Enterning the Rains

July 9, 2017

In Asia, the immediate reason for staying put for the rains is that the roads are washed out, travel is difficult, and all too often, if you’re wandering around, you start trampling over people’s crops, which they don’t like. So it’s a good time to stay put. And in staying put, it’s a good time to accelerate your practice. Here in San Diego, we don’t have many rains during the rains retreat, but we still take advantage of the fact that this is a time when we can settle down and accelerate our practice by the idea that, living together, we can be an encouragement to one another. So as we face the next three months, think about ways in which you can accelerate your practice. And also think about ways in which you can be a help to one another. The monastery is getting more and more crowded all the time. So you want to make sure that your presence is a gift to other people, that it’s a help to their practice, and not a hindrance. And the more we can live in harmony, the more the fact that we have a group here is an encouragement to practice. Sometimes we prefer being alone, seeing that other people are an obstruction to our meditation. And there are other times, though, when having other people around who are practicing reminds us that we should be practicing more too. The Buddha lists six qualities that help create harmony within a group, and it’s good to think about those as we face the next three months. The first three are all connected with goodwill. You treat one another with goodwill, both behind their backs and to their face, in terms of your physical actions, that’s the first one, in terms of your verbal actions, that’s the second one, and in terms of your thoughts toward them. You want to act in ways that show that you really do wish for their happiness, so you don’t let your likes and dislikes get in the way. You have to realize that each of us is here because we want your happiness. We want to practice. And that right there is something to admire. There are some people who may be practicing more strictly than others and with more intensity than others. But try to keep in mind that we’re all here for the sake of true happiness. We’re all here for the sake of training the mind. So try to have goodwill for one another. And as the Buddha said, to one another’s face and behind one another’s backs. If you see something that you can help the other person, whether the other person knows about it, you do it. In fact, sometimes it’s better to do it without the other person knowing. They find out about it later, and they realize that you’re not doing this to make, as they say in Thailand, to make face or to look good. You’re doing it because you really are concerned. You want to help the other person. So this means that we look around us all the time. What needs to be done in the monastery, even though something may not be “your task.” If you see that it’s undone, especially if it’s something to do with cleaning up, putting things in order, fixing something that you’re able to fix, you just go ahead and do it. In this way, there’s a sense that we’re here together for the same purpose, and that gives us encouragement in the path. The fourth quality is sharing. You gain something good, you’re willing to share it with the others. This is an extension of goodwill, but it also shows that you’re willing to make sacrifices. You’re not just doing and thinking and saying things of goodwill without putting yourself out. There are some cases where you really do have to put yourself out, and you do it for the sake of the group, not hoping that you’ll get something back, but simply realizing that this creates an atmosphere of harmony. One of my students in Thailand was up in the northwest, in an area in the forest. The monks were living in pretty difficult circumstances. They had one storeroom where things that were brought from Bangkok were stored and shared out among the monks. As long as everybody else felt that everybody else was living under hardship, it wasn’t all that much of a problem. You could put up with the hardships, too. But it turned out that the monk in charge of the storeroom was keeping things back. That immediately caused a lot of strife within the group. The idea of, “You’ve got something and I don’t get anything. What is this?” So if you see that you have something to share, be willing to share it. For the senior monks, this means not taking as much as you like out of the food that comes down the line. Remember that there are junior monks down at the end. You used to be a junior monk. You know what it’s like. There’s no need to store up on extra stuff in your bowl lid and then share it out among the laypeople afterwards. You want to share it with the monks first. This creates a feeling of harmony within the group. The last two qualities have to do with our virtue and our views. We want to have virtue in common and we want to have views in common. Virtue means raising all of our observation of the precepts up to the same level. Having virtue in common doesn’t mean we all pull one another down to the same level, but we try to hold ourselves to a high level and everybody tries to hold to a high level. It’s a lot easier to live together. The same with your views. You want to make sure your views are right views. At the very least, we believe in the principle of action, which comes down to meaning that if you expect happiness, you have to put out. You have to give of your actions. Make the effort. So you don’t keep a tally of, “Well, I did this for that person, why isn’t that person doing something back for me?” The fact that you were able to do something good, that is now your treasure. If you can all have that attitude, in the practice of generosity, in the practice of virtue, in the practice of meditation, then it’s a lot easier to live with one another. And the presence of all these other people becomes a help. As the Buddha said, having admirable friends in the path is the most important external circumstance, or the most important external factor, to help with awakening. So by being an admirable friend, you’re helping everybody else. You’re part of that external factor. When we all have this attitude, then, as a group, our practice becomes more powerful. It develops. Which is the whole purpose of having a monastery to begin with. Think about Ajahn Sawat’s aim when he first thought of setting up this place. He wanted a place where people from all nationalities, regardless of their background, could come together and practice the Dhamma. And it’s the fact that we’re aiming at the end of suffering together, we’re practicing the Dhamma together. The fact that we have that in common is what enables us to live together. So focus on the things that we have in common in terms of our aims. As for the areas in which we’re not equal with one another, remember Ajahn Lee’s comment, “Think of the fingers of your hand. You can’t expect them all to be equal. If they were all equal, you’d have monstrous hands.” So be forgiving of one another’s shortcomings and try to be an encouragement, bringing everybody up to a high level. We can do that. That’s when we say that the rains retreat has fulfilled its purpose, giving us a chance to accelerate our practice, to put out more effort than we have in the past, to put out wiser effort than we have in the past, so we can get better results than we’ve had in the past. After all, we’re aiming at something that we haven’t yet seen, haven’t yet experienced, haven’t yet known. That means we have to do things we haven’t yet done in the direction of heightened virtue, heightened concentration, heightened discernment. It’s in this way that we keep the tradition alive and we benefit from it as well.

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