Harmony

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There’s an old image that’s a favorite of many Dhamma teachers in Thailand. They say if you take a thread, you can’t do much with it. But if you get lots of threads and weave them together, you’ve got a piece of cloth. And you can do a lot of things with a piece of cloth. The image is one of harmony and cooperation. People work together in harmony. They can accomplish a lot of things that they couldn’t do on their own. This is one of the reasons why here at the monastery, the people who are meditating are also the people who work. We all have chores around us. And some of them you can do on your own, and some of them require cooperation, like the monks painting the Multikutti right now, changing the flooring, reconfiguring the rooms. It takes a lot of cooperation. Any one monk trying it all on his own would get overwhelmed. But the monks all worked on it and each followed his own opinion as to what should be done. They’d actually make the whole thing more difficult for each other. That’s why the Buddha said, “Happy is harmony in the community.” When you work together, things get done, things get accomplished. There’s a sense of ease and well-being. If you’re working on a project and arguing about it all the time, there’s no way that you can have any peace of mind in the project. This is a principle we have to keep in mind at all times. Whatever our work, whatever our chore, we’ve got to learn how to do it together. Because it’s the harmony that creates the right atmosphere for the practice. I spent the last couple of weeks surrounded by laypeople. One of the things you notice about modern American society, if you haven’t been out in it recently, is how little people value harmony. It’s all, “My opinion, you’ve got to submit to what I think. If you don’t, I’m going to ridicule you and make life miserable for you.” People seem to think that all they have to do is just force their will on other people. And everything will go well. They don’t stop to think that other people have their ideas, too. You just can’t erase other people and pretend they don’t matter. For a society to work, it requires people to learn how to cooperate, how to work together, to realize that they have to depend on one another. So it’s important they learn how to do it with a sense of peace, with a sense of harmony. It’s being willing to give up their opinions when the opinions get in the way of harmony. It’s a harmony that’s helpful to their state of mind. Now, there are ways of being harmonious and cooperating and conforming that are actually harmful. But here in the monastery, everything has been designed in such a way. After all, we’re following the precepts set down by the Buddha. We’re following the patterns he established. So the basic framework of the harmony is healthy. It’s up to each of us to decide where our own opinions are important and where they’re not in the framework of this harmony. That requires a lot of sensitivity. It also requires that we learn how to look at our opinions with a skeptical eye. I saw a few videos when I was on the internet of young monks complaining about the Thai monks and how he was so developed in really good, critical discussions with the teachers. They’d just kind of brush you off. You can’t really assert your opinions. Well, the question is, why do you want to assert your opinions? We’re here to learn. We’re here to overcome our delusion. A lot of our opinions come from delusion. Sometimes it’s the ones that we hold to most tightly that we’re most deluded about. Of course, delusion is one of the hardest things to see. When you’re angry, you generally know you’re angry. When you feel greed or lust, you know you feel the greed. You know you feel the lust. But delusion, by definition, is hard to see. So one of the ways of testing it is when you see that your opinion is going against the principle of harmony in the community, you want to question it. Learn how to hold your opinions loosely with a sense of humor, realizing that sometimes by holding strongly to the things you hold dearest, you actually create more problems for yourself and end up having to sacrifice things that are even more dear, more valuable. If you don’t have a sense of irony, it’s hard to practice. If you don’t have a sense of learning how to withhold judgment, it’s hard to practice as well. When I was staying with the Jon Froome, there were a lot of things that he didn’t explain—things he would say, things he would do. Occasionally I’d ask him about it, and occasionally he’d actually give me an answer. He did have his reasons, but he wasn’t about to explain everything. If you asked too many questions, he’d drive you back to meditate. “Figure it out on your own,” he’d say. Sometimes it would take a lot of time. Sometimes things would seem a little illogical or inconsistent, and it was only over time that I saw the underlying consistency. That was an important lesson right there, that not everything is obvious. You can’t judge everything by your first impression. Some things, if you want to learn them, you have to sit with them. You have to live with them to understand where they’re helpful, where they make sense. What this means is that you have to learn how to hold your opinions lightly. This doesn’t mean that you don’t think at all. You think. It actually makes you think more, contemplate more, turn things over in your mind. What we’re doing as we’re meditating is putting the mind in a position where it can look at things with some more detachment. The areas where we’re convinced that we’re absolutely right, we can pull back from them a little bit and view them from a calm, collected, equanimous position. Then you might get a new perspective on them. And even when you realize that you are right, but then there’s a question, “Well, you can hold on to things that are right, but you can’t hold on to them wrongly.” In other words, if you hold on to them in a way that leads to disharmony, then you’re wrong. This whole question of right and wrong is a lot more subtle than we tend to think. We have to have a sense of time and place for our opinions. And even when we’re right, we have to make sure that if we want other people to see the rightness of our opinions, we’ve got to take their feelings into consideration. We have to understand where they’re coming from and try to figure out the most skillful way to honor everybody in the community. When I was first staying with Ajaan Fuang, there was an old monk who had moved into the monastery. He’d ordained late in life. And as Ajaan Fuang once said, “He’s just waiting to die, biding his time.” He’d listen to the radio in the afternoons. When he talked to the younger monks, he liked to claim that he was beyond sensual passion, sensual desire. That is, probably because he didn’t want to practice sensual desire. His practice was very advanced. And yet he liked to talk about sex a lot, joke about it with the younger monks. And it got to me, this old hypocrite. So one day I called him on it and said, “Look, you’re the only one among us who’s talking about sex. It’s obvious that you haven’t gotten anywhere in your practice. At least you haven’t gotten rid of sensual desire.” He blew up. Word got to Ajaan Fuang, and that night he told me, “There’s a more skillful way of handling this.” That’s whether the old monk was a hypocrite or not. That was really none of my business. It was just this unseemly behavior on his part. What was the best way to stop it? He suggested that I say, “Well, maybe you are beyond sensual desire, but we young monks still have this as a problem. So it would be appreciated if you didn’t stir up these problems for us.” And Ajaan Fuang was right. That would have been a much more skillful way of handling it. So when you’re dealing with other people, you’ve got to think, turn things over. You can’t just blurt out whatever thoughts are in your mind or insist on your own rightness. That destroys the harmony of the community, and harmony is an important part of creating a conducive atmosphere for the practice. So before you open your mouth, before you say things, think about what the results are going to be and what’s the best way of broaching a topic. If there are areas where people don’t disagree, try to find the easiest way, the most skillful way, to resolve the disagreements, honoring both sides. That way you not only create harmony in the community, but you also exercise your own discernment, your own ingenuity. These are properties that are really necessary in the meditation. You may have noticed that there is no one single forest, Thai forest method of meditation. There are lots of different methods, and it’s up to you to choose which one is your own base and when it’s appropriate to use other methods as well. In other words, you’ve got to learn how to read your own mind and use your own ingenuity and have a strategy for dealing with the times when the mind is obstreperous. It’s just like other people. You try to force the mind into a particular mold and it’s going to rebalance, like mercury. The more you push it in one direction, the more it’s more likely to push back in another direction. So you’ve got to learn how to think strategically. What can you do to get the mind to behave? So if you have practice dealing with other people, dealing with disagreements in the community, you’ll get useful practice in meditation. You’re developing the habits you need to be a skillful and good all-around meditator. If you simply hold to one particular idea that this has to be right and anybody else who disagrees is wrong and I’m not going to deal with anybody who disagrees with me, you’re hopeless as a meditator. You’ve got to learn how to think strategically. Learn how to step back and look at things from a more balanced position. This is one of the reasons why harmony is so important in the group. Keeping the principle of harmony in mind teaches us a lot of lessons that we need as meditators. We find this in all areas of Buddhist practice. You look at the Vinaya, you look at the rules, and sometimes they seem strange. There’s even an attitude that, “Well, they’re not meant to make sense. They are the way they are and we have to follow them because Thai people appreciate monks who follow the rules.” Well, the immediate response to that is, “Well, if I’m in Thailand, yes, but if I go back home, I’m going to do things my way.” But the rules have their reasons, and some of the reasons are not immediately obvious. So you give them the benefit of the doubt and live with them. You have to be observant. Be sensitive on many levels. Then you’ll come to appreciate them. In the course of appreciating them and in the course of being sensitive to being on many levels, again, these are precisely the qualities you need to be skillful at the meditation, to be a sensitive meditator. So whenever an issue comes up, especially when you’re working together, try to look at it from many sides. So that you benefit on the outside level, living in a harmonious community, and you benefit on the inside level, learning to expand your range of skills and the layers of sensitivity that you need in order to deal with the many layers of issues that are there in the mind.

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