Anumodana

November 5, 2023

The suttas list three kinds of meritorious activities. The Abhidhamma spreads them out to ten. And one of the ten is expressing appreciation or expressing approval of other people’s merit. The word is anamorva. This is something that the monks do on a regular basis. The blessings given at a meal are called anamodana. In a case like that, it’s sometimes translated as rejoicing in the merit of the others, of the donors. But there’s also the anamodana of the kathina, which is going to happen tonight. In that case, it’s better translated as approval. We had the gift of the cloth this morning. In case you didn’t notice, the whole kathina revolves around that little white piece of cloth. Over the centuries, a lot of other things have accrued around that. All the other gifts given to the sangha, all the activities of feeding all the people who came who wanted to participate in that gift. And the monks are supposed to take that cloth and, before dawn tomorrow morning, make a robe out of it. It involves cutting the cloth, sewing it together, dyeing it, drying it, and then they gather together. Although in this case, with some of the monks being sick, we may have to do this on an individual basis as well. But one of the monks, it’s going to be me, announces that the kathina is spread. The word kathina actually means “frame.” It’s the frame on which cloth can be stretched as you’re going to sew it together, like in a quilting bee. It’s symbolic of the fact that from now through the end of the cold season, some of the rules that make it more difficult for the monks to get around and get extra cloth to sew and patch their robes are rescinded. And then the monks who say they approve of that get that right as well. So that’s what we’ll have tonight. The question arises, “Why did the Buddha institute the kathina?” It’s hard to answer because the origin story for the rules doesn’t really indicate much at all as to why he would institute such a thing. Some monks wanted to come and stay with the Buddha for the rains retreat, but the rains started before they could get there. So they had to spend the rains someplace else. And then they came right after the rains retreat was over, and they got their robes all wet and paid their respects to the Buddha. And then based on that, the Buddha said, “Okay, let’s have a kathina.” The connection is hard to see. But looking at the effect that the kathina has, one of the main things is that it gets the older monks to pass on their sewing skills to the younger monks, because everybody has to pitch in. This is a good case for a good way of getting the skills passed on. Because the monks do need to learn how to take care of themselves. Especially the younger monks. They have lived in a place where someone else was doing all their sewing for them. Now they have to learn how to do it themselves. It’s also a good way of getting the monks to work together as a team. And the privileges that are given to the monks after the kathina has been spread, come primarily to those who want to make robes, but also those who want to stay. So in a way, the Buddha’s encouraging you to stay connected to the monastery, especially a place where the laypeople have felt the faith and the conviction of the monks that they would give the cloth to begin with, that that faith and conviction should be honored. The monks should respond by making this monastery their home base. If they decide to leave the monastery without any plans to come back, then they lose the kathina privileges. So a lot of it is around cooperation, helping one another. You might also think that we can express our appreciation for that, our approval for that. As the Buddha said, when we approve of the harmony of the community, it’s uplifting to the heart. When the heart is uplifted like this, it’s easier for it to get into concentration. So the way we live together really does have an impact on the training of the mind. Sometimes the training gets atomized, in the sense that each person has to do it for him or herself, and it becomes something you do all alone. But we forget that it’s part of a community, and that community gives us encouragement, gives us strength. We realize that there are other people who have the same values that we do, who see the value of training the mind. And whether the training is equal in all cases, which is most likely not the case, the fact that everyone has that goal in common is what makes us a community. So it’s good to think about that, and it’s good to take strength from that, and to learn how to feed off the merit that comes from approving of the goodness of other people. This, of course, connects with one of the Brahma-viharas, mudita, empathetic joy. It can also be translated as appreciation. You see that other people are happy, that they’re creating the causes for happiness, and you’re happy for them. If you can’t be happy for other people’s happiness, it’s going to be hard to be happy for your own. And empathetic joy really is a good test of your goodwill. You say, “You want all beings to be happy. May they be happy. May they do skillful things.” And you come across someone who is happy, is enjoying good fortune, and you’re jealous of them, you’re envious of them. That’s not right. You feel that you’re lessened by their happiness. There’s really something wrong. So it’s a good test case. How mature is your goodwill? How genuine is your goodwill? But if you see cases where someone is happy, has good fortune, but they’re abusing it, that’s when you have to have compassion. At the same time, give rise to a sense of sanghvega, realizing that our quest for happiness, if we don’t do it right, can spoil us. Think about the case of the devas who’ve done good in this lifetime and they get to enjoy the results of that goodness. They begin to take it for granted. The Buddha once said that the number of devas who pass away from the deva world and then return either to the human world or stay on in another deva world is very, very small. He compared it to the amount of dirt that he could put under his fingernail. And the numbers that fall because they get complacent, because they get lazy, because they take their happiness for granted, it’s like the dirt on the entire earth. That’s a scary thought. You work to do good, and then the results of your goodness, if you’re not careful, if you’re not wise, can actually pull you down. So think about goodwill. Thinking about empathetic joy should lead to a sense of heedfulness. You realize that you’ve done good in the past, and you use that goodness to give yourself strength as you practice. But you have to focus on not letting that goodness harm you. You want to find a goodness that’s better, that’s not harmful, that doesn’t have the potential for harmfulness. That gives rise to a sense of maturity in your mind. So there are a lot of ways in which the practice of empathetic joy, the practice of approving of the merit of others, is a maturing practice. You feel that you’re not lessened by other people’s good fortune, and you also reflect. You see people’s happiness and you say, “Well, this is what worldly happiness is like.” The happiness of being generous, the happiness of being virtuous, even the happiness of goodwill. As the Buddha said, there were many times when he could remember his past lifetimes when, as a king, he had reached the point where he had decided to give up the kingdom and go practice, and he developed the Brahma-viharas. But he said that was an inferior goal. He’d fall from the Brahma realms and have to start all over. So these forms of goodness, the regular forms of merit, unless you learn how to use them as objects of discernment, have their drawbacks. And that’s what’s maturing, and that’s what’s chastening. So as we appreciate the goodness of others, we should do it in a mature way. We’re happy for them. We’re happy for the goodness that they provide us so that we can continue our practice. But we should also take it as a motivating factor for going to go beyond that. So we develop the insight, we develop the wisdom, that allows us to find happiness that doesn’t fall, that doesn’t lead to any fall. That’s what we’re searching for. And one of the ways we search for it as we gain different states of concentration, a sense of stability, wellness in the mind, is to test things we’ve entered, best called the three perceptions, in consciousness, stress, not self. You attain something in the concentration. And as the Buddha said, you don’t quickly move on to the next jhana hoop. You settle in. You learn to appreciate it. Your ability to appreciate the happiness of others allows you to appreciate the happiness of jhana. If you can’t appreciate the happiness of others, if you look down on it, dismiss it, you’re going to wonder if you yourself are worthy of the happiness that comes, the pleasure that comes with jhana. So first you have to learn how to settle in with it. And then you contemplate it. Is there still any disturbance here? Is there still anything inconstant here? And you see that the level of stress or the level of pleasure goes up and down, up and down. It doesn’t go through any wild swings, but there’s enough for you to detect if you’re sensitive. And that alerts you to the fact that this is not the ideal goal. Because wherever the level of stress goes up and down like that, it shows that it’s not totally under your control. You can’t really take it as you or yours. So you’ve got to look deeper. That’s where you learn to look. Where is the disturbance? What’s causing the disturbance? And here we’re not talking about the disturbances outside of the concentration. There’s a disturbance in the concentration itself. You want to look for that. When you see what’s causing the disturbance, then you can drop that. The mind will go to a deeper state of concentration. And again, you settle in for a while. I was reading a while back about someone who had calculated that if you want to do all the levels of concentration in an hour, you can spend no more than seven minutes in each. You’re not going to see much in seven minutes. You have to be willing to stay. To tell yourself you don’t have to do that, you don’t have to climb the jhana ladders or jump through the jhana hoops. Stay right here. Appreciate the sense of well-being that comes, and then you can turn your microscope on it. Where is there something inconstant here? And keep at this. Eventually it’ll take you to something that’s beyond concentration. You’re doing the practice of discernment and concentration together. And because they help one another along, the fact that the mind is still allows you to see subtle things going on. The fact that you’re using discernment allows your concentration to get deeper and more and more solid. That’s one of the reasons why in the forest tradition they don’t make a radical distinction between samatha practice and vipassana. When you do it right, they help each other along. Those two qualities of mind get developed in tandem. But they start with some pretty simple things. And one of them is learning to appreciate the goodness of others. That allows you to have an appreciation for your own goodness and for your own ability to create states of well-being inside. And now it feels good. You don’t feel embarrassed about them, you don’t feel unworthy of them. Realizing that this is a path that the Buddha opened for everybody. He never taught, saying, “I’ll teach you the end of suffering, but only if you don’t deserve to suffer.” Whether suffering is deserved or not, that’s not an issue that he actually addressed. Do you want to put an end to that suffering? Well, this is what you do. You look inside to see what you’re doing that’s adding to the suffering, not necessarily. There is stress and the aggregates on their own. But that doesn’t weigh on the mind in the same way that the stress that comes from our own craving, our own ignorance, our own clinging. So you look right here. Based on the goodness that you’ve done, the goodness that you’ve appreciated, to the point where you see there’s got to be something better. So we move to that something better, not out of neurotic fear, but from a sense of well-being and stability, a sense of competence. A sense of self-esteem. It may sound strange that we’re going to be dropping our sense of self ultimately, but the large part of the practice is having that sense, as the Buddha said, that you’re competent, that you can depend on yourself, realizing that you do have to depend on yourself if you’re going to do the practice. Is there anything that gives rise to a healthy sense of self, competent and responsible? Confident. It’s all for the good.

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