Appreciating a Good Example

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Many of the Buddha’s teachings begin with generosity. When he talked to his listeners, if they were willing to think about the goodness of generosity, he felt that they were worth teaching further. If they didn’t see the goodness of generosity, there wasn’t much you could teach them. It’s in that quality of being willing to give. That’s so much of the practice of the Dhamma lies. And so it’s something to be celebrated. Every year, when they, as I say in Thai, “tan om kathin,” which means to set up the kathina, there’s usually some chanting and celebration, like we did just now, to show our appreciation, to show our, as I say in Pali, anamodana, to rejoice together for the generosity of the donors. And because this is a harmonious kathina, as I say, when everybody gets to be a donor, we’re celebrating our own generosity as well. That’s a good thing to celebrate, because there’s so little of it in the world. It seems like everyone is getting more and more grasping and possessive and selfish all the time. So it’s good there’s an opportunity to show that we can think of one another and go out of our way for one another. That becomes the foundation for everything else that we do when we practice. Because after all, we’re looking for a happiness that’s not only good for us but also causes no harm to anyone else. That was the characteristic of the happiness that the Buddha thought about after he had been torturing himself, going without food, going without forcing himself even enough to breathe at times, for many, many years. He realized that that was not the way. Then the next question was, “Well, what is the way? Is there another way?” And he thought of the happiness, the well-being of getting the mind into concentration, and he asked himself, “Why am I afraid of that happiness? Why am I not afraid of that happiness?” Because in the beginning he had been warned off by a vision of wood lying in water. In other words, the wood is sappy and it’s lying in water. There’s no way you can create a fire with it. If you take the wood out of the water but it’s still sappy, you still can’t create a fire with it because it’s still too wet. Then the image said, “When we take the wood out of the water and get it dry, then you can create fire with it.” And he interpreted the water there, being in the water, being indulging in sensuality and being sappy even though it was away from the water. He was thinking thoughts of sensual pleasures and assuming that all pleasures were sensual pleasures. He tried to avoid every kind of pleasure possible. But now he realized that that was not the way. So he asked himself, “Why am I afraid of the pleasure of concentration?” After all, it is harmless and blameless. In other words, it causes no harm to anybody. He realized there’s nothing to be afraid of. He realized then, of course, that he had to strengthen his body. He had weakened it so much that it would be strong enough to do the concentration. But that’s the important quality of the happiness we’re speaking of. What we’re searching for is something that harms nobody. There’s no way you can blame it. And it doesn’t harm you either. It’s not the kind of pleasure that makes you intoxicated. It actually clarifies the mind so you can see more clearly what’s going on inside. So all of this goes together. The fact that you want to be harmless and the fact that you want to find clarity inside. Those two concepts are connected. It’s good to realize that every time you make a choice as to what would be a good thing to do, what would be something that would make you happy. Always keep that question in mind. Is this good for the mind? In other words, does it bring more clarity, more understanding? Or would it get in the way? At the same time, is it something that would harm anybody? Happiness like that is hard to find in the world. But it is possible to find it. The Buddha realized that happiness comes from generosity and virtue. These qualify as that kind of happiness. But above all, happiness comes from meditation, getting the mind to settle down and be still so it can see itself clearly and then understand where inside it is still causing itself unnecessary suffering, unnecessary stress, unnecessary disturbance. And learning how to stop that. That’s the quality of discernment. And that leads to happiness too. Sometimes we tend to forget that. We associate the pleasure with the concentration. And then the discernment seems a little bit more cold and analytical. But it’s discernment with the purpose of goodwill for yourself and for other beings. So we apply the categories of discernment. We look at things in terms of the Four Noble Truths. Again, that’s for the sake of putting an end to suffering. We apply the Three Perceptions, seeing things as inconstant, stressful, not-self, as we’re freeing the mind from its self-imposed burdens. As the Buddha says, “Let go of what is not yours. That will be for your long-term welfare and happiness.” It’s all for the sake of happiness, but it’s a responsible happiness, a harmless happiness, a blameless happiness. So everything that heads in that direction is something to be celebrated, something to be appreciated. We appreciate it in others so that we can appreciate it in ourselves. Because so much of our lives is based around seeing someone else do something and thinking, “That might be good. That might be a good way to find happiness.” My mother tells a story when I was about three or four years old. She was washing dishes in the kitchen and she heard this little voice outside. It was my voice saying, “I think I do that.” And fortunately enough, she realized, “Wait a minute. What does he think he’s going to do?” My older brother was up in a tree, walking, his hands hanging from a branch, way up high. Something he could do at his age, I couldn’t do it at mine. That’s the way a lot of us live our lives. We see somebody else do something and we say, “I think I do that.” And all too often we have bad examples. We don’t look at them carefully. So it’s good to appreciate when someone else does something good. Tell yourself, “I think I do that.” Look for good examples in the world. They’re there. The media is so full of all the bad examples out there. So try to find good examples. The Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha are our refuge. They’re good examples for us in how true happiness, blameless happiness, can be found. We look at their example and we see other people who follow it. It’s good to appreciate that too. So in that way, the goodness gets maintained in the world and gets maintained in our own hearts. So remember, as we practice meditation, it’s not simply a matter of practicing a particular technique. It’s the quality of the heart that you bring to it. A generous heart. A heart of goodwill. A heart that’s based on the desire to be harmless. But also a heart that’s looking for security. A place inside that’s really safe. These are the attitudes that we should bring to the technique. So it’s not just a mechanical technique. It’s not just a training of your intellect. It’s a training of your whole heart.

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