A Meritorious Heart

October 31, 2009

Every year at the end of April, at Wat Asokanam in John Lee’s monastery, the monastery where I was ordained, they have a commemoration of his passing away. And they invite monks—sometimes forest monks, sometimes city monks—to give a closing talk. In the very last year I was there, just before I returned to the States, they had invited a monk from one of the major city temples in Bangkok. He sent word about five minutes before he was due to get up on the Dhamma seat, saying that he was stuck in traffic. It looked like it was going to be a long time before he could get to the monastery. So they scrounged around and found another monk to get up and give the sermon. The theme of the sermon was that the Buddha’s teachings are all about suffering. He went into a fair amount of detail on that point. And just as he was finishing, the city monk showed up. So they invited him up on the Dhamma seat. And he gave a Dhamma talk, saying, “The Buddha’s teachings are all about happiness.” And, of course, they were both right. You’re not going to find happiness unless you understand suffering. And you’re not going to understand suffering unless you understand happiness. The two are very intimately connected. The reason I bring this up is that over the past century, as Western scholars have gone to Thailand and other Asian Buddhist countries, to study Buddhism there, especially Buddhism, as you might say, on the ground, they would usually start out by reading up on the teachings. And they would see in the canon a lot of passages on suffering. And they’d get over there and they’d find that people were making merit and they were very happy about it. And their conclusion was that these people didn’t understand their own teaching, they didn’t understand their own religion. The problem, of course, is that the scholars didn’t understand. When the Buddha’s talking about suffering, he’s not talking about to be pessimistic or depressed or depressing. He’s simply pointing out, “Here’s a problem and here’s the solution. It is possible to put an end to suffering.” There’s nothing pessimistic about that teaching. In fact, it’s the most positive teaching you can think of. The difficult part, of course, is that you have to do the work yourself. You can’t expect someone to come down and undo your suffering for you, because your own suffering is caused by a lack of skill. Nobody else can make you skillful. They can point out how to become skillful. But the actual energy and attention, mindfulness and discernment that are needed to develop a skill, those are things you have to bring to the practice. So there is work involved. But it’s good work. And this is why people are happy to do it. In Thailand, they have the phrase jai bhun, which literally means someone with a meritorious heart, someone who enjoys doing the practice, enjoys doing good, because that’s what a lot of the connection is. The practice is not just meditation. It’s how you approach your life as a whole, realizing that, yes, there is suffering in the process, but there is a way out. And yes, that way out involves effort, but the effort involves a lot of good things. And so you’re happy to do the practice. You’re happy to make that effort. There are three basic elements in developing a meritorious heart. One is generosity, a willingness to give. This may sound a bit silly, but generosity means not only material things, but giving of your time, giving of your energy, giving of your knowledge, giving of your forgiveness. An important part of making that effort and being generous is to learn how to be happy about it, to want to do it. It’s not simply a chore that you get out of the way. But you see there is a positive effect that comes from it, and not just a positive effect many years down the line. The state of mind you create by being generous is an expansive state, one that’s willing to give of what energy you have. You’re not resentful of whatever effort is involved. That’s not right effort. It’s to be resentful of it as you do it. You learn how to enjoy it. And keep reminding yourself of what a good thing it is to be generous, to have more than enough, and to act on that sense of more than enough, realizing that what you give is given in total freedom. This is an important principle in the teachings, that what we give is given in freedom. It’s an expression of freedom. Probably as a child, your first sense of your own freedom was not just in your ability to disobey your parents. It was simply giving in to a particular unskillful emotion, unskillful attitude. It was a moment when you realized that you were free to give something. You were under no compulsion, but you wanted to give. So as you give, keep reminding yourself that this is an expression of freedom. You’re not tied down to material things. You’re not tied down to the things you have in other areas. Your knowledge doesn’t improve by holding it back. Your wealth doesn’t improve by holding it back. Your forgiveness doesn’t improve by holding it back. It improves by giving it, and the mind improves by giving, too. Similarly with the precepts, you realize that you’re actually free to give. You have the power to help, you have the power to harm. And so you see in any way where your actions could be harmful, you learn to hold back. You learn how to say no, even though you may feel that this is what I want to say, this is what I want to do, and I want to express myself. If you see that it’s harmful, you say, “No, I want to be freed from that compulsion. I want to show that I have some agenda. I want to show that I have a sense of maturity.” Again, this is a sense of freedom you have. And you learn to appreciate it. This is what it means to have a meritorious heart. These two practices of generosity and virtue are nurtured by the third form of merit, or the third expression of a meritorious heart, and that’s development of an attitude of universal goodwill, the desire for everybody to be happy, realizing that if you were the only person in the world who were happy and nobody else was happy, you’d be in a miserable state. You couldn’t really be happy without knowing that you’d spread some happiness around. And you can trust your desire to be generous and trust your desire to be virtuous only if you’re able to develop an attitude of goodwill for everybody, wishing that all people be happy. This course doesn’t mean that you’re going around hoping that everybody is going to be happy no matter what they’re doing, skillful or unskillful, because you know that unskillful activity does not lead to any true happiness. What it means is that you hope that all people will avoid unskillful behavior and learn how to develop skill. You’d be happy to see everybody being generous. You’d be happy to see everybody being virtuous. And you hope that people will understand these principles and act on them. Even when you see people who are suffering from unfortunate circumstances, it’s not simply a fact that you have to leave them there. You feel compassion for them and then you try to act on that compassion in whatever way you feel inspired to act. If you see someone who’s already happy, you’re not resentful of their happiness, you’re not jealous. You hope that they continue learning how to maintain their happiness. As for the people who are suffering, you hope that they learn how to deal with the situation and not suffer. And you develop equanimity in areas where things can’t be changed, accepting the fact that there’s a lot of karma going around in the world, a lot of unskillful karma, and realizing that there’s going to have to be some negative consequences of that. When things have already happened that were unfortunate, you have to have equanimity about them. The next question is, what do you do about them so that things don’t keep making a downhill slide? But as you develop this attitude and try to apply it to everyone, it’s useful exercise to go developing this attitude. Then ask yourself, “Is there anyone that I really don’t feel goodwill for? Anyone that I’d really like to see suffer?” Then probably a few faces will come up in your mind. Then you can ask yourself, “What would I really gain from that person suffering? What would the world gain from that person suffering?” And there’s really nothing. Usually the more people suffer, the common reaction is to lash out more at the world. That doesn’t help anything. It’s a rare person who suffers and then develops the conviction that’s needed to get on the path. So you see, if there is suffering out there, you hope that people will develop the conviction that they can get beyond their suffering. But you don’t want to wish suffering on people. Then as you work through any limitations on your goodwill, you find that the mind develops an even greater sense of expansion, even with generosity. Because your generosity has to have its limits. There’s only so much you can give in terms of your wealth, your material things, your energy, your time. Because your time is limited, your energy is limited. But goodwill doesn’t have to be limited at all. And as you develop that larger sense of goodwill, you develop an unlimited mind. That unlimited mind is like a large river. If you threw a huge lump of salt into the large river, you could still drink the water, because the river is so much larger. It’s very different from if you took that same lump of salt and put it into a little cup of water. The water would be way too salty to drink. So you want to develop this expansive and large state of mind, because that’s what it means to have a meritorious heart. Wishing goodwill for all, wishing that all people would be happy, and then being happy to make whatever effort you can to be generous, to be virtuous, to enjoy this aspect of the path, even though there are difficulties. And tomorrow we’re going to see quite a lot of them. Large numbers of people are coming, and it’s important to have some equanimity about the fact that all kinds of things can happen. But you want to maintain that sense of expansive goodwill for everybody who comes. As you give goodwill to all beings, as you are virtuous around all beings, you give universal protection to the world, the Buddha says. And you have a share in that protection, regardless of circumstances outside, as long as you can maintain this expansive heart, this meritorious heart. Whatever unfortunate things happen, they’re like little lumps of salt in that huge river of water. So this is the attitude you want to bring, not only tomorrow, but to all of your activities, because this is the attitude that provides the proper context for the practice of meditation. As you go beyond the practice of goodwill into focusing on the breath, developing mindfulness, developing concentration, it’s all best done in this attitude of a meritorious heart, a heart that wishes happiness for all. This is true happiness for all. This is why we meditate. This is why we practice to begin with. We want a happiness that doesn’t harm anybody. We want a happiness that has no limitations. And to taste that unlimited state, that unlimited heart, you start out by training it to be a meritorious heart. A heart that has no limits on its goodwill. So tomorrow it might be tested, but it’s only when things are tested that you know that they’re genuine. So be happy for whatever opportunities you have to do good.

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