with a tray or something, and came up from behind them like a good server, I guess, and reached over and put the cup they had in front of them, so they had something to drink. They all just kind of accepted it.

No Zen teachers reacted or responded to receiving it at all, except for one. One of them, when the server came to offer it, turned completely around to the server, acknowledged the server was there, and thanked the person who brought it. The contrast between the ones who were almost oblivious to the person offering, and the one who took the time to really see that person as the most important person at that moment, was striking. Perhaps the teacher was going to turn and really be there, see, recognize, and thank the person. I was so impressed by that. Oh, that is quite something. What are the other people doing, I thought. So that inspired me. That was one vignette.

The second vignette was at the same Zen Center. Some years later, there was a visiting monk from Japan. We were sitting at sesshin, a seven-day retreat, and he was sitting next to me in the hall. The way it worked then was that every afternoon during the retreat, in the meditation hall, we would be sitting like sitting up here on the stage, facing the middle of the room, everyone around the edges of the room, and people would come in and offer us tea and a cookie. The first day of the retreat, first afternoon, they also came with a tray of cups, and each of us kept our own cup next to our seats for the week. At the end of the retreat, they came in to gather the cups we had been using.

They gave us tea, they gave us a cookie, and when that was finished, they came to collect all the used cups. The visiting Japanese monk was sitting next to me. It's all choreographed in Zen; you are supposed to know exactly when to bow and chant and stand up and sit down. It's all choreographed on a schedule. So if someone does something a little bit out of the usual, it stands out. He was sitting next to me, and his cup was on the platform in front of him, and before the server came, he bowed to the cup. I don't know what that was—respecting, appreciating, having gratitude for the cup. I don't know what he was expressing, but I think it was partly gratitude. The fact that you would express this to a cup was inspiring as well. Not just people you'd respect, not just people you would thank or express something to—a cup. That was the second vignette.

The third was when I was in graduate school. I was studying religious studies, Buddhist studies at the Religious Studies Department, but I took a class from the history department. I think the class was like The History of Japanese Buddhism, maybe, and I had to do Japanese history. Somehow we were learning all these facts about history, and there was some little fact that was told, and we were preparing for the finals or something. So I said to the professor, "So this particular thing is not so important, right? That we have to know this?" He looked at me and he said, "Gil, everything is important." I thought, "Well, that was quite something. Oh, everything is important."

There is an idea that, you know, when you're studying history, everything has its value. That echoed in my mind in all kinds of situations. Everything is important. Everything is respectable. I think what these three stories have in common is an idea of respect. Respect is a very important attitude, a behavior that in many societies, many religions, many people—I've never heard a Dharma talk about respect. I've been listening to Dharma talks for almost fifty years and have never heard one about respect. I've never seen anybody actually writing about respect. There must be someone, but I've not read that well, you know?

If you go back to look at the teachings of the Buddha, that concept of respect is all over. It's

kind of sprinkled in all over. However, it's not on any list. So if you like to teach lists, it's not there. It's not described as having any role for the path of awakening, because that's a very specific kind of listing of practices and mental experiences that happen on that path. But respect is not listed there.

The things that people often use for meditation, they are talking about important things, things that are important now, suttas, things that stand out, the things you read in Introduction to Buddhism books, and there it is—this is what it's all about, or something. Respect doesn't rise to the surface high enough to be talked about in Introduction to Buddhism texts, nor Dharma talks and all kinds of places that I've heard. Maybe some of you heard differently, however, it's sprinkled in all over. The impression I have is that respect was just an assumed important quality, maybe of a society at the time of the Buddha, just assumed as a very important quality people have that you didn't have to teach it specially. Just mention it. In fact, it gets mentioned in all kinds of places.

One place is that it's mentioned together with gratitude and contentment, I think also something that's been translated in English as deference. So respect, deference, contentment, and gratitude are great treasures or great blessings. *Maṅgala Sutta*. In the discourse on loving-kindness, there is an emphasis on respect, and one of the wonderful teachings about it is where it's connected to a duty of respect, directly connected with love—*piyā*, love, or charity, or appreciation, or deep regard for other things. It's also connected with social cohesion, non-dispute, concord, and unity. Those wonderful things are all connected somehow in association with respect.

The Buddha teaches six things—actually, four things—that are conducive to this love, respect, cohesion, non-dispute, concord, and unity. These are: loving-kindness or friendliness, kindness that, if we live a life of kindness, that's conducive to love and respect; generosity, if we live a life that's generous, that also is conducive to love and respect, and so forth; living an ethical life, that also is conducive to love and respect; and finally, developing the insight that leads to awakening, liberating insight, having that insight, having the experience of liberation, being on the path of that, also is conducive to love and respect. I think when you meet someone who is very mature in the Dharma practice, it tends to bring up a certain level of respect, that appreciation of a person.

There is a fascinating story of the Buddha. Soon after he was enlightened, he said to himself that someone will live an unpleasant life, an uncomfortable life, if they don't have respect and deference, and a certain kind of reliance on others. Such an interesting idea. So he said, then he looked around, and he said, "Well, actually, there is no one who is more realized than

I am, so it doesn't make sense for me to have respect and deference, or to rely on them, to have a certain kind of dependence on them, because I'm complete in my awakening. So what should I have respect for then, if it's not a person?" He said, "I'll have respect for the *Dhamma* by which I was awakened. I will actually say respect, homage, or the honoring and reliance." So the idea of respect, honoring, and reliance—not a person, but some of the *Dhamma*, the teachings, the truth, the processes of awakening that exist within each of us. Here also the idea of respect appears.

Respect is a fascinating social attitude. It's complicated because it means so many different things in English. We use the word respect, and sometimes it has more to do with fear than it does with appreciation. We might say, "I have respect for something," but really mean, "I fear it." But then, as an attitude of appreciation of others, an attitude of valuing another person, seeing their worth or their importance—everything's important, including each person. To have an appreciation for the value of others when there's respect is a very interesting mental kind of process.

As many of you know, it involves seeing again, taking a deeper look at what's going on. There's a latent respect, like a spectator or spectacle or something to look. To "re-spect" means again to look again. So something is respect-worthy—we want a deeper look at it. But a deeper look is also deeper listening, like, "This thing is—whatever, who this person is—is worthy of me paying attention to." It's not only about me, myself, and mine. It's not only about what I want or what I'm afraid of, or how it supports my self-centeredness or something.

There is a kind of dropping of self-centeredness, dropping of my likes, my preferences, in order to hear or listen or take in the other person in a good way. There is a kind of healthy, I think, deference to others. When you have respect, there is a putting yourself aside slightly in order to take in, to let the person, to register the person, to make space for the person—to say a kind of deference. Even to listen to someone, what they have to say, is a kind of deference. We put aside me, myself, and mine a little bit. So respect involves a kind of attitude where other people are important enough that we do kind of put ourselves, some part of ourselves, aside.

The focus becomes on the person, the object that we have respect for. But it's not a giving up of oneself, because at the same time, when we have respect for someone else, we are the agent of the respect, we're the one who is empowering the respect, we're the one who is living the respect. So it comes from a place of a certain kind of confidence, hopefully a certain kind of ability to offer something here. So ourselves are the subject of the respect. As

the person who has respect, part of who we are is put aside—our preferences and our likes, our self-centeredness—so we can take in and really register the other person. But part of us comes forward, the ability to do that, and the ability to appreciate somebody else, to value them.

This is a mental movement. This is not just a casual thing, just stumbling along and, you know, bumping into someone. It takes really a certain kind of stopping and taking in, and registering, and having a kind of mental process that values, appreciates, and values the person we are with. You wouldn't get that message—that's important—when people, our Dharma teachers, for example, teach about some of the higher reaches of Dharma practice, where they talk about not-self. You suppose every self disappears completely. Or sometimes you talk about, "No, sir, there's no separate self," and some idea of merging or disappearing of the self and the other person. Respect doesn't involve that.

Respect involves a very clear distinction between you as the subject and the person as the object for that respect. The advantage of that is that there's a synthesis or a chemistry that can happen—there can be love, there can be respect, there can be appreciation, there can be a dropping of a certain kind of self-centeredness, a dropping of self-preoccupation, and the strengthening of a kind of confidence. I would like to propose that a healthy respect involves a healthy confidence to offer respect. If you have no confidence, the respect might be more of belittling oneself, making oneself small in relation to the other person, almost like subservience sometimes. But I think that the more confident we are in ourselves, the more value there is in our respect. The more we belittle ourselves, the less power or less energy, umph, there is in the respect itself.

So does respect have a role in Buddhist practice? Apparently it does. For the Buddha, it may be so fundamental he doesn't have to say it's part of Buddhist practice—it's just assumed as a foundation. I find that having respect for my teachers has been very important for me. There was a time when I felt like I am not really going to study with that teacher anymore, but I still had a tremendous respect and deference to them. I gave my teachers this authority over me. I said, if they ever come to me and say, "Gil, you have to stop teaching," I would say, "Okay." There are a few people who, if they told me that, I wouldn't question it. I was okay because I had that respect and that reliance, that dependence on them. That felt important for me to have, so that I wasn't just barreling ahead with my own self-centered orientation around all this. There was someone I was accountable to, or someone I was willing to listen to and hear from.

More significant for me is the respect I have for the *Dhamma*, for the practice, and also for

kamma. I've learned through my life experiences that these are powerful forces in the human heart, human mind, and that are not related to—not how I say this—that are kind of non-personal, but how I personally live affects it. So it's connected to the personal, but is somehow bigger than, or it's a larger process too. For me, trusting the *Dhamma*, or trusting meditation, or respecting it, is to respect this process, or this force, or these natural processes that are valuable and important and profound. If I respect my meditation, respect my *Dhamma*, it's here also I put aside my preferences and my likes and dislikes, what I want, in order to allow, to make room for something deeper to happen, to allow myself to listen and hear and start to see something that's happening here that is different than me and mine.

I've seen this over and over again, this transformation, this movement, this change that happens in meditation, where sometimes it's only in meditation I realize I've been spending the last hours somehow caught up in my thoughts or caught up in some personal concern, and then to watch and see it melt away or drop away or be able in meditation to see through it, to the kind of on the other side of it. There's more going on here than what I was allowing myself to tap into when I was going around my life caring for things. To have this respect for that process, respect for meditation, respect for *Dhamma*. When we show up to meditate, there is a kind of both putting ourselves aside and kind of bringing ourselves forward at the same time. Putting yourself aside because it's not about me, myself, and mine only. It's not about my—my likes and dislikes, my preferences, what I want. That's putting that aside. But it's also by coming forward more fully because I'm here to listen. I'm here to really wake up and see, to allow life to show itself, allow myself to receive, allow myself to be impacted by the *Dhamma*, the *Dhamma*'s operating here. Let me show up and be available for it.

The wonderful combination in this dance between letting go of self and bringing self into the picture, I think, is expressed very well with the word respect. That's the way I am talking about it today. Perhaps there is a wonderful place for respect in our Dharma practice. Maybe our Dharma practice has a different kind of confidence in it, and a kind of freedom in it, when respect is brought along and benign. Maybe you have thought about this a lot, and maybe, if those of you haven't, maybe it's well worth some kind of deeper reflection about your relationship to respect. In what way, for you, does respect involve valuing what you respect? What kind of valuing? What does it mean to see something as worthy? And what if everything is important? What if every teacup is to be respected? What if everyone out there, everyone you run into, is someone who warrants respect? What would it be like to live that way, respecting everyone? And who would benefit the most from that—you or those people being respected? It would be nice if it was equal for both. So respect that doesn't diminish

us, certainly doesn't terminate us, but a respect that brings forth some of the best qualities of who we are, that is conducive to love, cohesion, non-dispute, concord, and unity. What a nice thing. So those are my thoughts for today.

So if you have anything you'd like to say about respect, thoughts about it, and when you are ready, you can bring it. And then if you can, please say your name.

And then my name is Barry. I was thinking about mutual respect. That is maybe the substrate of connection. Mutual respect, yes. That feeling respected by another makes it easier to respect them, and vice versa. I was thinking about your story about talking to your teachers in a respectful manner, respecting their opinions. And I was imagining that they were respecting you, too, as a student. Yes, that. Thank you.

Yes, so good morning. My name is Jill and I'm sitting here with two thoughts that are struggling to come out as one question, and I can't quite get there. The first thought is perhaps there's no actual teaching of respect in the suttas—could it possibly be a matter of translation? I know we struggle with so many words. Maybe there's some little nugget in there that didn't quite make it to English translation. That, combined with the fact that the word respect in our Western culture has so much baggage with it. When I was raised, the phrase always was used with the word "show"—you are to show respect. Showing respect is very different than what we've spoken of today. So somehow, I'm kind of rolling through those two things together, which may mean that we just don't have a common language about it yet.

Yes, I think it's very nice what you're saying, that the word respect is so complicated because of all the different meanings of it, and there's a whole slew of meanings. Some of them are not so healthy—showing respect if it's only a show. That's why I was calling it attitude at the beginning. There can be a show, but it's where there's an issue of translation. I don't know. It's very hard to know how properly to translate these words. But that's why there's a bunch of words which are closely related that sometimes appear in lists, and in English they get translated as respect, reverence, veneration, and homage. So that's the family that we're talking about—exactly what it means in the different ones. Also, there's a word that sometimes translates as deference, which sometimes could also mean something like being gentle. Things like that. What's interesting about it is how often they translate deference. If you read modern psychology or philosophy about respect, deference is often considered closely related, kind of goes along with it. When I first saw that, I thought, "Deference? That doesn't seem a good thing," but I think maybe it is a good thing in a certain way, or can be a good thing. All these things—part of the task is to discover how to do these things, not as a duty or obligation, but how to do them in a way that's healthy, that's supportive and benefi-

cial. That's the task of each person. That's what I think our mindfulness can help give us—the inner information we need in order to understand when we're doing things in a healthy way and when not, and not in a healthy way.

So there's one more thing where respect appears in the suttas. It's another thing. I said that respect is kind of maybe just assumed, maybe because it's a cultural value to me. The Buddha doesn't really teach it specially. But another thing that's also found as the same thing, very foundational, and he doesn't teach about it particularly, so it tends to be overlooked very often in the suttas. It gets mistranslated, and that's—I've taught about it now a number of times—*anukampā*, which I translate as care, and sometimes it gets translated as compassion. But compassion really requires someone to suffer. Technically, the dictionary definition—there has to be suffering for there to be compassion, or some reference to suffering, and one to alleviate that suffering. But care can be involved, and can involve caring for people who are in suffering. The caregiving emotion the Buddha uses repeatedly is this word *anukampā*. *Karunā*, the common Buddhist word for compassion, the Buddha never uses as a caregiving emotion in his teachings. It's always this *anukampā*. But then the question is, what motivates *anukampā*, what motivates care? There's very little said about this. But there are a couple of places where it is discussed—it's motivated by respect, by respect, reverence, veneration, and homage in one place, in another place just respect. These two fundamental things: respect and care, or cookok together, and that we care for people not because we have compassion for them or love for them. We care for them because we have respect. Maybe respect is kind of more universal, or more foundational, or broader, or more—you know, it is like love and compassion is wonderful and profound, but it does require a more active engagement. Maybe respect is more basic. We can respect people that we don't love. We can respect people we don't have compassion for. Anyway, so the care of each other comes from respect. That seems to be one of the teachings of the Buddha. I don't know if that was addressing your two thoughts, but that was mighty helpful. Thank you so much.

I think this is Shawnee. I think you are just starting to get to my question, but I'm also struggling a little bit with what I perceive as different definitions of respect. I can understand a kind of care as an attitude, and towards maybe everything, and not worrying so much about what the object is. But for respect, it seems, with some of the words you're saying, like deference or veneration, it seems like there is a positive connotation towards the object. So if there's a difficult person or violent person or things I really don't agree with, how would you approach respect in those situations? Some people say you separate out their behavior from the person, so you are someone who's difficult and even maybe even dangerous. It's possi-

ble to respect their humanity but not their behavior, and their behavior has to be addressed in a particular way. But you never lose sight of the respect for that person, so the person feels all along—you just call the police on them, but boy, that person did it in such a respectful way, told me they were calling the police. "You know, this is not really good, and I wish you well. But I would like to support you. But this can't continue. So I'll call the police. But I'll stay here while the police come and make sure they treat you well." It's something like that. I don't think—I'm just making up a scenario—but I'd like to believe that we can find a way to have respect for the humanity of people that's not dependent on their behavior. Thank you to everyone.

My name is Jan. What came to my mind was also, since Barry and I've been leading the *Saṅgha* group after the talks, how much I respect the *Saṅgha* and have learned from the *Saṅgha*. No matter how long people have been practicing, it seems like there's always something to value and learn about what someone is experiencing through the practice. Also, I was thinking about something related to this from a talk that Ṭhānissaro gave recently in the headline crisis about how consumerism really comes from a feeling of disconnection and not feeling like we belong to each other, and how important it is to value and respect our connection to others, in addition to the *Dhamma* and the teachings of the Buddha. This connection to others is related to the way in which self-respect and respecting others are connected to each other. Respecting the humanity of others is one way of talking about it. But another way of talking about it is, if you have self-respect, you wouldn't want to have any disrespect for anyone else, because the act of disrespect is a way of diminishing oneself. So of course you'll have respect because of self-respect, because that's what you're left with—respect for others. Not appreciating others is not a neutrality, but a kind of movement of disrespect.

So what else? Anything else?

Tania: Yes, I was just kind of imagining how the Buddha often defines things by their opposite. I was thinking, I didn't find the word disrespect very visually, imaginably helpful for me, but I was thinking about the word respect or re-look, and that to respect or re-look, right? The point of that is to not look, to not see, to not regard, to not take in, and how that's very painful. That's sort of like the climate crisis—not looking, not seeing, not respecting. So what comes to mind is that if you are calm and present for things, of course you'll take another look. If not looking is a kind of disregard, not looking is a kind of turning away. There may be respect involves—means we never turn away or never turn our back on someone or on any other planet.

Okay, I hope this was nice for you. I've never given a talk on this topic, but lately it's been on

my mind, my heart quite a bit, and I find it meaningful to spend time reflecting on this topic. So maybe you will, too. Thank you all very much.