Harmony & Cooperation

November 5, 2023

It’s been a busy day. We’ve been making noisy merit all morning. So it’s time to make some quiet merit. Focus on your breath. Close your eyes. And tell yourself for the time being you’re the only person right here. You don’t have to pay any attention to people around you. Look inside. You’ve got the breath coming in, going out. So focus on your breath. Where do you feel the breath? Take a couple of good, deep, long, in and out breaths. Notice where you feel it. Then ask yourself if deep breathing is comfortable. If it is, you can keep it up. If not, you can change. Try shorter breathing, more shallow. Faster, slower, heavier, lighter. Get in touch with what kind of breathing the body needs right now. If it’s tired, what kind of breathing will give it more energy? If it’s tense, what kind of breathing will relax it? Just stay right here. Try to keep your body and mind in harmony. We’ve been practicing harmony this morning in terms of harmony outside. Learning how to get along with one another as we do good. We think of the news that’s coming out in the world these days. A lot of it is really distressing. But we’re going to show that yes, human beings still can do good. Our news can be something different. People from different nations, different nationalities, different languages, different races, could all come together and agree that being generous is good, being virtuous is being good, meditating is good. These kinds of goodness draw us together. If we look for happiness in material gain, status, praise, sensory pleasures, it’s going to lead to disarray. It’s going to lead to divisions in society. Because one group gains, the other group has to lose. And it goes back and forth like that. And it’s back and forth. This is what keeps the world miserable. So instead of going back and forth like this, we try to lift our minds above the world. The world can spin around, but we don’t have to spin around with it. Because gain and loss, status, loss of status, praise and criticism, pleasure and pain, these things take turns coming back and forth, around and around. And we spin around after these things, and of course we get dizzy. We have no clear idea of what’s right and what’s wrong. But if we can lift our minds above that, and see that when good things come, they have their uses. But you have to be careful with them. When bad things come, they too have their uses. When there’s loss of wealth, you find out who your true friends are. Same with loss of status. When criticism comes, you can tell yourself, well, you’ve learned something. If the criticism is true, then you’ve learned something about what you can do to help end your faults. If the criticism is false, then you’ve learned something about the other person. Even pain can be useful. The Buddha said pain is the noble truth. We learn how to approach it in the right way. So we have the right attitude, lifting our minds above these things. Then we don’t have to engage in the back and forth where people get hurt, people get harmed. We’re looking for happiness in a harmless way. We do it through cultivating the sources of merit, like I said, generosity, virtue, meditation. We also develop qualities that create harmony in the group. The first quality is being generous with one another. The second quality is being kind in our words. And this doesn’t mean that we never criticize one another, because there are times when people need to be criticized for their making mistakes. But you try to find the right time, the right place. You show respect for the other person. Then by the other person, be more willing to listen to what you have to say. If you say your criticism with an attitude of disdain, an attitude of looking down on the other person, they’re not going to want to hear it. But if your criticism is true and the criticism is delivered in a way where you show respect, then it actually accomplishes something. A few weeks ago I was talking with an executive in a computer company. He was complaining that his underlings were complaining about his temper tantrums. He said he wanted to hold them to a high standard and they weren’t living up to his high standards. He was wondering what to do. He was expecting me to say that, well, you should try to lower your standards. And I said, no, you don’t lower your standards. You just find a better way to make people want to live up to your standards. So if you find that your criticism of the people around you is not helpful, you have to look at the attitude with which you give it, the time, the place. In other words, show some thought in how you deliver your criticism and that will actually help improve the group, whatever the group is that you’re in. The third quality the Buddha recommended is genuine help. In other words, when you help other people, you don’t just do it to make a point or to gain points over them. You actually look at what does this person really need, what kind of gift that would actually help that person’s real needs. That kind of help goes straight to the heart. When you’ve given genuine help to people, especially when they’re in dire straits, that’s when they’ll be happy to be part of the group. And then there’s finally consistency. Once you’ve started helping one another, you keep doing it. You become a reliable person in your help. You don’t just help every now and then for the sake of making yourself feel good. You realize, okay, I’m going to be here solidly, consistently. Then you become a reliable person. The group becomes a reliable group that way. If we live up to these standards, being generous, being kind in our words, giving genuine help to one another, and then being consistent in our help, then we can show the world this is how human beings behave. Because we’re born as human beings, we have lots of opportunities. Opportunities to do a lot of good, opportunities to do a lot of evil. So what are we going to do with those opportunities? One of the things we can do is we can show people this is how human beings behave, so they live together in peace, in harmony, doing good for one another, doing good for themselves at the same time. So this can be the news that we give to the world. Whether they know it or not, we know it. And we can inscribe it in our hearts. So we’ve done good on this day. This is a day in which we’ve given of ourselves and we’ve gained a lot in terms of the quality of the mind that get developed in the course of that. So take pride in the fact that you’ve done good like this. As the Buddha said, we look back on our generosity, we look back on our virtue, and it gives energy to the mind. So as you try to develop the mind even further, you run into difficulties, you realize that you’ve got something good to fall back on, that you are a worthy person for the teachings that the Buddha left behind.

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