A King’s Dhamma

October 13, 2017

Tonight we’re marking the first anniversary of the king’s death, King of Thailand, Rama IX. He passed away on October 13th last year. We come together on occasions like this to think about the goodness. He was a very good king. It’s hard to think of any leader in the world, any ruler in the world, who has done as much for his country as the king of Thailand did for his. So when we come together on an occasion like this, we like to think about what was the goodness that he left behind, so that we can think about how we might continue that goodness in our lives. Because the type of goodness he did was not specifically just Thai goodness. It was human goodness. He was a good example for human beings who still have duties in the world. He followed his duties as a king. In fact, he did more than was required of him—much more. There were 4,000 royal projects, helping people in different parts of the country, everyone from the people in Bangkok out to the people in the far reaches up in the hills. He came into life. He had what they call the good side of the worldly dharmas—material gain, status, praise, pleasure. But he didn’t stop there. He used these things to help other people. In terms of his material gain, he set up all those programs. He gave lots of his money, lots of his wealth, lots of his time to help other people in terms of his status. I remember when I first went to Thailand, I was struck by how many households you’d go into and there’d be a picture of somebody in the family having received a diploma from the king. Thousands and thousands and thousands of diplomas that he handed out as a way of giving honor to them, sharing his status with them. In terms of praise, it’s hard to find anybody who’s had been as praised as much as he was. But he didn’t just stop satisfied with the praise he got. He just kept finding new ways to help the country. And as far as personal pleasure, he sacrificed that. He’d go to these very difficult places, sometimes requiring days of travel, very difficult conditions, just to find out people way out in the hills, to see where they’d begun to help them. So he was a good example. When you get to the pleasurable side of the world, the ways of the world, don’t just stop there. You have to figure out some way to use it for your long-term welfare. Because the ways of the world, they come and then they go. But if you can squeeze some goodness out of them, then it becomes longer-lasting. It’s a help both for you and for others. For most cases, when someone gains something, other people have to lose. If you just hold on to your worldly success, it becomes a source of division. We see this in the world now. Wealthy people just keep more and more and more for themselves. And the gap between the wealthy and the poor gets bigger and bigger. It’s not that the wealthy people actually get wealthier that way. They become poorer. They live in a worse world. The king was wise enough to see that it’s by sharing that everybody becomes wealthy. It’s by giving up your personal pleasures that everyone can find a greater pleasure. In addition to being a good example, he also taught, sometimes, the Dhamma. As I mentioned this morning, there was one time when they celebrated 200 years of the founding of the Bangkok dynasty. He gave a talk that was broadcast all over the country at the height of the celebrations. He gave four Dhammas that the Buddha had taught. The story goes that there was a yaksa who threatened the Buddha one day. He said, “I’ve got some questions for you, and if you can’t answer them, I’m going to split your head open and throw you across the river.” The Buddha said, “Well, I don’t see anybody who can throw me across the river. Go ahead and ask.” So the yaksa asked the questions, and the Buddha answered and answered and answered to the yaksa’s great satisfaction. The Buddha ended with these four qualities. In Thailand, they teach us four qualities for laypeople. They’re not just for laypeople, they’re for everybody. But the story symbolizes the fact that they’re really good for controlling the unruly defilements in the human heart, because that’s what the yaksas represent. They’re pretty unruly. They tend to be motivated by anger. They’re just general unruliness. And these are Dhammas for learning how to rule yourself. The first one is truthfulness. You make up your mind you’re going to do something, you really do it. You’re dealing with other people, you’re not deceptive. But the face you show to other people is the face that you really have inside your heart. And when you make up your mind to do something, you stick with it all the way. You’re true to your best determinations, your best decisions as to what you really want out of life. The second quality is generosity. The things you really need to give up in order to gain what’s really good. You gain something and you don’t think about just yourself. You think about the goodness that could be shared around. Because, as I said, it’s through sharing that the world becomes wealthy and human society becomes a society that’s worth living in. Without that, it becomes a jungle and society becomes poor. The third quality is self-control. You don’t let your moods and emotions get in the way of something that needs to be done, something good that needs to be done, even though you may not feel like doing it. You find ways of making yourself do it. So that will give bad results. You find ways of controlling yourself so you don’t do those things. And finally, there’s endurance. The Buddha taught endurance primarily in two areas. One is enduring harsh words from other people, or lies or any unpleasant speech from other people. And the other is physical pain, with harsh words. He said, “If someone says something really nasty or really harsh or really deceitful, just tell yourself that their unpleasant sound has made contact with the ear, and you let it stop there. You don’t bring it into your heart to stab yourself. Because it’s the way we stab ourselves that reduces our endurance.” Speech is like this. There’s true speech and false speech, well-meaning and ill-meaning, useful and useless. Speech that comes from goodwill and speech that comes from hatred. So when you become a victim of the bad kind of speech, remind yourself that this is just a normal part of human speech. You were the one who wanted to be born as a human being. Here you are in the human world. This is what they have. When you recognize it, it becomes less and less of a pain in your own heart. As for physical pain, it’s the same sort of thing. You learn how to separate things out. The Buddha has you analyze pain into which part of your experience of pain is actually the body, which part is the actual feeling of pain, and which part is the awareness. Can you separate these things out? Because when you can separate them out, the pain doesn’t have to come in and stab your awareness. You see, the body is just the four elements—solidity, liquidity, warmth, energy. Pain is something else. And we have all kinds of perceptions around the pain that lead it into the mind. Sometimes we even think that it’s there harassing us and has an intention toward us, or that it’s taken over part of the body. But actually, the pain is one thing, the body is something else. You can see the difference. You can also see the difference between the pain and your awareness of the pain and develop perceptions that help you maintain that awareness of the difference. And it’s a lot easier to deal with, a lot easier to bear. So the issue of endurance is not so much just putting up with things. It’s learning to see that things that you are putting together, or stories that you’re creating around things, are actually the real problem. If you can learn how to cut those connections, cut through those stories, pain and unpleasantness don’t have such a bad effect on the mind, and they can be endured a lot more easily. And when you can develop this kind of endurance, then it’s a lot easier to follow through with the other three qualities. These are the qualities that enable us to fulfill our duties in the world. And not just in the world. You’d look in your meditation at the duties of the Four Noble Truths if you have these four qualities—truthfulness, generosity, self-control, and endurance. You can perform the four duties of the Four Noble Truths a lot more easily as well. This is a good set of Dhammas to think about as we practice, as we make sure that the goodness of the people in the past continues on in our own actions. That’s one thing we have to remember when someone passes away. The goodness in the world, the possibility for goodness, is still there in the world. There’s a sutta where Venerable Sariputta has passed away, and Ananda goes to see the Buddha and informs him. And he says, “It was a great experience.” He’d lost his bearings hearing that Sariputta had passed away. He was so upset. And the Buddha said, “Well, did he take virtue with him?” “No.” “Did he take concentration, discernment, release? Did he take these things with him?” “No.” They’re still there in the world. The possibility for them is still there in the world. But it’s up to us to keep it alive through our actions. So we look at the example of good people in the past. And we take inspiration from them. It’s in this way that this kind of ceremony becomes really useful. It’s not just a ceremony. It’s time to stop and think. Each time you realize, people die, which means we’re going to die, each of us. What are we going to do with our lives in the meantime? It’s this kind of reflection that makes this an auspicious occasion. As I said this morning, there are textbooks in Thailand that say that anything that has to do with death, any ceremonies having to do with death, are called inauspicious ceremonies. But that’s a Brahmanical idea. From the Buddhist point of view, anything that gives rise to hatefulness is auspicious. So let’s make this an auspicious evening by reflecting on the good that we can do.

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