Cooperation

November 11, 2012

Another year, another ghatin. That’s twenty-two altogether here at the monastery. You may wonder why we have ghatins. The ghatin is actually related to the cloth. You may have noticed that little slip of white cloth that was placed under the set of robes. That was the cloth for the ghatin. That’s what it was all about, making that into a robe. To make that into a robe, of course, requires a lot of cooperation. The robe has to be done before dawn, and one person working alone is not going to get it done, especially back in the time of the Buddha when they didn’t have sewing machines. It comes at the end of the rains. It’s a good time for the older monks to pass on their sewing skills to the younger monks. This is something really necessary. Monks don’t have that many requisites, but robes are an important one because they give protection against the sun, against the rain, and clemencies of the weather, bugs and creeping things. They cover the body. They can provide shelter. It’s a really necessary part of a monk’s equipment. And each monk has to be responsible for looking after his equipment. You can’t pass it off to somebody else. So when the cloth tears, when the cloth wears out, you need to find a way to fix it. You need to learn how to fix it. So it’s a good way to pass on these skills. And as I said, it teaches cooperation. The rewards of the ghatin, after a while, have been spread. The word “spreading” here refers to the frame that was used when you were making a robe. And the term here is used symbolically. They didn’t actually take a frame out and spread it out. But the spreading of the ghatin means that for the next four months after the end of the robe, starting now and then, the extra four months of the cold season, there are certain privileges that you get as long as you’re still determined either to make a robe or to return to the monastery. It’s interesting that the Buddha would want the monks to be affiliated with monasteries. After all, the monks were supposed to be wanderers. But it’s good to have home base. It creates a connection between the monks and the laypeople. And if the monastery has a good reputation for practice, then when you are a monk coming from that monastery, that reputation goes with you. So it’s a way of establishing standards. It’s a way of establishing a sense of community. This is a really important part of the practice. Over the years, it’s gone beyond just the making of the robe or the presenting of the robe. There are all the members of the entourage, you might call them, all the other things that come along with a robe. And when a lot of people come together for the ghatin, there’s a lot of needs. There’s a place to sit, a place to go to the bathroom, and especially there’s a need for a lot of food. And again, it requires a lot of cooperation to provide that. So that’s basically what the ghatin is all about. It teaches the monks cooperation. It teaches the laypeople cooperation. What can be accomplished when we all work together? The cloth itself is a symbol of cooperation. Those threads that go into making the cloth. If you were just to take the thread and string it out, you wouldn’t be able to do much with it. But when you take the threads and you weave them together, they can accomplish all kinds of things. They can be used for all kinds of things. And so one of the important aspects of having a community is that you develop a sense of harmony and cooperation. When the community lives together in harmony, it’s an asset to the practice. It helps strengthen your practice. You’ve got good examples. One of my chanting of jhanas at my ordination was telling me one time when he was a brand new monk. He was walking past the sala there at Varasakaram, and he heard the scratching of a broom underneath the sala. The sala there was about, oh, shoulder height above the ground. And we looked under it, and there was a jhanali under the sala. And that was all he needed. He grabbed a broom and he went under the sala as well. This, mind you, is in a country where some men are afraid to go under floors like that because they’re afraid of the voodoo that people may be leaving behind on the floor. But he figured, “Well, jhanali’s not afraid of it. Why should I be afraid of it?” So he went under the sala to help sweep things up. And you learn from the good example of other members in the community. And when you work together, you can accomplish big things that none of us could accomplish individually. So it’s good that we take the lesson of the kettin and apply it to our lives. The virtue of cooperation. You read, for instance, the story of Shackleton and his expedition down to the Antarctic. In one sense, it was a failure. The plan was to land on one side of the continent and take a trek all the way across the continent to the other side. The ship never actually made it to the continent. It got stuck in the ice and was crushed. The men had to leave the ship. They got in dinghies and rode across some very cold, very treacherous stretches of water and found an island. And then a smaller crew had to go all the way over to South Georgia to get help. And the amazing thing was that nobody on the expedition died. And one of the things that kept everybody going was a sense of discipline and a sense of what you might call heedfulness, the realization that they knew what they should do in a specific situation and they all did it out of a sense of duty, realizing that if one member of the group didn’t pull his weight, he could pull the whole group down. It would be such a shame to know what you should be doing and not do it and then die as a result. So even though things looked pretty hopeless, they kept at their duty, worked together, and everybody came out all right. Now we look back in terms of hindsight, we can see all the mistakes that they made. I remember talking to someone who said that Shackleton was a horrible leader. He made lots of mistakes. They got to Georgia and they reached this one spot where there were five mountains, four passes going through the mountains, and they didn’t know which pass was the correct one. So they started from the left-hand side and went up to that pass. That wasn’t the one. Then the next one, the next one. It turned out the furthest right pass was the correct one. And this person said, “You know, they should know and they should have listened to Shackleton when he said to go to the left one.” But how would they know? And everybody said, “Since they’re arguing, everybody’s going to die.” So they were very methodical and they stuck with their discipline and got through. They all worked together. That’s how they got through. So it’s a good point to keep in mind. When you know your duty, you stick with it. And you provide a good example for others. And not only a good example, you help strengthen them. You provide safer and a better environment for them. This is an important part of harmony. It’s not just smiling at one another. It’s everybody pulling his weight and pulling her weight, seeing what needs to be done and doing it. The Pali word for this is sammiki. We translate it as harmony, cooperation. Basically, what it means is that the group survives because the group sticks together. In some cases, your duty is clear. You follow that. When it’s not clear, you just look around and see what needs to be done. Because you notice nobody here was hired to do the kathandu. Everybody came of their own free will. It was a voluntary operation. It was because everyone was inspired by the idea of what could be done. There were a lot of things that people weren’t told to do, but they noticed it needed to be done. So it’s always good to keep this in mind. This is the community that we’re trying to build here, the community that really is helpful for the practice, where everyone works together. And when you do something, you think about not only what this is going to accomplish for you, but how it’s going to have an impact on other people, on the harmony and cooperation of the group. That way, all the little threads of our lives can be woven together to form cloth. And cloth can lift great weights, it can cover things, it can do all kinds of good things. Because the threads aren’t just doing things on their own, they’re doing things together. As the Buddha said, it’s the cooperation of the group that provides for happiness. And it’s also the cooperation of the group that provides for our strength as meditators, as we practice. So always keep that in mind.

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