Goodness All Around

April 7, 2023

There’s that passage in the Canon where the Buddha talks about an acrobat and his assistant. They set up a bamboo pole, and they’re going to climb up to the top of the pole. And the acrobat says to his assistant, “Okay, I’ll get on the top of the pole, and you get up on my shoulders. And I’ll look out after you, and you look out after me, and that way we’ll perform our tricks and come down safely.” The assistant, whose name is frying pan, says, “No, that wouldn’t do. I have to look out after myself, you look out after yourself, and that way we’ll perform our tricks and come down safely from the pole.” In that case, the Buddha said the assistant was right, because the main issue that an acrobat has to worry about is his or her own sense of balance. And you can’t maintain someone else’s balance for them. You have to look after your balance. In the same way, the Buddha said, when you look out after yourself in the practice, you’re helping others. You maintain your sense of balance, you make it easier for other people to maintain theirs. And here, maintaining your sense of balance means developing the establishings of mindfulness. You keep your framework in mind, which is the breath, the body in and of itself. You’re ardent, alert, and mindful. And you’re putting aside greed and distress that have to do with the world. This is the mind in balance. You’re mindful to do what’s skillful. You’re alert to watch over your mind and the breath to see how they’re going, how they fit together. And then you’re ardent to make this solid. When the mind is solid like this, then things that come to it don’t knock it over. One of the images the Buddha gives is of a stone thrown into a ball of clay. If your mind is not trained like this, it’s like a ball of clay in which someone throws a stone. Of course, the stone is going to make an impact. It’s going to make a big indent into the clay. If your mind is trained like this, it’s like a solid wooden door. If someone throws a ball of string against the door, there’s no indent in the door at all. So you want to make your mind dent-free, undentable, by maintaining your frame of reference. In so doing, you’re going to be behaving in a skillful way and make it a lot easier for a lot of other people to behave in a skillful way as well. But then the Buddha goes on to say that when you look out after other people, you’re also looking out after yourself. Unfortunately, there’s no image to go with this. The image of the acrobat sticks in the mind. But there’s no image to illustrate the fact that when you’re helping other people, when you’re accommodating to other people, you benefit as well. But it’s an equally important principle to keep in mind. Here the Buddha says you develop four qualities in your interactions with other people that will be helpful to you. These four qualities are in harmony with establishing mindfulness, but they also make sure that it doesn’t become just a dry exercise. These two qualities have to do with an attitude you develop. The Buddha says citta can mean a mind, as he says, of goodwill and a mind of sympathy. It can also mean heart. Your heart has goodwill for others. Your heart has sympathy. It’s important to remember this. The practice is a training both of the heart and the mind. It’s one of the reasons why the training starts out not with sitting down and getting a theoretical discussion of the basic concepts. It starts out with the practice of generosity, the practice of virtue, development of goodwill. These are qualities of the heart you’re happy to share with others. You have a principled heart, one that doesn’t want to have to harm anybody else, and you have goodwill for all. That’s the beginning of the practice. So we’re training both the heart and the mind. In the case of the four qualities, you develop a heart of goodwill and a heart of sympathy. Goodwill is an attitude of goodwill for all. Sympathy is being kind to the people you’re dealing with. There are a few places in the Canon where the Buddha talks about sympathy, anukampan. It means a mind that moves with other minds. You have sympathy for other people’s minds, other people’s hearts, other people’s desires. Anything that you see as skillful, you’re happy to help. When the Buddha taught the first batch of Arahants to go out and teach, he said, “Do it out of sympathy for the world.” Then again and again, when he told the monks to go out and teach, it was out of sympathy. You see the world is suffering, and you know a way to help them. That’s what this basically comes down to. Goodwill is a general wish for happiness. “May I understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them.” “May other beings understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them.” Sympathy, however, is when you see you’re in a position where you actually can give some help, and you’re happy to give it. That’s where you find the word “sympathy” used in the Candanas, in the context of the ordination. When the Candana comes and asks for ordination, it says, “Please lift me up out of sympathy. Allow me to have this opportunity to practice.” Sympathy has to do with specific kindnesses that you do for one another. And, of course, you benefit. The two other qualities that the Buddha lists as helpful in dealing with other people and from which you benefit are patience and equanimity. Patience is the ability to put up with things, but not just be passive in putting up. It also means being patient and seeing that there are some things that are good to do, but they’re going to take time, and you’re willing to take the time, make whatever effort is necessary. It’s a strength of non-reactivity. It’s not for its own sake, but for the sake of accomplishing something that’s really good, to make the mind stable, to make the mind unshakable. The Buddha talks about patience in the context of being patient, learning to endure harsh words and physical pain. With harsh words, the Buddha says, to learn how to depersonalize them. There are two ways in which he recommends this. One is simply to think that when someone says something harsh, you tell yourself, “An unpleasant sound has made contact with the ear.” That arises based on the contact, and it’s going to end when the contact ends. So when someone says something that’s hurtful or something that’s disagreeable, if you find that your mind is still reacting after they’ve stopped speaking, it’s no longer the contact of their words that’s the problem. You’ve internalized what they said, and now you’re reflecting on it. In the Buddha’s image, you become like a gong. You hit the gong, and it just keeps reverberating. It’s interesting that for him, the ideal image is of a broken gong. You hit it, and it’s plunked. That’s it. There are no reverberations. The point here is that when something is said like that, you just leave it right there at the contact. Don’t watch out for any tendency that your mind has to make it more than that. Realize that when you’re making it more than that, you can’t blame the other person at that point. It’s your own doing. It’s something you should learn how to undo yourself. The other reflection is that the way you see the world is such that there’s pleasant speech and unpleasant speech. When people say something critical, they can do it with a mind of goodwill, meaning well, or they can mean ill toward you. They can be saying true things or false things. This is the nature of human speech. What do you want? You’re here in the human world. You wanted to be born here. That’s something we tend to forget. I know some people who blame their parents, saying, “Well, you were the one who gave birth to me.” But the parents can have every right to say, “Well, you were the one who came in.” You have to feel sorry for the parents so they don’t get any chance to interview candidates and make a choice of who they want. It’s whoever comes barging into their gene pool. So remember, you’re the one who wanted to be born as a human being, so here you are. This is human speech. This is the human world. The fact that people are saying outrageous things is not out of the ordinary, which means that you don’t have any extraordinary rights to lash back. It doesn’t help anything at all. You learn patience. And with that patience, the Buddha recommends you develop your goodwill. You’re not just gritting your teeth, but you realize, “Okay, these are people who don’t understand what’s skillful. May they understand what’s skillful sometime.” You’re taking yourself out of the line of fire. The words are no longer aimed right at you; they go past you. That way, they’re a lot easier to endure. And you’ve lifted your mind at the same time. That’s where equanimity comes in. There’s basic equanimity of just learning how to be neutral. When things happen, especially things you don’t like, how to keep the mind on an even keel when you’re presented with situations that you really can’t do much about. Then there’s household equanimity, and then there’s renunciate equanimity. There’s equanimity with debates about the world, and there’s equanimity that goes beyond the debates of the world. So the Buddha doesn’t just leave you with ordinary, everyday equanimity. The advice is that you lift your mind to higher levels of equanimity. And the way you do that is you don’t just say, “Well, this is the way things are. I guess I have to put up with it.” That’s defeatist. You remind yourself that you actually have the potential for joy inside your mind, the potential for well-being inside. You can cultivate that well-being in two ways. One is through your meditation, especially through getting the mind in concentration and having a sense of rapture, a sense of well-being, pleasure. It can come through the way you treat your mind, the way you treat your breath inside, as a place where you can settle down. Then, based on the joy and the rapture and the pleasure, the mind can settle down even more into equanimity. And it settles down because it’s full, not because it’s starving and tells itself, “Well, I just have to put up with starvation.” You fill the mind with a sense of well-being. So it’s less likely to feel damaged by things coming in from outside. And so it’s a lot easier and a lot stronger equanimity than your ordinary garden-variety equanimity. The other way is through insight. You see the things of the world as they arise and they pass away. And you realize, as part of your awareness, that it’s impervious to them. It’s not affected by them. In other words, the Buddha’s image of gaining insight is that you lift yourself above ordinary, everyday level of things, understanding that the mind doesn’t have to be damaged by them, doesn’t have to be injured by them. They can only go so far. There’s a part of the mind that goes a lot farther than the things of the world. When you can see that through insight, first there comes joy, and then there’s a sense of equanimity towards all the other things that are in the world. So the ideal of equanimity is not somebody putting up with things, being defeatist, being pessimistic about the way things go. You find a source of joy inside, either through concentration or through insight. That places the mind in a position where it’s not affected by things outside, because it has its own internal resources well-developed. So these are the qualities you develop as you get involved with other people, the qualities you should be developing—a heart and mind of goodwill, a heart and mind of sympathy, patience, and equanimity. This is your gift to other beings. And as you give them this gift, you find that you’re on the receiving end as well. You receive the gift, too. Your mind is stronger. Your heart is stronger. The practice becomes not just something you do for yourself, but something that engages all of your activities as you go through life. And it develops both the heart and the mind. So, even though the Buddha doesn’t give an image to illustrate this principle, remember, this is going to be coming up over the weekend. We’ll be dealing with a lot of people. So think of these four words—goodwill, sympathy, patience, equanimity. These are people coming to do good, so we sympathize. And in being sympathetic with them, helping them, you help yourself, too. This is one of those aspects of the Buddhist teachings that the Mahayana gets so wrong. They think it’s a choice, either working for yourself or working for other beings. But the Buddha pointed out that, ideally, when you’re working for yourself, you’re working for other beings. And when you’re working for other beings, you’re working for yourself. He saw through to what is actually really skillful in approaching your whole life, both in your dealings with yourself and in your dealings with others, in a way that everybody can benefit.

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