Harmony

July 14, 2022

Tonight we have another rains retreat. For the monks that means staying here for three months, greeting dawn every day here, except in cases where there is a legitimate reason to be someplace else, in which case you can go away for seven days. Otherwise you determine that you’re going to stay here and gain the benefits of living in a community in a continuous way. In the time of the Buddha, the monks would tend to travel for nine months out of the year, finding seclusion, finding places where they can go and meditate in ease, in solitude, gaining the benefits of solitude. We get to see your mind very very clearly. But the Buddha also saw that there are benefits for living in a community you can learn from one another. And defilements that don’t show up when you’re living alone will show up when you’re living in a group. And if you’re earnest in the practice you want to do something about them. And you can also develop the virtues that come with living in a community. The Buddha talks about six ways in which you create harmony. And harmony is something that actively has to be nurtured doesn’t happen on its own. We’ve seen what happens when harmony gets destroyed. So it’s time to look into our desire for harmony, make sure that it is high on our list of priorities. But can’t you say, “I’m here only to meditate.” Because your ability to meditate here has to depend on the harmony in the group. It’s the harmony that gives rise to a sense of well-being. That sense of well-being makes it easier for the mind to settle down. So the Buddha listed six principles. The first three are basically one principle that he stresses again and again. You treat one another with actions of goodwill. You treat one another with words of goodwill. You treat one another with thoughts of goodwill. Goodwill, goodwill, goodwill. Wishing for the happiness of all the people here in the group. And of course it extends out from there. But as I said the other night, there’s that Thai expression that the tongue is close to the teeth and so it gets bitten often. A lot of times it’s the people we live in close proximity with that are difficult to feel goodwill towards. We get aggravated by their habits. We get irritated by their words. We forget that we’re all here trying to practice the Dhamma. And it’s hard to find places like this in the world. Different people have different levels of mastery of the Dhamma. So you have to take that into consideration and treat one another with forgiveness. If there’s any way that you can help the well-being of others, you’re happy to help. That’s what gets into the other three principles. One is that if you have any gains, you share them with one another. You don’t just keep them for yourself. You’re generous with the group. And generosity of course means not only generosity with material things, but being generous with your time, being generous with your knowledge, being generous with your energy. Try to find something every day which you can go out of your way for somebody else. Doesn’t have to be anything large, just little things. But try to find some joy in trying to figure out, okay, what would be a good thing to do for this person? What would be a good thing to do for that person? And make a point of going out of your way. They’re the duties that we do every day, every day. And you want to be solid and consistent in those. I was reading one time someone saying, that it’s best not to be consistent in your help to other people because otherwise they take it for granted. As if we’re helping other people only because we want their appreciation. We’re helping other people because it’s good for us. We learn how to expand our minds, expand our hearts. So it’s not just me, me, me in my practice. It’s us in our practice. And using your ingenuity and figure out ways of going out of your way for other people is a good use for your ingenuity. Because then the principle then applies inside. Think of the Buddha’s image of the cook trying to please the king or the king’s minister for whom he’s cooking. When you meditate it’s just the same thing every day, every day, every day. It gets kind of boring after a while and your expectation of what can happen in the meditation gets lowered. But if you can use your ingenuity to figure out ways to give some interest to your meditation, make each day have something a little bit special, that habit of trying to be special for other people in little ways will pay off inside. The fifth principle is having virtue on the same level with another, and especially on the same level that the noble ones would praise. In other words, we don’t have in common a low level of virtue. We’re trying to think of all the rules for the monks, make sure that they’re all being observed. The lay people make sure that their precepts are all good. Principles of right speech, including not only the precept for against lying, but also think of the principle of not speaking in divisive ways, not speaking in harsh ways, and not engaging in a lot of idle chatter. Idle chatter may seem innocent, but all too often you open your mouth before thinking what’s going to come out, and some things can come out that you’re later going to regret. So try to keep the principles of right speech on a high level. It’ll be a lot easier to get along with one another. And finally, your views. You want to make sure that your views are in line with right view. If everybody’s views are in line with right view, it’s really easy to get along with one another. So those are the principles of harmonious living in a group. They apply not only to the monks, of course, but also to lay people. Give goodwill in your head. Actions, goodwill in your words, goodwill in your thoughts. You’re generous with one another. You hold to the precepts on the same high level. You try to maintain right view all the time. What does right view say? If you’re experiencing suffering, look inside. If you’re irritated by somebody else’s behavior, well, look inside. Sometimes other people’s behavior irritates you because it’s actually unlike yours. Do you have the same kind of problem that that other person has? You see what it looks like from the outside. That’s what you look like from the outside too. Even if you don’t have that particular problem, you still look at why you’re irritated. And the irritation, even though there may be an outside irritation, it can be pretty strong, but still the reason you’re suffering from it is related to something inside, and you’ve got to look for that. If everybody takes care of themselves inside like this, and is generous on the outside, has goodwill on the outside, then we can live together harmoniously, and our living together is not going to be an obstacle in the practice. It becomes an adjunct to the practice, an encouragement for the practice. When the Buddha talks about getting the mind into concentration, he always says you try to give rise to a sense of well-being, a sense of joy. There are lots of ways you can do that, but one of the sources of joy is when you live in a community where everyone is on good terms, where everyone is trying to be harmonious, helping one another as best we can, where that sense of joy in the mind is willing to settle down, and willing to look at its own defilements. Not spending some time thinking about what’s wrong with this person, what’s wrong with that person, why don’t they respect me, why don’t they like me, why don’t they treat me like this. That kind of thinking can eat up your meditation. So if we treat one another with respect, it’s a way of helping one another with our practice. So these three months spent together will be an aid to the practice, and we do get the benefit of living together. Even though we have some sacrifices, there are some of the things that we would benefit from if we could go off and be by ourselves. This is a time of year to learn how to benefit from being together, with each person going out of his or her way to make it work. Then we can prove that the Buddha was right. There are advantages both to living together and advantages to being alone. And we learn how to manage both. As in Chan Phuong’s image, he says it’s like learning how to be good both at Thai boxing and in Western boxing. You can knock out your defilements either way.

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