Goodness Is Real

October 15, 2016

Try to gather your mind together right here at the breath. The breath comes in, you know it’s coming in, and it goes out, you know it’s going out. And that’s what you have to pay attention to. Anything else that comes by, just let it go. You want to gather your mind into one. We’re making our minds a gift to the king tonight, the king of Thailand. Just a few days ago, when you’re making a gift of your mind, you want to make sure it’s in good shape. You don’t want to present him with a shoddy looking present. You want to give him something that you’re proud to give. So bring the mind into oneness, because that’s when the mind is really at its best state. You think about the mind as it goes through the day. If you could do a picture of all the places your mind has gone today, it would be like a bird’s nest, tangled all over the place. That’s not the kind of mind you want to give to anybody. It’s when the mind is gathered into one at the breath, and there’s a sense of being, an all-around awareness that fills the body. That’s when the mind is at its most valuable. The reason we do this is that we think of the king. It’s hard for people who haven’t lived in Thailand to appreciate all that he did for Thailand, for people of every walk of life. There was a center around which the hearts of the Thai people were able to gather so that we were able to maintain a sense of unity. In spite of all the things that were happening in the countries on their borders, Thailand was able to hold it together. A lot of it had to do with the king’s efforts to be helpful. He had a program of winning the hearts and minds of people. He really knew how to do it by going out into the jungle, many times into the jungle, actually, into very poor areas, to see what it was that people needed so they could stand on their own two feet. In other words, in terms of knowledge and in terms of infrastructure, he went out of his way to provide it. It’s good to think of that, even though we may not be the direct recipients of his goodness, although in one sense we are. The fact that we have a monastery here depends on the fact that Buddhism was able to survive. It died out basically in Laos and Cambodia. But it survived in Thailand, and that’s why we have it here. It was available for us to bring back here. That’s a direct result of all of his work. When you think in general, it’s just the fact that there’s someone who’s really good, who does his best to be helpful, who does his best to do what’s of real benefit to others. There really is such a thing as genuine goodness in the world. I mentioned this this morning. You read in the newspaper accounts that in his obituaries, the Western accounts, he tended to be kind of doubtful. Was he really all that good? There’s something in our culture that really doubts goodness. When you start doubting it, then people don’t do it. This falls in line with the Buddhist principles that there are two things that you don’t have to doubt that are true across the board in all situations. One is the principle that unskillful qualities of the mind should be abandoned and skillful ones should be developed, regardless of the situation, regardless of how easy or hard it is, regardless of what kind of sacrifices you have to make. The Buddha said, “Don’t doubt this.” Our problem is that we keep coming up with excuses for why we don’t do our best. We do a lot less than our best, but the excuses don’t really count. There’s a passage where Sariputta finds out that one of his former students has gone off and lived someplace else. His wife died and he got a new wife, and the new wife is not interested in the Dhamma at all. All she was interested in was making sure her husband got a lot of money for the family. He cheated the people in the name of the king. He was probably a tax collector. Sariputta goes to see him and asks him, “Suppose you’re being dragged off to hell by the hell wardens, and if you start telling them, ‘Actually, I had an excuse for being corrupt, being dishonest. It was for the sake of my family, for the sake of my parents, for the sake of my children.’ Would the hell wardens listen and leave you alone, or would they throw you into hell as you were speaking?” Sariputta says, “There are lots of other ways to make a good living that don’t require that you cheat.” So when you have excuses for not abandoning unskillful qualities or for not developing skillful ones, ask yourself how they would look from the outside. Even though there are examples all around you of people who took the easy route, it’s good to remember that there have been people who took the hard route, who did what really should be done. In other words, goodness is real. The other principle the Buddha said was true across the board was the Four Noble Truths. And this too has its set of duties. The duties to comprehend suffering, in other words, to see that suffering is the big problem in life and that it’s something you want to comprehend. We tend to have to run away from it, but it runs after us like a shadow. You have to turn around and face it. To face it, you have to develop the path until you can see what the cause of suffering is so you can abandon that, and then you can realize the cessation. This is the kind of project that no one else can do for anyone else. This is something that each of us has to do within. Sometimes Buddhism, especially Theravada, is accused of being selfish, saying, “We can’t go out and save other beings.” But even the Buddha himself couldn’t reach into your heart and straighten things out. It’s something each of us has to do for ourselves. But we’re not the only ones who benefit. When you’re suffering, you tend to place burdens on other people. When you’re not suffering, you’re a lot lighter. So there’s another principle not to doubt. There’s another principle that’s true across the board. What can you do to comprehend suffering? You get the mind still and you watch and realize you’re not going to be able to let go of the suffering. You have to find the cause. You let go of that. Our problem is that oftentimes we want to let go of the suffering. But again, it doesn’t stop it. It’s like going into a house and seeing it’s full of smoke. If you simply try to put out the smoke, there’ll never be an end to it. You have to find where the fire is, put that out, and then the smoke goes away on its own. So you look for the cause. Where is the craving and clinging in the mind? This is work that each of us has to do for ourselves. But the goodness we find inside, in this way, is actually a lot more dependable than the goodness outside. So we take heart in the fact that there are good people, people like the Buddha. Again, there’s something in modern culture that says, “When anybody tries to speak to you, they’re trying to gain power over you, so you can’t trust anybody.” But here the Buddha was teaching you how to end your own suffering. What could be more compassionate than that? So his compassion was genuine. There really are genuinely good people in the world. We have to look hard for them, but they’re there. And the reason we look for them is because, one, we benefit directly, and two, they’re good examples for us in our own behavior. They give us the encouragement. They don’t have to tell us. By their example, they give us encouragement that goodness really is worthwhile, and it’s worth whatever sacrifice has to be made. So always hold firmly to that principle, because it is genuinely good, and it’ll see you through for a long time to come. you

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