In Honor of the King

October 13, 2016

Tonight we’re dedicating our meditation to the King of Thailand who passed away last night. It’s hard to describe to people who haven’t lived in Thailand exactly what a great king he was, all that he’d done for Thailand. When he first became king, he didn’t have any power. The kingship was just a kind of an empty position. And he turned it into something really good. He saw all the different ways that in his position he could create goodness for Thailand, finding ways to help people who were poor, encouraging the practice of the religion, trying to ensure that Thais would have water to use and water to drink, even the rain out of the sky. He had an artificial rain program that became standard for the rest of the world, and all the various royal projects to help people on all walks of life. It’s hard to imagine one person doing all that he did. But he did. And so when something like this passes, there’s a great sense of loss. But there’s also a great sense of inspiration. He showed what a human being can do. Very few people with his potential for power and influence use their power and influence so well. Those of us who don’t have much power and influence in the world can think, “Well, if we had that kind of power and influence, we’d want to do good in this way and do good in that way.” But when people get in that position, all too often they’re tempted to go off in other directions. So it’s inspiring to see someone who wasn’t waylaid, who actually gave his life for his country. He could have lived in the palace, he could have lived in comfort, but he didn’t. He went out into the jungles, went out into the forest, went out into the rice fields, all over the country, trying to find out why poor people were so poor and what could be done to help them. He instituted lots of projects that the government at the time had no idea of how to do, and he was able to do it. In terms of the religion, he encouraged people to practice. He himself was a supporter of the forest tradition. So he was a very good example. And when you think about good people who’ve lived in the world, we don’t just think about them. The right way to respond to that is to say, “What kind of goodness can still be carried on? Perhaps we can carry that kind of goodness on, or whatever kind of goodness is appropriate for our station.” When Sariputta passed away, Ananda was the first to get the news, and so he went to see the Buddha to give the Buddha the news. And then he said that he felt, as he said, all directions were dark. The Dhamma was no longer clear to him. He was so uptight and upset and shocked by Sariputta’s passing away. And the Buddha said, “Did Sariputta take virtue with him? Did he take concentration with him when he died? Did he take discernment? Did he take release?” No. Those things are still there. You have the opportunity to build them. You have the opportunity to develop them. So it’s good to think about people who are inspiring, to realize that this is what human beings are capable of. You’re a human being. Maybe you can be capable of something good along those lines as well. This is how the goodness of the people in the past who provided us with the opportunities that we have gets carried on. In Buddhism there’s a strong sense that when we’re born into this world, we’re born into debt. There are so many people we owe things to. The fact that we have language, the fact that we have all the conveniences, all the opportunity to practice what’s good, to practice the Dhamma, we owe this to people who’ve come before us. And the way to repay the debt is to make sure that that goodness doesn’t die with us, that we find ways of carrying it on. So we’re meditating right here, right now. We’ve got the opportunity to develop some goodness in our mind. You think about the Buddha, you think about the Ajahns, all the people who’ve passed this teaching down to us. They didn’t let it stop with them. They made sure that there was something left, something carried on, something conveyed to the next generation. This has been going on for many, many generations now. And so here we are, recipients of their goodness. This means we’re in debt to them. And the way to repay the debt is to pass the goodness along. The best way to pass it along is not just simply to tell other people about it, but actually to practice it. So it’s not just words, but it’s the presence of a good person, the example of a good person for other people to see. So even though we’re living here in America, we’re recipients of the king’s goodness as well. The support he gave from the forest tradition enabled Mettā to get started. The fact that Thailand didn’t become communist and Buddhism wasn’t wiped out the way it was in other countries around it owes an awful lot to the king. So here we are, we’re sitting here in a large piece of his goodness right now. He was a person who kept the country together. He enabled the Ajahns to continue practicing and all the other people who wanted to practice to continue practicing. He enabled those from outside the country to come and practice and to bring the Dhamma back. So we’re in the king’s debt. We dedicate the merit of our practice to him and we determine that the way to repay that debt is to make sure that this practice continues. As we bring our minds into concentration, as we try to develop discernment and overcome our defilements, that’s what goodness has kept alive in the world. We’re all here for a very brief time. As the Buddha says, even if you lived a hundred years, it’s still pretty short. Think about it. The end comes even if you’ve been around for a hundred years. You look back on your life and it seems very, very short. So try to be heedful. You’ve got the opportunity now. In the case of the king’s passing, there was no sign ahead of time. There were the signs of aging, illness, and death, but there was no specific sign that it was going to be on this day or that day. You look in your own body, and the signs of aging and illness may be more or less than other people’s. But everybody reaches the same end at some point and thinks, “We don’t know what the day is going to be.” But we do have right now, this breath right here, right here, to make the most of it. As I said, this is how goodness is kept alive in the world. Through our heedfulness and our sense of gratitude to those who went before.

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