Harmony Inside & Out

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It’s an old tradition within the forest tradition, and in fact, throughout the Buddhist tradition, that by working for external harmony, you create internal harmony. The qualities of mind, the attitudes you need to develop in order to get along with one another, are precisely the same ones you need in order to get some harmony inside your own mind. So take time. Put in the effort to be in harmony with the people around you. The Buddha talks about being in tune with others, being on good terms with others, by developing physical deeds of goodwill, verbal deeds of goodwill, mental deeds of goodwill, by sharing whatever gains you get, by having a certain similarity in your views in line with the right view, similarity in your virtues in line with the virtues pleasing to the noble ones. It’s not just any virtues that you have in common. You want to have noble virtues in common. The same with views. You want your views to be not just in common, but also right in common. These qualities translate inside. This takes time. You have to be careful. As you’re dealing with other people, you can’t just say or do what first occurs to your mind. You have to stop and ask, “Is this the right thing to say? Is this the skillful thing to say or to do?” The Buddha gives four guidelines. It’s interesting that these four, on the one hand, are part of a chant that we have at the meal regularly. They’re also adopted by the Mahayana. There’s a case where a layman was said to have a large following. He was popular among the people who worked for him, the people who worked with him. It’s because of the four qualities that he had. And the Mahayana decided that if you wanted to be a Buddha, these were the same four qualities you would need to develop in order to develop a following. We may not be here to develop a following, but to get along well with one another and to get along well inside, it’s good to develop these four qualities. The first is generosity. You give of your time, you give of whatever special things you’ve received. And people are happy to have you around. You realize that any situation has to depend on what you put into it. So put good things into it. The second quality is endearing words. This doesn’t mean sweet-talking all the time, but it does mean that you show respect to the other person if you’re going to be critical of what someone else has done. Do it in a way that shows that you actually respect the person. If your criticism shows that you look down on that person, they’re not going to want to hear it. And the criticism, instead of making the group better, actually makes it worse. Ideally, that’s what criticism should be for—to make things better. So you have to ask yourself, “What would be the best way to get the other people to want to make things better in that way?” And, of course, be open to the possibility that your ideas may not necessarily be right. So show a certain amount of humility. The third quality is to give genuine help. You don’t help just to make points. You’re asking yourself, “What does that person need?” This is an extension of generosity. When you give a good gift, the best gifts are the ones that meet a need that the person has felt but may not have articulated. They may not have shown necessarily to other people, but the gift-giver is prescipient enough to see that this is something that the person has felt. This is something that the person is lacking. This is some help they really need. And you’re glad to give it. It shows concern. It shows genuine compassion. Not just feeling sorry for the person, but seeing what can be done to help that person’s situation. And then finally, the fourth one is consistency. Years back, there was a positive psychology writer who was saying that if you’re consistent in your help for other people, they don’t appreciate it. So it’s good to be inconsistent. Now, that kind of advice should be thrown out. It’s when you’re consistent and reliable that people feel good in your presence. They know they can depend on you. And this sense of being able to depend on one another, that’s what enables us to live together. Without unpleasant surprises and disappointments. So as we work together, it’s good to keep these four qualities in mind. Generosity, endearing words, genuine help, and consistency. And they also translate into qualities you’re going to need as you meditate. The basic principle of giving is that if you want to get something good out of an activity, you’ve got to be willing to put in first. Put in your energy. Put in your thought. That’s precisely what you have to do in the meditation. You can’t sit down and say, “Okay, now I want the mind to be quiet right away, and I want it to happen for me, and I want it to be arranged for it to happen. If it’s not happening, something’s wrong with the teacher.” As I put it, the sources of suffering are inside. They come from within us. And we have to change things within ourselves. If we’re going to get past the suffering, this means the work is up to us. And we’re working on developing some qualities that will take time. So you have to be willing to put in the energy, have the trust that this process is going to work, and learn how to take joy in the fact that you are putting energy into something that’s really worthwhile. That way your meditation is sure to develop. Endearing words, of course, have to do with the way you talk to yourself when things don’t go well in the meditation. Again, criticize yourself in a way that shows respect for yourself, respect for your desire to put an end to suffering, and respect for your ability to do it. If your criticism of other people is destructive, then your criticism of yourself is going to be destructive. And the whole purpose of criticism should be to make things better. Here’s an area where things can be improved. Let’s work on it. That’s the kind of internal conversation you want. Genuine help, of course, has to do with figuring out when things are not going well in the meditation. Instead of saying, “Today’s meditation is not going well, I might as well give up,” you say, “Today’s meditation is not going well. What’s the problem? Let’s see what we can do to make a positive change here.” We’re meditating not simply to have a good time or to have a nice restful hour or so, but to work on the mind, to improve the mind, to make it more skillful in its concentration, more skillful in its discernment. That’s genuine help for the mind. And finally, consistency. You meditate every day, every day, every day. You meditate in between the meditation sessions. When I was starting to meditate with Jon Fung, we’d have a group meditation in each evening back in the very early days. He said, “If you really want to be good, don’t stop when the group meditation ends. Go back and pick it up on your walking meditation path, back in your hut, back in your room. See if you can pick up where you left off. Move it further.” As you go through the day, remember, your breath is there. You may not be able to maintain a full body awareness, but at least have some spot in the body where you anchor yourself, anchor your awareness, and make that spot comfortable. Treat it in a way that leaves it open, unstressed, unsqueezed. You begin to notice that when something unskillful comes up in the mind, there will be a squeezing in the more sensitive parts of your body. One, that alerts you that something’s going on in the mind that should not be going on in the mind. And two, at the very least, you can unsqueeze that spot, keep it open, keep the breath energy flowing. That unskillful state of the mind doesn’t have any area of the body that it can take over. This way, your consistency helps your meditation to develop. So you can develop some peace and harmony in your own mind. So remember these principles for harmony. Generosity, endearing words, genuine help, consistency. Remember, they’re good for developing harmony both outside and inside. When you develop it inside, of course, it’s going to be a lot easier for things to go well outside. The two help each other along. It’s in this way that our living together as a group, living together with other members of the human race, actually becomes helpful to our meditation. And our meditation becomes helpful for our life outside.

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