A Mind Larger than the World

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Years back, when I was working on the book “The Buddhist Religions,” I sent it to a scholar who was an expert in early Mahayana. I had her read through the book, and she was surprised at the point I was making about Theravada, which is that most people in Theravada countries don’t think of themselves as following the Eightfold Path. They think of themselves as developing the Ten Perfections. She thought that the Perfections were a Mahayana invention. Actually, they came before Mahayana split off. And they really are a powerful way of understanding how Buddhism is practiced in Southeast Asia, Theravada countries. Because they deal with the virtues you need and the virtues you develop as you go through daily life. Some of them are related to meditation, like renunciation, which doesn’t mean just giving up pleasures. It means giving up sensuality, your fascination with sensual thoughts, and finding your pleasure and concentration instead. Others have to do with more dealing with other people. As the Buddha said, when you’re dealing with other people, you have to develop equanimity, you have to develop goodwill, kindness, endurance. And all those play a role in your meditation, especially the endurance. So there’s a special need for developing these qualities as you deal with other people. And practicing the Dhamma into your daily life, or bringing your daily life into the practice of the Dhamma. Think of the Perfections as the overarching set of Dhammas that you want to think about. They can all be explained under one Perfection, which is the Perfection of Determination. I was mentioning yesterday how someone was surprised that the development of goal-oriented meditation there was in some of my books. Well, think about the Buddha. He was extremely goal-oriented. He left home because he had a goal. And he kept on practicing, even in spite of many false starts, because he held to that goal. And even after he attained the goal, then he continued having goals. He decided he would set up the Dhamma, the Vinaya, so that it would last for a long time. That was a big project. Gaining awakening took six years. Setting up the Dhamma and Vinaya took forty-five. Every time he gave a talk, it was with a purpose. If he could get people to gain awakening by listening to the talk, that’s what he would try. If he realized that they were not ready for that yet, he would try to send them in the right direction. So he didn’t just give talks as a matter of ceremony. He didn’t teach as a matter of ceremony. He taught with a purpose. So when you’re thinking about bringing your life into the practice of the Dhamma, what is your purpose? Think about that. The Buddha would recommend that you make your purpose ultimately the end of suffering. Then you have to think about what you have to do in order to get there. What aspects of your life are getting in the way? What aspects of your life are helpful? You want to sort things out along with that standard. And then you think about the four qualities that go into a good determination. You start with discernment, just as the Noble Path starts with right view. You want to have a clear idea of what would be a worthwhile goal for your life, and then what you have to do in order to get there. Now under discernment, the Buddha would also list goodwill. At one point he said, “If you have ill will for other people, that’s wrong view.” Not just wrong resolve, wrong view as well. But goodwill doesn’t mean simply being nice to other people. It means thinking about what true happiness would be for you and for others. What you have to do in order to find true happiness. Use your discernment for that. That’s where discernment and goodwill come together. You could use your discernment for all kinds of goals, but if you want to go on to true happiness, you have to have goodwill for yourself. If you want your happiness to last, you have to have goodwill for others. And realize that their happiness is going to come from their actions. So when there are times when someone is going to do something unskillful and you can actually prevent it, that’s an aspect of goodwill. They may not like it, but as the Chan Fung used to say, we’re not here to get other people to like us. We’re nobody’s servant. Nobody hired us to practice. Nobody hired us to be born. But we think of their happiness because it has a bearing on our happiness. We think of their happiness in terms of their acting in skillful ways. Our happiness comes from our acting in skillful ways. This is why we’re not Buddhist doormats. And there is that case where the bandits have pinned you down, and they’re sawing you into little pieces with a two-handled saw. And that’s the case where they’ve overpowered you. There’s nothing you can do. You just have goodwill, starting with them and spreading to the whole cosmos. And that’s for your happiness. Because if you were to die at that moment with ill will, you’d be reborn in line with that ill will, probably with a desire for revenge. And a life devoted to revenge is not a useful life. It’s not a happy life. But if you can maintain goodwill in situations where you’re totally overpowered, that means your mind is larger than the situation. And that’s a lot of what Dharma practice in daily life is, making your mind larger than the situation, thinking what would be for the true happiness of everybody all around you. That’s the first aspect of a good determination, discernment, which encompasses discernment and goodwill. The second aspect is truth. It covers virtue, right effort, and endurance. Once you’ve decided that you have a goal, you stick with it, and you do what needs to be done. Whether you like it or not, whether it’s easy or not, you’re trying to be true to your goal. Otherwise it’s not a goal anymore. The third quality is generosity. Generosity here can cover giving up unskippable attitudes, it can cover the act of actually giving. And renunciation. As I said earlier, renunciation is giving up your fascination with sensual thoughts. You find your happiness in the practice of concentration. You want to have the concentration as your food as you go through life. Of course you don’t have as much time when you’re outside of the monastery as you would in the monastery. But you do actively have to make time for your meditation. Because the world doesn’t make time for you. This may mean little meditation breaks as you go through the day, having a part of the day when you devote it totally to the practice. And it goes with generosity, the act of giving. You give of your time, you give of your material wealth, you give of your energy, you give of your knowledge. You want to find opportunities to give as much as you can. The Buddha advises that you not harm yourself as you give. In other words, you don’t give so much that you’re depleted by it. You don’t harm others by the way you give things. In other words, if you give something to a monk, make sure it’s the kind of thing the monk can use and maintain his precepts. There’s a lot that goes into giving, and devoting yourself to giving is one of the ways you can find enjoyment in the practice, as you try to use your creativity in deciding what you have that you can give and how you can give it. What would be really appropriate for the person receiving it. That expands your mind. And then finally there’s calm, which covers endurance and equanimity. These two are related, they’re not quite the same thing. Equanimity is an evenness of your attitude. It’s the ability to put up with things and not retaliate. There are a lot of things we have to endure in this life. You want to make sure you’re not getting back at others for the things you have to endure. The more you have this endurance, then the more you can deal with problems of pain in your own meditation. Have the attitude, “Okay, negative things are going to come up, it’s a natural part of the world.” But you don’t have to wound yourself around them. In every case, all these perfections are a matter of making your mind larger than the situation. As you maintain a larger perspective, a sense of larger strength, as in the images the Buddha gives for goodwill, your mind is like earth. The people who are abusing you are like a little man coming along, and he’s going to hoe in a bucket. He’s going to dig the earth and spit on the earth and piss on the earth, saying, “Be without earth, be without earth.” But because he’s so small and puny and the earth is so large, he’s never going to succeed. You want your goodwill and endurance to be that large. You can make your goodwill like space. People can come and try to write things in space, but there’s no place for it to stick. You want a mind that’s not sticky. In other words, people are going to do unskillful things, they’re going to say unskillful things, it’s a natural part of the world. But you don’t fasten on it. This is why we say that it’s not a matter of bringing the Dharma into your daily life. It’s more a matter of bringing your daily life into the Dharma. Let the Dharma be larger, because it is.

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