May You Forever Be Well

October 5, 2019

May you forever be well. That’s something we chant every day. And it’s good to think about what it means. Partly, of course, it means that we wish one another well. It’s an expression of goodwill. But how can you forever be well? You look at the state of the world. Things go up and down. There’s gain and then there’s loss. There’s status, loss of status, praise and criticism, pleasure and pain. The Buddha himself was subject to these things. There were a couple of famines during his lifetime. There were sectarians. People tried to discredit him. Even people tried to kill him. So when we say, “Through the power of the Buddha,” it doesn’t mean that he can somehow magically make you well or make sure that the world is okay. But when you think of the Buddha, it’s important to think about his qualities. There are three that stand out. There’s his discernment, or wisdom. There’s his purity, in other words, his willingness to restrain his actions so that they would not cause any harm to anybody. And there was his compassion. Having found a true happiness, he wanted other people to be happy too. After his awakening, he could have just sat around and done nothing. His job was done, as far as he was concerned. But he realized that he had found something valuable. So he spent forty-five years walking all over India, even the very last day of his life. He was stricken with dysentery, and yet he walked for the whole day, because there was one more person he had to teach. And so it’s through taking these qualities as examples, that’s how the mind is forever well. It’s the nature of the body to be sick sometimes. It can grow ill and ultimately die. And the mind, of course, can even be more changeable than the body. You sit here and the body doesn’t change all that much, but the mind can go all over the place. But it can be trained so that if it changes, it changes in a good direction. And that’s what you want to be forever well. That’s the state of your mind, and that’s how you can feel happiness that’s impervious to events outside. It’s not affected by them. You train your mind well and it’s solid inside, at ease with itself. That’s the kind of mind that can be forever well. The Buddha, as he said, came from three qualities—heatfulness, ardency, and resolution. Of those three, the most basic is heatfulness. As he said, all good qualities of the mind come from heatfulness. The realization that there are dangers—dangers in the mind itself, not only dangers outside, like physical dangers outside. And there are also the dangers of people who set bad examples and teach things that would discourage you from trying to develop the mind. There are people who say, “We have no free will.” Or even, “If we have free will to make choices, they don’t really have an impact.” Those kinds of teachings can discourage you from making any kind of effort at all. They’re dangerous. So you have to be alert to the dangers inside and out, your own greed, aversion, and delusion. They’re dangerous looking inside. And the mind’s ability to change, if you don’t watch over it carefully, can also lead to danger. So you’re alive, alert to the fact that there are dangers. But at the same time, heatfulness means that it is possible to avoid the dangers. You need to be heatful. Your actions can make a difference. Your choices do make a difference. And as long as you have a strong sense of heatfulness, then the other qualities come. Ardency. You want to do your best to develop skillful qualities inside, to abandon unskillful ones. This principle is so important. The Buddha said one of the customs of the noble ones is to delight in abandoning and to delight in developing. All too often our delight is in developing unskillful qualities like craving, greed, anger. But here we have to turn things around. We have to delight in counteracting these things. And John Sowat used to say, “We have everything backward.” We think that craving is our friend and pain is our enemy. But we can learn a lot from how the mind reacts to pain. Get the mind in a solid state of concentration, then you can watch pain, and then you can see the different voices in the mind. You will learn a lot from it. Craving, however, even though it seems to be our friend, is the kind of friend that gets us to do unskillful things, break the law. And then when the police come, our friend runs away. So you have to look at your cravings with a little bit of skepticism and be willing to look more carefully at how the mind reacts to pain. So you can see the ways in which you add unnecessary suffering on top of it. In fact, the Buddha’s insight was, it’s the added suffering that you put on top of things. That’s what really weighs the mind down. If it weren’t for that, physical pain wouldn’t be that difficult. But we have this tendency. When there’s pain, we start thinking about how long the pain is there and how much longer it’s going to be there. All that pain, from the past into the future, weighs down the present moment so much that everything breaks. You have to look into the dialogue around the pain. Understand where you’re adding unnecessary burdens on top of the mind by the way you think about it. It’s in this way that you develop a lot of skillfulness in the mind, able to see the mind in action in areas where you tend to look away. Ardency means a willingness to look at the parts of the mind that stay in the shadows, that you ordinarily try to run away from, and face them down so that you’re not constantly being pushed around by them. This leads to that third quality of resolution, your willingness to stick with something that you know is good, even when it gets difficult. As the Buddha said, it’s a sign of wisdom when you see that there’s something difficult. You know it’ll give good results in the long term. And you’re able to talk yourself into doing it. At the same time, there are things that you would like doing in the present moment, but you know they’re going to lead to harm in the long term. And you’re able to talk yourself out of doing it. We tend to think of Buddhist wisdom as being very abstract, but it comes down to really simple principles like this. Learning to look for the long term. Because that’s what heedfulness is all about. You’re not apathetic. You’re not careless. You realize that your actions have long-term consequences. As the chant says, “Whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir.” You’re trying to do as much good as you can, then. And that goodness is not wasted. You’ll see many times when we do good things, the good things in the world get washed away. But the Buddha’s insight was that the impact of a good action can sometimes take a long time to sprout. It’s like a seed. We have these seeds here in the chaparral that can lie there on the ground for years and years and years. And the strange thing is, they have to be burned before they sprout. So you may have some karmic seeds that come from who knows when. But if you can burn them with your effort, with your right effort, you can allow them to sprout. So be confident that the good you do is not wasted. It doesn’t disappear. It just may take a long time to show itself. In the meantime, you develop good qualities in the mind. This is the mind that is well in spite of things outside. Confident, cheerful, resourceful. The kind of mind that’s good to be in, so that even when things outside are not well, the mind is well. And you develop the skills that make it well in a steady way, by taking the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha as examples, learning lessons from them, and then developing their qualities inside. That’s where the power of these things is going to reside. And that’s the power that can make you forever well. (crickets chirping)

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