In this Together

July 13, 2018

We’re having an ordination tomorrow, and every time we do, it reminds you of how much our practice is a communal project. We say that this is Tom’s ordination. But if Tom simply went up to the ordination hall there at Mappu tomorrow all by himself, nothing much would happen. It’s because the whole community is there. That’s what enables it to happen. It reminds us that his practice and our practice depend on mutual support. The community of monks accepts him in to train him. The community of laypeople are there to lend their good wishes, lend their support. We all work together. This is in line with the Buddhist principle that admirable friendship is the whole of the practice. Of course, this doesn’t mean that your friends are going to do the practice for you, but the practice depends on our support for one another. So as we live together here in the community, some of us live here long-term, others live here short-term. But whatever the term may be, we want to be good, admirable friends for one another. So we don’t get in each other’s way. So we actually do support one another’s practice. This means, of course, simple things like helping with the work around the monastery, not destroying one another’s peace, having some respect for each person’s concentration, but also trying to embody four qualities. Conviction, generosity, virtue, discernment. These are what make you an admirable friend for other people and also help you choose your admirable friends inside. We’re sitting here meditating. Each of us is in our own mind right now. You’re experiencing your body from inside, something no one else can experience. That is one aspect of the practice. This is individual, as the Buddha calls it, pacchittam, exclusively individual. This is where the work is done. But you find that inside there you’ve got some friends and you’ve got some not-so-friends, the members of your committee that are eating away at the practice and not all that helpful. So it’s good to sort them out, to figure out who’s who inside. That enables you to be a good friend. Outside as well. The quality of conviction, that it’s our actions that make all the difference. We see other people practicing. Sometimes we see that they’re doing well, and there are two responses. One is just getting fascinated with their progress, and the other is getting jealous of their progress. When you think in terms of karma, you have conviction in the Buddha’s awakening that what he said was true. Our actions are what determine things. And both your fascination and the jealousy can go away. The question is, what can I learn from another person’s actions so that I can gain those benefits as well? That’s the right way to look at other people’s practice. Of course, the other way to look at other people’s practice is when you see them doing something that’s not so inspiring. You turn around and ask yourself, “Do I have that in me too?” If so, then that becomes my karma. Why do I want that? Because when we think about conviction, the standard translation is conviction in the Buddha’s awakening. But what is the meaning of the Buddha’s awakening in your life? The meaning is that your actions make all the difference. I’ve been translating some of Ajahn Fun’s Dhamma talks, and he keeps making this point that we should just sit around and be miserable and have no idea why we’re miserable. So we make ourselves even more miserable. We keep doing the things that create more misery. He says, “Look, it’s your actions. This is what’s skillful. Generosity, virtue, meditation. These are the things that lead to happiness.” So whenever you find that you’re not happy, ask yourself, “Could I be more generous, more virtuous? Could I put more time into my meditation?” These are qualities, of course, that make you an admirable friend. So you can be a friend to yourself and a friend to others. Generosity, of course, doesn’t mean just being generous with material things. It means being generous with your time, generous with your knowledge. It means being generous with your forgiveness. One aspect of generosity that’s often overlooked, though, is the willingness to be on the receiving end of generosity. This is one lesson that the monks have to learn very early on. How to be gracious in accepting gifts and how not to push your way in front of the other monks to get gifts. In the Thai phrase, you place yourself in a way, you compose yourself in a way. You’re willing to live off the gifts of others. What that means, of course, is that a lot of times things will be lacking. Sometimes you’ll have too much of something and too little of something else. And you learn to accept that. You’re also happy to accept help, both in terms of material things and in terms of knowledge. This is how you grow. In thinking about generosity, think about both sides, being a good donor of the inner wealth you have and also being a good recipient. So that people are happy to give. One of our duties as a monk is to make sure that people are happy to give. That means we have to behave in a way that’s appropriate for the gift. It doesn’t mean that we have to do what they tell us to do with the gift. Jon Foon was very clear about that. Once a gift is given, it really does belong to the recipient. The donor has no control over it anymore. But at the same time, you want to behave in a way that is inspiring. As the Buddha said, you want to be either free of passion, aversion, and delusion, or else trying very hard to free yourself of passion, aversion, and delusion. So that people will see, at the very least, if they’re reasonable, that you’d make good use of the gift. So be happy to give. In that way, you’re giving a gift to them. If they’re happy and being generous, it becomes their perfection. That’s a similar principle to virtue. If you look after the precepts, you’re protecting others. But even more so, if you get them to observe the precepts, that becomes their good karma. In some cases, you can’t go around telling people, but if you can be a good example, it inspires people to want to be virtuous. I was in Thailand a while back, and someone had noted that even though I’d written a couple books on Vinaya, I was not all tense and tight around the rules. He said, “Well, that’s not what the rules are for. They’re not to be tense and tight. They’re for us to have a good sense of what is appropriate in our actions, what’s gracious in our actions.” So, as the Thais say, our body and mind can be at normalcy. The word “sila” in Pali has that meaning, something that you would normally do. But it also has a sense of normalcy for them in the sense that what is appropriate, what is in line with the Dharma, as opposed to being out of line. And as you observe the precepts, you find that you’re not a burden on others, you’re not harming them. And that enables you to meditate well, because there’s no regret about your actions. And it helps the community to live smoothly together with one another. And finally, there’s discernment, looking for where you’re creating unnecessary suffering. That’s one area where we really tend to be blind. There are so many aspects of life where we’re creating suffering for others and for ourselves, and we don’t see it because we’re focusing on something else. Other things seem to be more important. And to the extent that we are aware of the suffering we cause, we tend to write it off as either necessary or that it doesn’t matter. But here we’re taking it seriously. There’s stress simply in having a human body, trying to maintain the human body. But on top of that, there’s the added stress of craving and clinging, which is totally unnecessary. I mean, even Arahants have to put up with the stress of having a body, but they don’t have the stress of craving and clinging. That’s the stress that weighs down the mind. When your mind is weighed down like that, then it’s hard to help other people with a clear vision of what kind of help is actually appropriate for them. You’re leaning under the weight of your own problems. So when you’re leaning over, of course, your vision is skewed. When you see other people, your vision of them is skewed. So it’s hard to see what they really need. This is one of the ways in which cleaning out your own mind makes it easier for you to look at other people and see what they need. If you have something that you can share with them that would help them, then you’re happy to share. So as we become admirable friends, we find that in looking after our own well-being, at the very least, we’re not creating a problem for others. And many times we can actually be helpful in helping them look after their well-being. This is one of the aspects of the Buddhist teaching. It’s the happiness that the Buddha teaches that’s so important. It’s a happiness that does not create boundaries. In fact, it erases boundaries when you’re generous. There was a French anthropologist who wrote a whole book on the aspect of giving. In fact, it was the very first book of what we now consider anthropology. He was pointing out that when something is given, it creates a sense of relatedness. When you have to pay for it, there’s a barrier. When you give, the barrier is broken down. You should notice that everything around here is on the basis of donations. This is one of the reasons why in Thailand, when the monks refer to laypeople, they use terms that are terms of relationship or being related, part of one big family. When you’re generous, when you’re virtuous, when you’re not harming anyone, when you’re trying to develop good qualities in the mind, these are forms of happiness that erase boundaries, which makes it easier for us to support one another. But it also means that, as we have this sense of an enlarged family, you want to look after other people’s feelings, other people’s situation, with the same care that you would with a relative that you really love, that you really care for. When we have that attitude of being admirable friends, part of a large family of admirable friends, then the practice goes a lot easier. And for each of us, the development of the perfections goes a lot easier as well, in all areas of our life. So these are some things to think about as we approach tomorrow’s ordination and then move on from tomorrow’s ordination to continue our practice. That we’re in this together. We can either be in this suffering together or in this happiness together. The choice is ours.

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