In Memory of the King

October 13, 2020

Tonight we commemorate the fourth anniversary of the passing of King Rama IX of Thailand. We here at the monastery, as in all monasteries connected with the forest tradition around the world, have a special debt to him. The fact that Thailand was destroyed and was able to stay stable through many decades when the countries all around it were falling to the Communists, victims of civil war, allowed the forest tradition to flourish, gave the opportunity for people in Thailand and from abroad to side with the forest masters, and helped to keep the tradition alive. So the fact that we have wet metta, we owe a lot to him. So it’s good to reflect on his goodness, the fact that he was able to maintain harmony throughout the country. It was based on goodwill. This is a principle you see in the canon. Harmony that’s forced on people is not real harmony. Or harmony that simply tries to pretend that there are no differences is not real harmony. You need to have an attitude in which differences can be honored, but they don’t obscure the fact that we have a lot of needs in common, a lot of aims in common. That has to be held with goodwill. Goodwill is one of the perfections. It’s directly related also to right resolve. It comes under the discernment aggregate, as the Buddha called it, the discernment aggregate of the path. We think of it as heart quality. Discernment has its heart qualities. Remember that in Buddhism. The heart and the mind are not separate things. The word citta can mean heart and it can mean mind. It involves both knowing and willing. So with right view, you learn about the nature of suffering and why there’s suffering, and what can be done to put an end to it by attacking the cause. That’s what you take on as a working hypothesis and you work to know it. And part of working to know it means you have to will it. You have to bring that knowledge, or at least bring that view, to bear on the attitudes you’re going to allow in your mind. And non-ill will, in other words, goodwill, is one of the attitudes you have to foster. Now, goodwill is something we have for some people. But it’s not innate that we’re going to have goodwill for everybody. After all, our minds are human minds, and it’s the quality of a Brahma mind to have goodwill for everybody. But it’s a quality we can develop. We can lift the level of our minds. It helps to think of the good examples of people in the past. It’s another reason why we have a commemoration like this. All too often, we look around at the world around us, and everybody seems to be clawing their way to what they think is going to be happiness, and they don’t seem to care about whose eyes they gouge out as they claw their way up. It gets very discouraging. You begin to wonder if goodwill really is realistic. But then you remember, there have been good people, and they haven’t done good. The King of Thailand, he had his numerous royal projects for helping Thai people all over the country, people of all kinds, people from all walks of life. It shows that it’s possible for someone in a position of power to use that power for good. And the fact that people felt his goodwill, meant that they responded. That’s the difference between forcing harmony on people and making them want to be harmonious. And it’s the second kind of harmony that’s going to last. So we take those examples and we try to bring them to bear in our own lives. After all, goodwill is not something you simply sit and think about. In the abstract, you have to engage in, as the Buddha calls them, bodily acts of goodwill, verbal acts of goodwill, mental acts of goodwill. When you think about the people immediately around you, and then as the circles get wider and more and more encompassing, everybody you have any kind of engagement with, and even people you don’t have engagements with, you want to act in a way that’s not prejudicial to anybody’s true happiness. You can’t go around making people happy, but you want to make sure that you treat everybody with goodwill. Otherwise you’re going to create a lot of bad karma for yourself. It’s very easy when you have ill will for somebody to say and do and think things that are going to rebound back at you, and not in a pleasant way. So when they say goodwill is a perfection, it doesn’t start out perfect. But you have to make it perfect. I was just noting the other day that if you look in the four nagayas, which are kind of the core of the sutta, the most reliable part of the suttas, there are only three suttas that mention perfection at all. And all three of them have to do with good qualities in general, and you bring them to perfection, bring them to the culmination of their development. It was only later that the ten perfections became a list. We tend to think of them as something that you start out as a perfection, but they’re not. You take good qualities, skillful qualities, and then you have to make them perfect. You have to think about how you can develop your goodwill. It’s not innate in the mind, as I said, for everybody to feel goodwill for everybody else. If it were, we’d be living in a very different world. You can’t say that society has corrupted your innate goodwill, because after all, what is society made of? It’s made up of other people who are supposedly innately good as well. It just doesn’t add up. We’re mixed, and our minds are very changeable. They can change so fast that you even the Buddha couldn’t think of a good analogy for how fast they are. That’s what we have to work against. If we’re going to perfect our goodwill, we have to watch out and make sure our minds don’t change so easily. Or if they do change, they change for the better. So when you’re extending thoughts of goodwill, you perfect it by thinking of the question, “Is there anybody out there for whom you have ill will?” And if you do, a few faces may come to mind. So you have to ask yourself, “What do you gain, or what would you gain, from seeing that person suffer?” And if that person suffered from his or her actions, would that person necessarily learn a lesson? Because sometimes we think, “Well, maybe they should suffer a bit and they’ll understand.” But all too often, people, when they suffer, they don’t understand. How many people understand that they’re suffering because of their craving, because of what they’ve done? Most of the people in the world say they’re suffering because of somebody else. So when they suffer more, they’re going to lay the blame more on other people. So nothing’s accomplished by settling old scores and saying, “Then the person can be happy.” You have to change your attitude. You should be happy to help that person see what is right, see what is skillful, and find true happiness that way. Now, there are some people for whom you know you can’t do that, but at least you make sure that your intention toward that person is good. And as you work through the list of people for whom you have some ill will, there comes a point when you realize that it’s the same issue again and again and again. The desire to get back at somebody for the dumb things they’ve done, either to you or to other people. But where does that get you? That’s what keeps the world in conflict all the time. So you have to lift your mind above that level. Remember, we’re lifting our minds above the ordinary human level, getting them up to the Brahma level. It’s there that good will becomes a perfection, because it gets perfected. As I say, we look for good examples. Rama IX is a good example. He looked after a whole country. He made sure it stayed together and provided a place where people could practice the Dhamma. So we think of our debt of gratitude to him, and then we ask, “Well, how do we repay that debt?” One, by practicing the Dhamma. And two, in particular, by looking at the perfections we develop, the qualities of the Dhamma that we want to bring to perfection. And think of that as a gift to ourselves and to other people, and to the people for whom we have karmic debts—the people who’ve provided good examples in the past, who are caring on the goodness that they did. This is one thing you notice as you get older. You begin to wonder the goodness that you’ve been trying to do. Is there anybody who’s going to carry it on? And knowing that there are people who want to carry it on, that gives you more and more energy to keep on wanting to be good yourself. So we’re given this opportunity to practice the Dhamma, in part because of the fact that we’re still in the realm of the ninth sections. So we can think of this practice of the Dhamma as a gift back to him. It’s in being generous with one another like this that the human world becomes a world that’s worth living in. And we may not have the power to make the whole world livable that way. But to whatever extent we have an influence, we want it to develop in that direction. That’s the best way to think back on the goodness of the people who’ve passed away. In other words, you think of the goodness that you can continue to do to carry on the good work of the past. You make sure that, at the very least, it doesn’t get dropped on your watch. And you hope that it can keep on going.

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