Entering the Rains

July 20, 2016

Tonight’s the night we enter the rains. Of course, there’s not much rain in Southern California this time of year, although we tend to have at least one little sprinkle toward the beginning of the rains retreat. We’ll be entering a period where there’s a lot of heat. And as I said this morning, this is a good way to practice, with that voice that always finds excuses. Not to practice. It’s too hot. But you have to ask yourself, is it too hot to focus on your breath? No. Is it too hot to get rid of a little greed, aversion, and delusion? No. This is work to begin on, whether it’s hot or cold, rainy or snowing, early in the morning, late at night. Don’t let these things be an obstacle. And as we’re living together, we want to make sure that we’re not obstacles to other people. The Buddha sets down six principles for living together in peace so that the group as a whole benefits. And the first three have to do with goodwill. Goodwill in your actions, goodwill in your speech, goodwill in your thoughts. Always think of the principle of the fact that you’re here looking for a happiness that’s reliable and a happiness that’s harmless, which means it doesn’t have to take anything away from anyone else. Other people’s happiness does not reduce yours. So you want to be able to think about everybody’s happiness as you act, as you speak, as you think about them. Think about their true happiness. Have goodwill for one another. And the fact that the Buddha made this three out of the six principles was to emphasize it again and again and again, all aspects of the way you comport yourself, the way you speak, the way you think about other people. Remember, we’re all here to a greater or lesser extent for the end of suffering to find true happiness, to a greater or lesser extent that some people are further along the path than others and some are walking faster than others. But we should make that an obstacle. There should be some understanding around that. So wherever you can give forgiveness to others and have some equanimity and patience, that helps nurture your goodwill. Because goodwill is very strongly connected with patience and equanimity. Because there will be things that, as we live close to another, as they say in Thay, “Your teeth and your tongue are very close together, and that’s why the tongue gets bitten.” So you want to make sure that, as we’re close together, we don’t bite one another. That we put up with things that we can put up with and not make issues out of them. The fourth principle is generosity. If you’ve got something special, share it. This creates a sense of camaraderie among the group. There was a group of monks who used to live in northern Thailand. They went through a lot of hardships. They were living up in the forest. Food was scarce. And as long as they were sharing with one another, they got along really well. And then as more and more people learned about them, more and more food came in, and they started getting luxurious, and a few of them started hoarding. And that was the end of the camaraderie. So it’s not the question of whether we have a lot or a little. It’s whatever we share. That way the group lives together and we have a sense that we’re all in this together. The fifth principle is having virtue in common. For the monks, this means everybody observes all the precepts. There are no exceptions and no exceptions. No special cases. That way we can live with one another. For the laypeople, it means, at the very least, the five precepts. That’s one of the most important principles. In all sets of precepts are the precepts against lying. We’re honest with one another, but honest in a way that’s helpful to one another. Remember, the principles for right speech are true and beneficial and timely. Which means if you have something unpleasant to say to somebody else, you’ve got to figure out the right time and right place to do it so that it benefits them. And if that means you have to wait for a long time, that’s fine. Because the opportunity will present itself at some point. And if you’ve waited that long, you’ve made sure that your own mood is not involved in the issue. And that way you can speak and have it be heard effectively. Finally, it’s having views in common. We’re here to train in the Four Noble Truths, which means each of us has to be looking at how we’re causing ourselves suffering. We’re not looking at how other people are causing us suffering. A little while back, I was talking to a monk who had started a monastery in England and eventually had to leave it and went back to Thailand. I asked him why. He said, “One of the reasons that nobody was interested in practicing the Four Noble Truths was that they had other agendas, constantly focusing on what was wrong with the situation, what was wrong with other people. And when that’s your main focus, you’re never going to see the Four Noble Truths. Because the Four Noble Truths point you back in to what you’re doing. That’s creating the suffering. That’s weighing your heart down. And each of us is training in that. There are not going to be any issues. This is what makes it a noble path. We’re not here keeping score. This is why we have the forgiveness ceremony at the beginning to remind ourselves that whatever resentments we may have about other people, we’ve got to wipe them clean. Wipe them clean. And not just one night out of the year. Learn to put up with what you can put up with. And you find that you can put up with a lot. Because if you’re really looking inside, practicing the Four Noble Truths, you’re developing the concentration, you’re developing the mindfulness. They give a sense of nourishment inside. They give you a sense of protection inside. And as the world focuses inwardly this way, there are no issues. Our living together becomes conducive. We’ve got a lot of people here now. In the old days, when I could sit anywhere I wanted to, in the monastery, and do walking meditation anywhere I wanted to in the monastery, they’re gone. Each of us has a slightly more confined space. So it’ll be confining just in the space. Don’t let it be confining in our minds. Try to make your mind as open, as spacious, and full of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity as possible. That way, the fact that there are a lot of people here doesn’t oppress the mind. Try to keep your mind as broad as possible.

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