

## *Harmony Inside & Outside*

*January 28, 2006*

Harmony is an important principle in our practice, both harmony inside and harmony outside. The Buddha extolled the monks who lived together in harmony—the description is of those who look at one another with eyes of affection and blend like milk and water. In other words, you put water into milk and you can't see where the water is, as opposed to where the milk is. They blend immediately. It's a situation like that, a society like that, where it's easiest to practice the Dhamma.

This is why a split in the Sangha, the Buddha said, is one of the five most heinous things you can do. Once there's a split, then it's difficult for people to get along; it's difficult to practice. Everyone spends his time talking about the issues, taking sides, and as a result very little time is left for meditating. And even if it doesn't get to the level of a full split, just the fact that there are factions or long-standing disagreements and grudges means that it gets difficult to sit down and meditate in peace.

Here in the West we have the idea of the romantic hero who stands up against the evils of society and battles corruption. In a situation like that, the ability not to get along is prized. But when you've got a society that wants to practice the Dhamma with a set of common goals, it's the other way around. Getting along is a good thing. You're not being asked to do anything immoral; you're not being asked to do anything against your principles. Most of the conflicts come down to simple matters of personality and personal preferences, which really are not worth fighting over. You want to protect your time to meditate; you want to protect other people's time to meditate as well.

This is why harmony outside is important, because it also helps induce harmony within. The two principles help each other along. So it's good to reflect on the way you're getting along with everyone else, to see how it helps or hinders your ability to get along with yourself. The Buddha talked about four ways to induce harmony. In direct terms, he was talking about harmony outside, but you can also apply these principles inside. The four are: generosity, kind words, genuine help, and consistency.

Generosity doesn't necessarily always mean being generous with things. It also means being generous with your tolerance, generous with your energy, generous with your forgiveness. That's extremely important. Generosity with things is limited. You have only so many things to share. Especially as we live here in the

monastery, we don't have that much around. So you have to be choosy who you give to, where you feel most inspired to give, where you feel will be put to the best use. That's the basic principle.

But in terms of forgiveness and knowledge, these are things you can give without stint. It lightens your own mind; it lightens the situation all around you. Forgiveness doesn't necessarily mean that you like the other person, simply that you're not going to pose a danger to the other person, you're not going to try to get revenge for the wrongs they've done you, you're not going to retaliate. Whatever wrong they've done, you're not going to try to play karma cop, making sure they get punished right away.

In terms of knowledge, you share your knowledge in a way that's not overbearing, but genuinely is helpful. We'll talk about that in a minute.

As a general principle, as we live in the monastery, there's work to be done: certain jobs the monks can do, certain jobs monks can't do. So whatever way you can be of help is a part of the practice. Sometimes we feel that the genuine practice is when you're sitting with your eyes closed, meditating, but that's only one part.

I remember reading a while back a book by a woman who had been doing a comparative study of a Thai temple and an Anglo meditation center here in the States. Among the first things she picked up on was that the concept of practice in the Anglo meditation center was much more restricted. In the Thai temple, everything counted as practice. Generosity, virtue, meditation, or in other terms, virtue, concentration and discernment—all the things that develop good qualities in the mind: That was considered practice, whereas in the Anglo center, it was just sitting and walking mindfully. That was it.

The author recounts how one night she was talking to one of the members of the Anglo center, and it suddenly hit that person that traditional Buddhists have a much larger view of practice. Just the fact they commonly present food to the monks could actually be part of their practice. For her, it was a real revelation. For us here, it's a simple fact of life. We do our best to help one another along. Whatever needs to be done, whatever way you can develop generosity of heart, that's a part of the practice. If you can't be generous in little things like this, how are you going to give up your defilements? Those are much more tightly held in the mind.

So generosity is a basis for the practice. In Thailand, when they teach little kids about Buddhism, the first thing little kids will learn will be how to raise their hand in respect, and then how to put rice in a monk's bowl. So, one, how to show respect; two, how to be generous. In the beginning, it may seem mechanical, but after a while the child learns to enjoy it. It feels good to show respect to people

worthy of respect. It feels good to be generous. It puts the mind in a much more open state. When you're generous, you're conveying to yourself the message that you have more than enough. When you're stingy, the message you keep sending yourself is that there's not enough, there's not enough. And which mind state is more likely to settle down in a state of ease in a state of concentration that's healthy and open? Which mind state is more likely to create a sense of harmony?

The second principle is kind words. When you speak to somebody, what energy is contained in your words? What impact is it going to have on the other person? You've got to think about this. Again, you want to show respect for your concentration, respect for the other person's concentration. So if the things you have to say are difficult things, things the other person may not want to hear, you learn to say them in a way that's not going to be harmful, that's not going to hurt them. You opt for the right time, you choose the right words to say, keeping the other person's feelings in mind.

Again, the more you disturb other people, the more your own concentration is going to be disturbed. So even when you have to disagree about things or you have to criticize someone about his or her behavior, the fact you do it in a respectful way, in a kind way, is going to make all the difference in the world as to whether your listener is going to be receptive to what you have to say or not. And it'll make a huge difference in how easy it is afterwards to settle your mind down.

The third principle is genuine help. When you help someone else, you don't do it simply for show or simply to show off or simply to prove your superiority. You look at what that person really needs. If you can provide for need, then you provide it. That kind of help goes straight to the heart. The satisfaction that comes out of it has nothing to do with self-image, just more that you really were able to provide the help that that person needed. And the other person will appreciate it more, because it shows on the one hand, the you really are paying attention of that other person's needs, and that the help you're giving is not simply to make yourself feel good. It's not hypocritical. It comes from a genuine desire to help.

And it creates the kind of harmony that can withstand the fact that we all have disagreements in the course of a day. If you've been a genuine help to the other person, it's a lot easier to get over disagreements, to iron them out, to actually feel not only forgiveness but also reconciliation when things have gotten difficult. In other words, you've restored friendship rather than simply telling yourself as in the case of forgiveness, "I'm just not going to pose a danger to that person." Reconciliation means you restore trust. And trust gets most easily restored when you're genuinely helpful.

The fourth principle is consistency. If you've helped somebody in the past, you continue helping that person. That's one kind of consistency. The other kind of consistency is that the way you speak about a person behind his back is the same way you speak to his face.

When you have these four principles in a society, the society lives in harmony, it lives in peace.

The same principles also apply inside.

Generosity inside: You're willing to give up your defilements. You're willing to give up any views that stand in the way of doing something skillful. And you try to create a spaciousness in your heart. When people are really, really anxious, really greedy for success in the meditation, that often gets in the way. This is not to say that you should be complacent or lazy. You do the practice, but instead of being greedy for results, you just say, "I'm going to focus on the causes." It means willingly giving up certain comforts, and giving more of yourself to the practice.

A lot of people are very stingy when they meditate. They want to put in just a little time and get a lot of results. But if you're generous in your meditation, you're willing to give whatever has to be given. If it's going to involve the pain of sitting for long periods of time, well, you're willing to give it. If you find yourself suffering because of some deeply held notions, well, you're willing to give them up, or at least try your best to give them up.

In that way, an inner generosity, an inner largeness of spirit is what helps the meditation get genuine results.

As for kind words, address kind words to yourself.

There's a famous story concerning Ajaan Khao, who was one of Ajaan Mun's earlier students and who tended to have a very strong and quick temper. He got upset at his mind one night because it wasn't settling down, so he started cursing his mind. Ajaan Mun sensed this, and the next morning said, "Don't do that to your mind. Don't curse your mind. It creates a really bad feeling inside." When the mind is obstreperous, when it's not settling down, do your best to urge it into concentration so that it's willing to settle down. Don't set up an inner voice of sarcasm or of putting yourself down, because that's destructive in the practice. Learn to speak in ways that are encouraging. Look for whatever scrap of progress you can find, focus on that, and say, "Look, I can do this."

And if there are ways that you have been unskillful, learn to speak to yourself, learn to train yourself in a way that actually has you willing to listen, so that the criticism doesn't add to depression, doesn't add to a low sense of self-esteem, doesn't add to resentment, because those things really do get in the way the practice. Learn to speak encouraging words to yourself.

When things get tough, engage in what they call the recollection of the Sangha. There are plenty of stories of monks and nuns who went through all kinds of hardships. One monk talks about meditating for I don't know how many years, decades, and not having a moment of stillness, he said, and yet he kept at it until finally was able to get his mind to settle down. So just because you're going through a bad period right now doesn't mean that you're hopeless. People have been in situations more hopeless than yours, yet they've been able to pull out of it. They can do it, you can do it too. Learn how to think in these ways.

This way, your kind words to yourself, even when you have to tell yourself unwelcome truths, help you to learn your lessons in an effective way. You're not just putting yourself down. It's instructive in the Buddha's teachings to Rahula when he was talking to Rahula about looking at his mistakes, that he says, "Learn how to restrain yourself. When you see mental states that are unskillful, have a sense of shame about that state."

Notice, that's not shame about yourself. Don't think of yourself as a shameful person for thinking those thoughts. Everybody, except for the arahants, thinks unskillful thoughts. Learn to see the thoughts as something you'd be ashamed to follow through with, but don't think of yourself as a shameful person. Learn how to make that distinction. It's important. Criticize the act, not the person. When you make distinctions like that, it's a lot easier to get through the dry periods in your meditation that are inevitable, and give yourself the encouragement you need.

Genuine help: This is what seeing things in terms of the four noble truths is all about. Look at what you're doing that's causing stress to yourself and to the people around you. Focus on that. Again, instead of getting involved in issues about what sort of person you are, focus on where the genuine problem is and on solving the genuine problem. Is something you're doing right now causing stress? Can you see it? Can you stop it? If you focus on this issue, then all your other issues get sorted out.

One of the basic principles of problem solving is that you try to see where the genuine causes of the problem are and focus on those. Don't get distracted by extraneous things. Get the mind to settle down so that you can see where the craving is, because that's the problem. As long as there's going to be craving, focus your craving on the path, on what you can do to observe your precepts, what you can do to get the mind concentrated, what you can do to start analyzing what's going on in the mind. Focus your desire, focus your craving there.

That way, you'll be able sort out what kind of craving is skillful and what kind of craving is not. If a desire pulls you off the path, that's something unskillful. You've got to watch out for that.

What this means is that you learn to sort out where the problem is, where the problem isn't. The Buddha didn't say all desires are a cause of suffering, just specific types of desire. The desire to get the mind concentrated, the desire to give rise to insight, the desire for liberation: Those are all part of the path. When you've got the path to measure things against inside the mind, you can see where the genuine problem is. That way, you can focus your efforts on solving the genuine problem at the genuine cause.

And then consistency: You've made up your mind that you want to practice, well, see it all the way through. Don't just take a little stab at it and say, "Well, gee, this is hard. I don't know about this." Or "It looks like I can't do that." That kind of defeatist thinking never got anybody anywhere. Sit down and ask yourself: What's really important in life? When you realize that a lot of things are not important, don't indulge in those. Be consistent in pursuing what you really see as the goal worthy of pursuit.

That lesson I've talked about where a woman playing chess decided that there was one thing in life she wanted more than anything else and she'd be willing to sacrifice everything else for that one thing: You get some people who follow that principle and they can wreak a lot of havoc in life. But when applied here, to the desire for a true happiness that causes no one any harm, it's a good principle to follow, because this is a goal worth pursuing. It's good all around.

As the Buddha said, this is the noble search. If you search for happiness in things that age, grow ill, and die, that's not a noble search, because doesn't take you anywhere that you haven't already been. You're in the midst of aging, illness and death yourself, and an ignoble search just keeps you here. But if you search for something that doesn't age, doesn't grow ill, doesn't die, that's a noble search because it takes you to a place where you're not causing anyone any harm. The mind is no longer its own enemy. Everything is working together inside.

That's what's meant by inner harmony. You realize ultimately that the mind is the big troublemaker in life. It goes from laying claim to this to laying claim to that, getting upset when the things that it lays claim to don't give the satisfaction it wants, and it goes all out of control, blaming this person and that. A lack of harmony inside leads to a lack of harmony outside. You don't need to read too much world history to realize what can happen when people's own inner problems get played out on the world stage. But if you can learn to follow these practices that lead to harmony both inside and harmony outside, the happiness

that develops is something that doesn't give you any cause for regret in any way. It's not disappointing in any way.

So learn to value harmony both inside and out as an important part of the practice.