In Tune

August 27, 2023

The word Samana, which we translate as contemplative, literally means someone in tune, someone in harmony, someone who tries to live in harmony with the way things really are. It’s by living in harmony that you can understand how things are. What causes what, what kind of causes are proportional to what kinds of results, and looking for the best results. In other words, this is someone who puts aside his or her preferences, what he or she likes to do, and does what has to be done, what should be done. For the sake of harmony, for the sake of being in tune. This is one of the reasons why we chant as a group, is to get practice. Some people’s voices are high, some people’s voices are low. We try to find a middle ground. We have to learn how to put aside our preferences. If each of us chanted as we liked, you couldn’t listen to it. It’d be a mess. Last week I had someone here asking whether he should try to chant together with the group, or just read the translations as we chanted. I recommended that he chanted with the group, and then that night we had a particularly bad chant. People were chanting all over the place. I was tempted to tell him the next day, “Well, forget about listening to the group. Chant the way you want.” But that wouldn’t accomplish anything. There’s that statement that the Great Way is not hard for those with no preferences. And of course we prefer the end of suffering to suffering itself. But the Way does demand that we put our preferences aside as to what has to be done, what should be done. We live as a group because we can learn from another, and hopefully we can live in enough harmony so it becomes a group that gives rise to a sense of well-being, a sense of gladness. As the Buddha said, a sense of gladness isn’t important for getting the mind into concentration. He talks about different ways of doing that. One is simply taking joy in the fact that we have this teaching that lays clear the causes for why we’re suffering and how we can stop suffering. Another source of joy is when we follow the teachings and find that we’re able to act in more skillful ways, more harmless ways. That gives rise to a sense of joy. Another source of joy is living in harmony. The Buddha defines this as living in harmony together in terms of our virtue. The monks all adhere to the Vinaya. The lay people all adhere to the precepts. And when we don’t, there’s going to be trouble. There’s going to be disharmony in the group and it becomes an unpleasant place to practice. But if we have these bases for harmony in terms of the precepts and in terms of right view, then the fact that we’re living together as a group actually becomes conducive to getting the mind still, getting the mind quiet, so that we can each work on the work that has to be done. Ferreting out our defilements. Developing discernment. Think of that principle of discernment, that questions that lie at the basis of discernment. What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? The discernment lies in several things. One is realizing that long-term happiness is possible. It’s not the case, as you sometimes hear, that pleasures and pains just come and go like waves on the shore and you can’t try to keep the pleasure or get rid of the pain. If that were the way the Buddha taught, his dharma would have died out a long time ago. But actually he says, when you’ve got skillful mental qualities, you try to develop them, try to maintain them. When they’re there, you try to keep them going and get them to develop further. That’s where unskillful things, you try to cut them away to the point where they don’t come back. So long-term happiness is possible. And it is better than short-term. That’s a lot of where the wisdom lies. Because anybody can find short-term pleasures, without reference to whether they’re going to be making you happy in the long-term. But it’s when you think about the long-term, that’s when you’re wise. That means you’ve got to put your likes and dislikes aside. I like doing things this way, I don’t like doing things that way. That’s not the formula for practicing the Dhamma. The formula for practicing the Dhamma is whatever is required, I’m ready to do it. That’s what it means to be in tune. So as we practice living with one another, keep that in mind. The purpose of being here together is to work in harmony. The purpose of chanting together is to chant in harmony. And you don’t just say, “I can try.” That means you haven’t been trying. And you don’t really want to try. The proper response is, “I will.” And if you haven’t figured out how to do it yet, well, you work on it. Ask questions, ask other people around you, how do they do it? Other people can chant in tune. One of the benefits of chanting together in tune is that the devas like it. If it’s not in tune, they go away. And the other people in the group want to go away. So you’ve got to think all around. This is a quality that the Buddha calls “Vimamsa.” In the John Lee translation, he states it as circumspection. Looking at your activities, looking at the results, looking at it from all sides. How it looks to you, how it looks to other people. How it sounds to you, how it sounds to other people. And trying to develop this quality of being a Samana, someone in tune, someone in harmony. Because you look at the world, it’s full of dissonance. People clashing with one another. And they don’t care. But a quality of a person who practices is that you do care. That’s what compunction is all about. You think about your actions and you think about the results. And you really don’t want to do anything that’s going to cause harm, even the least little bit of harm. It’s the opposite of apathy. It’s an attitude of respect. And the people who say, “Well, I’ll just do what I want and say what I want and people will just have to accept the way I am.” That doesn’t respect other people. As the Buddha said, we can change our ways. If we couldn’t change our ways, he wouldn’t have taught. Which is why when he heard that there were people saying that what you experience in the present moment is based on past karma totally, he went and argued with those people. He said, “Do you realize what you’re doing?” If that were true, then people would kill and steal and have all this. They’d have sex and do all kinds of unskillful things because of some past karma that they couldn’t go back and change. They’d just be stuck in their ways. But the point is that we can bring something new to the present moment, each present moment. For the most part, we’re too lazy to do it. We just want to keep on doing things our old ways. But that’s not called practice. Practice is when you try to change your ways. The students of Ajahn Mun would say with a single voice that what was impressive about Ajahn Mun was he had made himself totally Dhamma. His thoughts, his words, his deeds were not the ones he originally started out with. His understanding of the Dhamma improved. His behavior improved. Everything about him changed. He was willing to submit himself to the customs of the Noble Ones and as a result became a Noble One. So there is this element of willingness in the practice. There’s a point where the Buddha says once you’ve heard the Dhamma, if you want to gain Awakening, the next step is to have the desire to really practice in line with the Dhamma. From desire, he says, willingness. Willingness to look at your actions and compare them to the Dhamma, to see if they’re in tune. It’s like listening to your voice, listening to the voices of others. And when they’re not in tune, you change your voice. This involves a third quality which the Buddha calls judging. You see where your actions are not up to the standard. And then finally, exertion. You do what you can to bring them up. You don’t pull the Buddhist standards down to you. You pull your behavior up to the Buddhist standards. That’s how you gain Awakening. So look at your life, look at the way you behave, your thoughts, your words, your deeds, and see where they’re not in tune. The chanting is just one example. But the way we work together, the way we meditate, the way we try to bring the body and mind in tune, it’s all the same principle. There is a joy that comes from harmony. And that joy brings the mind peace, brings your mind peace, brings peace to the minds of others. So try to develop this quality of being in tune wherever you go.

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