Living Together

April 14, 2012

We have a lot of people here tonight, and there are going to be a lot more tomorrow. So it’s important to think about what enables people to live together peacefully, amicably. The Buddha set out six principles. The first three have to do with goodwill. You express goodwill with your actions, you express goodwill with your words, and you express goodwill with your thoughts. Like right now, we can sit here and think thoughts of goodwill for everyone in the room, everyone outside, and then spreading them out as far as we can think. We all will be happy. Goodwill is not for wimps. Sometimes we think of kindness as something for people who are a little bit soft in the head, but that’s not the case. The Buddha’s teachings on goodwill are based on some pretty hard-headed calculations, hard-headed considerations. “Calculations” may be the wrong word. Realizing that our actions are the most important things we have, and we want to make sure that our actions are well-motivated. There was a time when he was speaking to the Kalamas, a group of people who were generally skeptical. They had heard many different teachings from many different sources, and they really didn’t know who to listen to, who to believe. And so the Buddha set out a few principles. Some of them have to do with watching your own actions, things you can learn from just watching the way you behave, the results of your actions, and the things you might be expected to learn from the wise. In terms of looking at your own actions, you can see that certain kinds of motivations, starting with greed, aversion, and delusion, lead to actions that are going to cause trouble. So those are two things you observe. One is that your actions do have results. And two, that the actions are shaped by your motivations. That, he expects you to notice by watching yourself. As for things you learn from the wise, he recommends that you develop thoughts of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. You should do this in all directions for all people, yourself included, to make sure that your motivations are as skillful as possible, because it is so easy to slip in this area. Of course, underlying all of this is the principle of heedfulness, realizing that our actions make a big difference and so there’s danger, and allowing unskillful motivations to take over and become too easy for them to take over. We have to make a conscious effort to develop these attitudes. And we find that when we do, the attitudes start spreading into our words and spreading into our actions. And when that happens, it’s a lot easier to live with one another. I noticed many times when I was in Thailand, staying in a monastery was like living in a family. We weren’t trading. We weren’t trying to take profit off of one another. We were trying to work together. And, of course, there are differences of opinion as to what the best thing might be to do. But underlying it all was a sense of goodwill and the fact that you were here to train your mind. So when you met up with difficulties and disagreements, the first order of business was to look at your own mind to see where it might require some training. And that’s how that atmosphere of an extended family was able to survive. The fourth principle, after the three principles around goodwill, is generosity. As we all know, generosity is something that breaks down barriers. When you put a price on something, that creates a barrier that only that certain amount of money will be able to cross. But when you give something, that barrier is torn down. Of course, generosity here doesn’t refer only to things. There’s generosity with your time, with your energy, generosity with your forgiveness, with your knowledge. When everyone is looking for an opportunity to be generous, things go a lot more smoothly. This is one of those actions where both sides benefit. You develop good qualities of mind. Your motivation to be helpful gets strengthened. And even though there are times when you can’t be generous, there’s a certain amount of calculation that goes into thinking about the results of your action. It’s not the calculation of someone who’s hoarding things to himself. It’s a calculation of thinking about what state of mind is going to result when you’re generous. And you find that the mind is a lot more spacious because the act of generosity affirms the fact that you have wealth. You have more than enough. It helps to adjust your idea of “enough” so that it isn’t a barrier. The fifth and sixth principles deal primarily with communities that are living together over time. You have precepts in common, and you have views in common. You’re in line with the five precepts, and your views are in line with right view. When everyone can agree on this, that these are standards of behavior and these are standards of thought, it’s very easy for people to live together. There are communities that don’t like to talk about controversial issues, don’t like to talk about disagreements. And that just drives the problem underground. If there are areas where our views and our precepts are not in line with one another, we want to be open about it to see where things can be corrected so that everyone is on the same page in a very open way. So even though those last two principles may not apply tomorrow, we’ll be dealing with all kinds of people. A couple years back we actually had people digging up some of our flower plants to take home. So in cases like that, practice equanimity. Realizing that the most important thing, of course, is to look after your mind. That’s what makes a community like this so special. Most other organizations out there have to always think about money as the bottom line. How is the organization going to survive? We don’t have to worry about that here. We depend totally on people’s generosity, and one of the lessons of living off other people’s generosity is that whatever you get is always enough. The bottom line here is to look after your mind, making sure your mind is in good shape, your mind is growing and developing. When you keep that set of values in mind, you can live alone and you’re happy. You can live with a lot of other people and you’re happy. Because it’s all an opportunity to practice.

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