Harmony Inside & Outside

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Harmony is an important principle in our practice, both harmony inside and harmony outside. The Buddha extolled monks who lived together in harmony. The description is those who look at one another with eyes of affection, who blend like milk and water. In other words, you put water into milk and you can’t see where the water is, as opposed to where the milk is. They blend immediately. It’s a situation like that, a society like that, where it’s easiest to practice the Dhamma. This is why split in the Sangha, the Bodhisattva, is one of the five most heinous things you can do. Once there’s a split, then it’s difficult for people to get along, it’s difficult for them to practice. Everyone spends their time talking about the issues and taking sides. As a result, there’s very little time for meditating. Even if it doesn’t get to the level of a full split, just the fact that there are factions or there are longstanding disagreements and grudges, it gets difficult to sit down and meditate in peace. Here in the West, we have the idea that a romantic relationship and a Kira, who stands up against the evils of society, will take on corruption. In a situation like that, the ability not to get along is prized. But when you’ve got a society that’s based on wanting to practice the Dhamma and having a set of common goals, it’s the other way around. Getting along is a good thing. You’re not being asked to do anything immoral. You’re not being asked to do anything against your principles. Most of the conflicts come down to simply matters of personality and preferences, which are really not worth fighting over. You want to protect your time to meditate, and you want to protect other people’s time to meditate as well. This is why harmony outside is important, because it also helps induce harmony within. The two principles help one another along. So it’s good to reflect on the way you’re getting along with everyone else to see how it helps or hinders your ability to get along with yourself. The Buddha talked about four ways of inducing harmony. In direct terms, he was talking about harmony outside, but you can also apply it inside. The four are generosity, kind words, genuine help, and consistency. Generosity doesn’t necessarily always mean being generous with things. It means being generous with your opinions, generous with your forgiveness. That’s extremely important. Generosity with things is limited. You have only so many things to share. Especially as we live here in the monastery, we don’t have that much around. So you have to be choosing who you give to, where you feel most inspired to give, where you feel it will be put to the best use. That’s the basic principle. But in terms of forgiveness, knowledge, these are things that you can give without stint. It lightens your own mind. It lightens the situation all around you. Forgiveness doesn’t necessarily mean you have to like the other person, simply that you’re not going to pose a danger to them. You’re not going to try to get revenge. You’re not going to try to get retaliation. Whatever wrong they’ve done, you’re not going to try to play karma cop and make sure that they get punished right away. In terms of your knowledge, you share your knowledge in a way that’s not overbearing, that generally is helpful. We’ll talk about that in a minute. In general principle, we’re realizing that here we live in the monastery. There’s work to be done. Certain jobs the monks can do, certain jobs the monks can’t do. So whatever way you can be of help, this is a part of the practice. Sometimes we feel that the genuine practice is when you’re sitting with your eyes closed, meditating. But that’s only one part. A book by a woman who’d been doing a comparative study of a Thai temple and an Anglo meditation center. One of the first things she picked up on was that the concept of practice in the Anglo meditation center was much more restrictive. In the Thai temple, everything counted as practice. Generosity, virtue, meditation, or in other terms, virtue, concentration, and discernment. All the things that develop good qualities in the mind, that was considered practice. Whereas in the Anglo center, it was just sitting and walking mindfully. That was it. The author recounts how one night she was talking to one of the members of the Anglo center, and it suddenly hit that person that traditional Buddhists have a much larger view of practice, that the fact that they come and they present food to the monks could actually be part of their practice. For her, it was a real revelation. For us here, it should be a fact of life. We do our best to help one another along. Whatever needs to be done, whatever way you can develop generosity of heart, that’s a part of the practice. If you can’t be generous in little things like this, how are you going to give up your defilements? Those are much more tightly held in the mind. So generosity is a basis for the practice. In Thailand, when they teach little kids about Buddhism, the first thing that little kids will learn would be how to raise their hands in respect and then how to put rice in a monk’s bowl. In other words, one, how to show respect. Two, how to be generous. In the beginning, it may seem mechanical, but after a while, the child learns to enjoy it. It feels good to show respect to people where there is respect. It feels good to be generous. It puts the mind in a much more open state. When you’re generous, you’re conveying to yourself the idea that you have more than enough. When you’re stingy, the message you keep sending yourself is, “There’s not enough. There’s not enough.” In which mind state is more likely to settle down? In a state of ease, a state of concentration, that’s healthy and open. In which mind state is more likely to settle down? More likely to create a sense of harmony? The second principle is kind words. When you speak to somebody, what energy is contained in your words? What impact is it going to have on that other person? You’ve got to think about this. You want to have respect for your concentration and respect for the other person’s concentration. So you try to say things. Even if they are difficult things, things that the other person may not want to hear, you learn to say them in a way that’s not going to be harmful, that’s not going to hurt them. You look for the right time. You choose the right words to say, keeping the other person’s feelings in mind. Because, again, the more you disturb other people, the more your own concentration is going to be disturbed. So even when you have to disagree about things or you have to criticize someone about his or her behavior, the fact that you do it in a respectful way, in a kind way, is going to make all the difference in the world as to whether they’re going to be receptive to what you have to say or not. The third principle is genuine help. In other words, when you help someone else, you don’t do it simply for the show or simply to show off or to prove your superiority. You look at what that person needs. If you can provide that need, then you provide it. That kind of help goes straight to the heart. The satisfaction that comes out of it has nothing to do with self-image. It’s more that you really were able to provide help that that person needed. The other person will appreciate it more, because it shows on the other person that you really are paying attention to the other person’s needs and that the help you’re giving is not simply to make yourself feel good. It’s not hypocritical. It’s genuine desire to help. That creates the kind of harmony that can withstand the fact that we are going to have disagreements in the course of a day. If you’ve been of genuine help to the other person, it’s a lot easier to get over disagreements, to iron them out, to actually deal not only in forgiveness but also in reconciliation when things have gotten difficult. In other words, you’ve restored the friendship rather than simply telling yourself, “As in the case of forgiveness, I’m just not going to pose a danger to that person.” Reconciliation means you restore trust, and trust gets restored when you are genuinely helpful. The third principle is consistency. If you’ve helped somebody in the past, you continue helping them. That’s one kind of consistency. The other kind of consistency is that the way you speak about a person to his face is the same way you speak behind his back. So when you have these four principles in a society, the society lives in harmony, lives in peace. The same principles also apply inside. Generosity inside. You’re willing to give up your defilements. You’re willing to give up any views that stand in the way of doing something skillful. And you try to create that spacious sense in your heart. People who are really, really anxious, really greedy for success in the meditation, that often gets in the way. This is not to say that you should be complacent or lazy. You do the practice. But instead of being greedy for results, you say, “I’ve got to focus on the causes.” It means giving up certain comforts. You give more of yourself to the practice. A lot of people are very stingy when they meditate. They want to put in a little time and get a lot of results. But if you’re generous in your meditation, you’re willing to give whatever has to be given. Involve the pain of sitting for long periods of time while you’re willing to give it. If you find yourself suffering because of some deeply held notions, while you’re willing to give them up, at least give it a try to give them up. Network generosity. An inner generosity, an inner largeness of spirit, is what helps the meditation get genuine results. Kind words. Kind words for yourself. There’s a famous story where Jon Kau, one of Jon Munn’s early students, who tended to have a very strong and quick temper, got upset at his mind one night because it wasn’t settling down. He started cursing his mind. Jon Munn sensed this and the next morning said, “Look, don’t do that to your mind. Don’t curse your mind.” It creates a really bad feeling inside. When the mind is obstreperous, when it’s not settling down, do your best to urge it into concentration in a way where it’s willing to settle down. Don’t set up this inner voice of sarcasm or an inner voice of hatred. Put yourself down, because that’s destructive in the practice. Learn to speak in ways that are encouraging. Look for whatever scrap or progress you have and focus on that. Say, “Look, I can do this.” And if there are ways that you have been unskillful, learn to speak to yourself. Learn to train yourself in a way that actually has an effect, that you are willing to listen. So it doesn’t add to the problem. It doesn’t add to the depression, or it doesn’t add to a low sense of self-esteem, because those things really do get in the way of the practice. Learn to speak an encouraging word for yourself. When things get tough, reflect on the recollection of the Sangha. We’ve got the stories of the monks and the nuns who went through all kinds of hardships. One monk talks about meditating for I don’t know how many years, decades, and not having a moment of stillness. And he kept at it and finally was able to get his mind to settle down. So just because you’re going through a bad period right now doesn’t mean that you’re hopeless. People have been in situations more hopeless than yours, and yet they’ve been able to pull out of it. They can do it. You can do it, too. So learn how to think in these ways. In this way, you’re kind words to yourself, even when you have to tell yourself that you are hopeless. Learn how to do it in a way that’s effective. It’s not just putting yourself down. It’s instructive, then, in the Buddha’s teachings, to Rahula, when he’s talking to Rahula about looking at his mistakes. He says, “Be it, learn how to restrain yourself.” When you’re looking at mental states that are unskillful, he says, “Have a sense of shame about that state.” Not about yourself. Don’t think of yourself as a shame. You’re a shameful person for thinking those thoughts. Everybody thinks unskillful thoughts, except for the Arahants. Learn to see the thought as something you would be ashamed of following through with. Don’t think of yourself as a shameful person. Learn how to make that distinction. It’s important. Criticize the act, not the person. When you make distinctions like this, it’s a lot easier to get through the dry periods of your meditation that are inevitable. Give yourself the encouragement that you need. Genuine help. This is what seeing things in terms of the Four Noble Truths are all about. Look at what you’re doing that’s causing stress. Focus on that. Instead of getting involved in all sorts of issues about what sort of person you are, again, focus on where the genuine problem is. In solving the genuine problem, there’s something you’re doing right now that’s causing stress. Can you see it? Can you stop it? If you focus on this issue, then all the other issues get sorted out. It’s one of the basic principles of any lessons in problem-solving. Try to see where the genuine causes of the problem are, and focus on those. Don’t get distracted by extraneous things. Get the mind to settle down so you can see where craving is, because that’s the problem. As long as there’s going to be craving, focus the craving on the path. What you can do to alleviate the problem is to observe your precepts, what you can do to get the mind concentrated, what you can do to start analyzing what’s going on in the mind. Focus your desire, focus your craving there. That way you’ll be able to sort out what kind of craving is skillful and what kind of craving is not. If it pulls you off the path, okay, that’s something unskillful. You’ve got to watch out for that. That means you’ve learned to sort out where the problem is and where the problem isn’t. The Buddha didn’t say that all desire is a craving. It’s not the cause of suffering. It’s the specific types of desire. The desire to get the mind concentrated, the desire to give rise to insight, the desire for liberation—those are all part of the path. When you’ve got the path to measure things against inside the mind, then you can see where the genuine problem is. That way you can focus your efforts on solving the genuine problem at the genuine cause. Then, consistency. You’ve made up your mind. You want to practice. Well, see it all the way through. Don’t just take a little stab at it and say, “Well, gee, this is hard. I don’t know about this,” or “It looks like I can’t do it.” That kind of defeatist thinking never got anybody anywhere. Sit down and ask yourself what’s really important in life. You’ll realize there are a lot of things that are not important, but a lot of them are. Don’t indulge in those. Be consistent in pursuing what you really see as the goal that you want to pursue. That lesson I talk about with a woman playing chess. Decide that there’s one thing in life you want more than anything else, and then pursue that and be willing to sacrifice everything else for that one thing. You get some people who follow that principle and they wreak a lot of havoc in life. But this is a principle that the desire for true happiness causes no one any harm. That’s a goal worth pursuing. The Buddha said this is the noble search. You search for happiness in things that age, grow ill, and die. That’s not a noble search, because it doesn’t take you anywhere where you haven’t already been. You’re in the midst of aging illness and death yourself. But if you search for something that doesn’t age, doesn’t grow ill, doesn’t die, that’s a noble search, because it takes you to a place where you’re not causing anyone any harm. The mind is no longer its enemy, its own enemy. Everything’s working together inside. That’s what’s meant by inner harmony. Because you find, ultimately, it’s the mind that’s the big troublemaker in life. It goes around laying claim to this, laying claim to that, getting upset when the thing it lays claim to doesn’t give it the satisfaction it wants. Then it goes all out of control, blaming this person, blaming that person. The lack of harmony inside leads to the lack of harmony outside. You don’t need to read too much world history to realize what can happen when people’s own inner problems get played out on the world stage. But if you can learn to follow these practices that lead to harmony both inside and harmony outside, the happiness that develops is something that doesn’t give you any cause for regret in any way. It’s not disappointing in any way. So learn to value harmony inside and harmony outside as an important part of the practice. you

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