In Accordance with the Dhamma (outdoors)

October 22, 2017

We had an Ajaan visit us from Thailand one time. He’d lived in one of the areas that was communist in the 1960s, 1970s. But he said he never felt he was in danger. And some of the communists actually came to tell him that they decided to give up being communist for two reasons. One was because of the goodness of the king, and the other was because of the goodness of the monks. These were two institutions that they said, “These are really good things to have in the world. There’s no reason to want to destroy them.” So today as we’re approaching the cremation of the king, I’d like to dedicate today’s meditation to him, in honor of the good that he’s done to us, even though we didn’t live in Thailand. We’ve benefited from the fact that he was an important part of what kept Thailand secure, so the forest tradition could flourish. And then we could study with the forest Ajaans and bring their Dhamma back here, and have the opportunity to practice here as well. And so when you have a debt of gratitude like this, how do you repay the debt? Well, think of the Buddha’s words on the night when he passed away. The day was for tossing flowers down from heaven, singing songs, playing musical instruments, scattering incense around. And the Buddha said, “This isn’t the way you pay homage to the Buddha. You pay homage to the Buddha by practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma.” And so to show our appreciation for the people who allowed us to practice, that’s how you do it. You practice. And you practice the Dhamma in a way that you’re not trying to change the Dhamma to fit your defilements, or say that the Dhamma has to fit with your culture. You ask yourself, “What does the Dhamma demand? What is it all about?” And the Buddha said in another place, “When you practice for the sake of disenchantment, for the sake of dispassion, that’s practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma.” And that means disenchantment with your own opinions, disenchantment with your own culture. What you do is you take on the culture of the noble ones. It doesn’t necessarily have to be a culture of Asian people or Thai people. Even Ajahn Mun was often accused of not following Thai or Lao customs. So I’m not interested in their customs, I’m interested in the customs of the noble ones. And what are the customs of the noble ones? The Canon lists four. The first three have to do with contentment. Contentment with whatever food you get, contentment with whatever clothing you get, contentment with whatever shelter you get. And in each case you practice contentment, but you don’t let the contentment become a source of pride, where you raise yourself up and look down on other people because you’re content and they’re not content. They’ll just spoil the goodness that comes from the contentment. It’s like that Onion article when they had the Spiritual Olympics and they showed the monk who was proclaimed the most serene. He did not look very serene, he was raising his hands in victory for having beat his opponents. So we practice contentment not to be better than other people, but because we know that our mind has these problems. As with all the Buddhist teachings, this is medicine for your greed, medicine for your discontent. So you see the dangers of attachment to things, but you also see the danger of attachment to your contentment. That way you keep the mind pure. But then it goes on. You start with food, clothing, and shelter. You would think the fourth member might be medicine, but it’s not. You take pleasure in developing and you take pleasure in abandoning. In other words, you take pleasure in developing the qualities of the path and you take pleasure in abandoning the things that stand in the way of the path. This shows the limits of contentment. Contentment doesn’t apply here. You’re not content with just whatever mind state you’ve got. You realize that there’s more to be done. John Suat tells a story. When he was a very young monk, he went to stay with a jhanman for the very first time. One day he found himself just one-on-one with a jhanman. So the jhanman asked him, “How’s your meditation going?” And John Suat said, “Well, my mind is all over the place.” And the jhanman said, “Well, at least you know that it’s going all over the place. That’s part of the practice of mindfulness, knowing a distracted mind as an extracted mind.” And John Suat took that very well. In other words, he realized that the jhanman was trying to be encouraging, but he wasn’t saying, “It’s okay to stay there.” He was saying, “Okay, this is the first step, but then there’s a second step and a third step.” Don’t get discouraged. Because once you recognize that the mind has distraction or it has sleepiness or whatever, the next step is to try to work your way around that. Take pleasure in abandoning that, in the efforts that go into abandoning that. Sometimes the efforts may take a lot. It may not come right away. But you take pleasure in trying to figure it out. Try to understand it. Look at it as a puzzle. How do I get past this particular problem? Confident that there’s a solution. After all, all the jhans of the past, all the noble disciples, men, women, children, old people, educated people, uneducated people, they figured out precisely this problem, too. So it can be done. So take delight in trying to figure it out. Once you’ve got something good, take delight in maintaining it. So you’re sitting here and the mind is able to settle down. What’s the best way to maintain it? Try to get more interested in the details of what’s happening right now. John Lee talks about three levels of breath energy in the body. There’s the in and out breath, and then there’s the breath energy in the blood vessels and the veins and nerves. And then there’s a still breath, what John Lee calls the resting places of the breath, like the tip of the breastbone, or the area right between the diaphragm and the lungs and the heart, or down around the navel. There are these spots where the breaths feel still all the time. And if you can focus in on them, begin to realize that that stillness is actually a layer of breath energy that’s already there at different parts of the body. If you can access that layer, you get a sense of stillness that goes throughout the whole body. The mind is very still, very alert, but not thinking about much. It’s with this still breath. So that’s the breath that’s already there. But to get there, you have to tune your mind in so that it’s able to stick with it. Which is why when we start out, we work with the breath energies and going down to the different parts of the body. Because those are the energies that you can use direct to thought and evaluation to try to figure out. Work the sense of ease through those spots. And then when you’ve worked it through, then how to maintain it. And learning how to delight in this. This is one of the customs of the Noble Ones. Think of this as a puzzle you’re trying to figure out. Confident that there’s a solution. And as with any good puzzle, if you don’t work it out today, well, you try again tomorrow and try again tomorrow. Because unlike most puzzles, this is not just something you solve and then throw away. You solve it as a skill that you’re going to need. Because you’re going to need to be able to get the mind to settle down and be still in any circumstance. Through the mind’s subterfuges, through its defilements, in any circumstance. So you want to get really good at this. Because this is the puzzle that when you solve it, helps you solve a lot of other deeper problems as well. This is one way in which we take delight in developing. You see, the meditation has an interesting challenge, a skill that’s really worthwhile developing. And as you do this, you get your mind in a center of oneness. You’re really focused on this. As we said earlier, we’re dedicating this meditation to the King. It’s like when you want to present a present to the King, you want to present something really nice. I knew a woman in Thailand one time. She got a message from a spirit medium saying that she should present a Buddha image to the King. And as she told me, she said, “You don’t just go down to the store and just buy any old Buddha image. You get one specially made.” And she went to a lot of trouble. First, she went to all the different foundries where they make Buddha images and had them sketch out a few designs. And she showed them to an artist she respected. She asked for the artist’s comments, and he said, “I don’t know where to begin. They’re all so ugly.” She said, “In that case, why don’t you do one?” He said, “Well, I’m a painter. I’m not a sculptor. I don’t work with sculpture like that.” And she said, “You’re very talented. I can make it worth your while.” And so he ended up, after many trials and errors, he was able to finally make a really beautiful image for the King. And you could see how proud she was. She put all that effort into giving something to the King. You want to give something really good. So when you take it into him, you can feel proud. So in the same way, if you’re going to be giving your mind to the King today as a gift, try to get it in good shape. Make it one. Because when the mind is one, it’s a lot more valuable than when it’s three or four or six or eight or 3,500 or whatever. It’s like fruit in the market. Suppose there’s only one peach in the entire market. That peach is going to have a lot of value. It’s going to have a good price. But if there are peaches all over the market to the point where they’re throwing them away and they’re going rotten, then they don’t have any value at all. It’s the same with the mind. If your mind is just filled with lots of thoughts, it doesn’t have much value. It’s when you learn how to think your way into oneness and then maintain that oneness. That’s when the mind becomes something that you’d really like to give to somebody. Even though you can’t really give it directly, you yourself can take pride in the fact that you were able to get the mind into this state of oneness and maintain it. So think of this as your gift. You want to wrap it up and present it well. In the same way, you’re practicing in a way that’s showing gratitude for the people who’ve made it possible for us to practice. And you’re doing it in the best way possible, practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma, the way the Buddha said we should all practice.

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