Living Together

July 28, 2018

Tonight we begin the rains retreat. We make a vow that we’re going to stay here for the three months. We’re going to meet dawn every day here until a full moon in October, except if there’s necessary business. It’s an opportunity to settle down during the rains retreat. The rest of the year we can think about places we’d like to visit, places we’d like to travel. Now for the next three months we’re settled down in one place, going away only when it’s really necessary. So when the opportunity or the possibility of going out someplace else is not there, it forces you back onto yourself. John Funden had a nice comment one time. He said, “We’re entering the rains. This is a good time to enter into your body, enter into your mind.” So watch what’s going on there. What’s going on in your body? What is your body like? What’s your mind like? What can be corrected inside, especially in terms of the breath in the body? What can be corrected in terms of the unskillful qualities in the mind? Bring some appropriate attention to what’s going on inside you. In other words, look for what you’re doing that’s causing unnecessary suffering, what you’re doing that’s unskillful in thought, word, or deed. See the harm that that causes and see what you do to stop doing those things. It’s good to have a time like this that throws you back on yourself. Of course, you’re not going to be here all alone. Those of us here at the monastery will be living in a community. The laypeople will be coming more often. So it’s good to think about the principles that make our living together a way of supporting one another rather than getting in the way of one another’s practice. As the Buddha said, the two main things that help you practice. On the inside, there’s appropriate attention. On the outside, there’s admirable friendship. We want to do what we can to be admirable friends for one another and to live together in a way that makes us glad that we’re all here. The Buddha set out six qualities for living together. It’s good to reflect on them as we begin this time. The first three have to do with goodwill. Have goodwill in your deeds. Show goodwill in your deeds. Show goodwill in your words. Show goodwill in your thoughts. The Buddha could have put goodwill just as one of the factors, but he made it three. Goodwill, goodwill, goodwill. Wish for your own happiness. Wish for the happiness of others. Wish for true happiness for both yourself and for others. That means as difficulties come up, as disagreements come up in the course of the day, what can you do so you don’t cause any unnecessary suffering around it, either for yourself or other people? And when there are disagreements, try to show some respect, show some goodwill. And what can happen in any kind of relationship is contempt. You don’t really respect the other person. You don’t care about them. Goodwill is a way of showing respect. You show respect to everyone else’s desire for true happiness. Remember that story about King Vasanidhi with Queen Mallika? He asked her one night in a tender moment, “Is there anyone you love more than yourself?” Instead of getting the expected answer, she said, “No.” “And how about you, is there anyone you love more than yourself?” “Well, no.” So that was the end of that scene. He goes down to see the Buddha, and the Buddha says, “You know, she’s right. You could search the whole world over and there’d be nobody else you could find that you loved more than yourself. At the same time, everybody else loves themselves just as fiercely.” So his conclusion is not that it’s a dog-eat-dog world. His conclusion is that we should not harm one another. If you really want to be happy, don’t harm anyone. So as you go through the day, develop thoughts of goodwill. There’s an interesting place where the Buddha says that if you have ill will for somebody else, it’s not only wrong resolve, it’s also wrong view. To think that ill will would be anything worth cultivating. Irritation may happen, but it doesn’t have to turn into ill will. You don’t have to wish for somebody else to suffer. You don’t have to act or speak or even think in ways about how they might suffer. You want to act in ways that show that you care about their happiness. This means, of course, respecting one another’s space, and particularly respecting one another’s quietness. People are working on their concentration. They’re supposed to be working on their concentration all the time. So if you have something to say, make sure that it’s worth impinging on somebody else’s concentration. Or as they say, “Silence is golden.” So if you’re going to break silence, make sure that your words are worth more than gold. You’re not just shooting the breeze. This is one of the ways in which we show goodwill in our words. As for the remaining three qualities, one is being generous. You get something, you share. This is the way that we create bonds in the group. One of my students who was living up in northwestern Thailand, up in the forest there, was with a group of monks. And there was one monk who was in charge of the storehouse, the things that were supposed to be shared out among all the monks who were scattered around in different villages and hills. And they began to realize that he was hoarding. And that really hurt the harmony in the group. If we can all see that we’re all willing to share with one another, then even though there may be times when things are not enough, we’re all in it together. So if you get a little, share a little bit. If you get a lot, share a little bit. If you get a lot, share a lot. John Lee talks about Pratisibhile, who’s famous in Thailand as being the foremost among the Buddhist students in gaining material wealth. People were giving him gifts all the time. And the tradition says it was because before, whenever he got anything in terms of food, he’d always make sure he shared the food first before he ate. If he got anything in terms of clothing, he’d share a little bit of the cloth before he used the cloth. So you’ve got to think about what kind of friendship you can develop by sharing. That makes it easier to help one another. This means not only material things, but also sharing with the work. There’s a lot of work that needs to be done around here, and everybody who pitches in helps create a good atmosphere in the monastery. The final two qualities are being equal in our virtue and equal in our views, and equal in our customs. At the same time, we’re not using our precepts as a means of looking down on other people. The virtue pleasing to the noble ones is virtue without conceit, meticulous virtue but without conceit. And it’s a real skill to be able to balance those two. As for views, well, this gets back to appropriate attention. We’re here because we each see that we’re suffering from what we’re doing inside. The problem is not with the people outside, the economy outside, politics outside, the people right around you. The problem is the mind, the clinging and the craving, the ignorance inside. We want to work on that. And if each of us works on his or her own clinging, craving, and ignorance, there are going to be no issues. And our living together, as I said, will be an aid to one another rather than a hindrance. So think about these three qualities and see how you can help embody them as you go through the rains, for the benefit of others, of course, but also for your own benefit. Think of the acrobats. You maintain your balance, you help other people maintain their balance. In that way, we come through the rains not only safely, but also having gained an awful lot for the time that we put in.

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