Making a Difference

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One of the lessons that can be learned from reflecting on the king’s life is that the right people or the right person in the right place can make a difference. We hear a lot, especially in academia, saying that the way life goes in the human realm or the human race is determined by social forces and economic forces and individuals don’t make that much of a difference. Everything is decided by the system. But then you run into an example like the king. Who would have thought that one individual could do so much for the country? You compare the kings of Thailand with the kings, say, of Burma or Laos, who lost their countries to the Western powers, largely because they really didn’t take much of an interest in seeing what needed to be done to improve the lot of the country. They stayed in their palaces and followed the old rituals, thinking somehow the old rituals would have a magic power that would repel the foreign barbarians. But it didn’t work. Whereas the kings of Thailand were a lot smarter. They saw the things that needed to be changed in Thailand and things that needed to be developed to develop a sense of the unity of the country. You see, it was particularly in the example of our most recent king. I remember reading a book about how Thailand was going to be the next domino. There was a big concern about whether Thailand would be able to hold it together. It needed someone to hold the country together. And the fact that there was a king who really did care about the people was something that united the hearts of the Thai people. It made it hard for the country to make much of an impact in the country. Because the king was such a good example, he was out there working and going off into the jungle, looking into the livelihood of people, trying to find out some ways that he could help people so they could help themselves. His charity was not the kind of charity where he just gave things. He looked to see what people needed in order to establish their own livelihood, so they could stand on their own two feet. He needed water. He found ways of getting canals dug, wells dug. I remember staying at Wat Thammasatit during a period when the king’s policies were being implemented by the government. All of a sudden, electricity was there. The roads were there. We even got a well-digging machine to dig wells for the monastery. The kind of things that people need so they can stand on their own two feet. That was the kind of help he liked to give. It had to do with knowledge. It had to do with developing new strains of rice, new species of cows that could give milk in tropical countries. That was the kind of work he was interested in, so that the country could stand on its own two feet, realizing that, as with all people, we’re all going to have to leave someday. But it’s good to leave behind knowledge and teaching other people the ability to help themselves. Here’s an example of someone who’d made a lot of difference if there’d been somebody else in his place who knows what would have happened to a Thailand. And as I said last night, if Thailand hadn’t held it together, we wouldn’t have the opportunity to practice the Dhamma like we have right now. You look at the countries that fell to the communists, and Buddhism was pretty much destroyed, even though they’ve tried to graft the monkhood back. Once it’s been cut like that, it’s hard to really survive the tradition. So there’s a lot to be grateful for. But there’s also a good example here for us that we can make a difference. Our range of influence may not be as large as the king’s, but we do have our range of influence in our lives. And you can make a difference within that range. And if you make a good difference, it expands the range. There’s no one here forcing us to meditate. We’ve decided on our own that we’re going to meditate. We’re going to train our minds. That’s a decision that makes a difference. And then when you stick with that, that makes a difference too. With all the aspects of the practice of the Dhamma, when you decide to follow the precepts, it’s up to you to make that decision. You’re making a difference in your life. And you see that the influence of that decision will start spreading out. You’re the first person to benefit from it, but other people benefit too. And there’s no way of forcing the whole world to want to be good, but if we can force ourselves to decide that we want to make a difference, regardless of what the rest of the world is doing. If we know what we’re doing is right, we stick with it. Then again, no one else forces us. This is a decision that comes from within. So nurture that desire to make a good difference in your life. Because we’re not just pawns in the sweep of history. We’re individuals and we have the choice to go with the current or go against the current. Because the current is driven by what? Creative urgent and delusion. That’s what most social structures are driven by. As John Munwin said, “The cultures of all countries are the cultures of defilement.” This is why he wanted to practice a culture of the noble ones. It’s a culture that you can choose to follow and choose to join. You’re entirely free to make those choices. So nurture that freedom of choice and use it well. Current actions really do shape our lives. I was teaching in the San Francisco area a week or so ago, and talking about this. The fact that we shape our lives through our choices. A woman came up after the talk and said this was something she hadn’t really thought of before. She felt that her life was determined by her DNA. But maybe now she could think it was determined by her actions. That’s probably the central message of what the Buddha has to teach. Your life is determined by your actions, and you have the ability to choose them well. So make the most of that ability. Take inspiration from people who have made the most of that ability to remind yourself that this is possible. And that way, their good influence stays on in the world, as it becomes part of your good influence too.

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