

Harmony

July 25, 2021

Tonight we enter the rains, where the monks make a determination to stay here for three months. As we make that determination, it's good to stop and think, "What do we want to accomplish in the course of these three months?" We look at our practice. We look at our behavior in terms of our thoughts, our words, and our deeds, and try to have a sense of where our strengths are and where our weaknesses are—and how we can use our strengths to compensate for the weaknesses, to fill in the blanks, fill in the holes, so that the practice is a practice all around.

Ajaan Mun once taught that we should make our practice in the shape of a circle. In other words, in any area where we see that we're lacking, we don't just leave it there, saying, "Well, that's the way my practice is," or "That's something I'll just leave for some time later." We don't know how much time we have left, but we do know we have right now. If a certain weakness in your practice shows itself, this may be a good time to look into it, to see what you can do about it.

Because we'll be living together, it's good to think about the principle of harmony. As the Buddha said, the harmony of the Sangha is what makes the Sangha happy. When the Sangha's in harmony, it creates a sense of joy. That sense of joy then is more and more conducive to getting the mind to settle down with a sense of well-being, to get into good strong concentration—the kind of concentration where you can stay there in a stable way.

We have to remember that harmony doesn't just happen. Think about an orchestra practicing: They have to work, work, work to get all the different parts to come together. It's the same with when we're living together. It's so easy to fall into disharmony over little tiny things: A glance, a word here or there, can cause a lot of damage. It can be really discordant.

So, it's good to think of the principles that the Buddha taught on how to be harmonious. Some of them come in the famous sutta on the acrobats. We know the part where the Buddha says that each acrobat should look after him or herself

by maintaining his or her balance. In the same way, we should develop the establishing of mindfulness. In that way, by looking after yourself, you look after others.

But there's the other side too, and unfortunately we don't have an analogy for that one—where the Buddha says that it's by looking after others that you strengthen yourself. As you deal with others, you try to develop certain qualities that will be good for your mind.

First and foremost is patience, *khanti*, which can also be translated as endurance. It might happen that something people say or do could very easily set you off. There's a little bit of irritation, then from irritation it grows into dislike, and from dislike it grows into anger.

The important thing about endurance is that you don't react. You don't express the anger. You have to ask yourself, "Who established you to be the National Bureau of Standards?" Remember that you don't fall to hell through other people's actions, unless you put yourself in hell by allowing unskillful mind-states to arise.

So, whatever you can bear with patience and endurance, try to bear it. This doesn't mean that you become totally passive, it means simply that you learn how to be non-reactive. When the mind doesn't react, when it's not quick to be triggered, then you can see more easily what should and what shouldn't be done. Your sense of shame, your sense of compunction, can have some time to work so that your response to the situation is an all-around response, looked at from all around, and will lead to good long-term results.

Another quality the Buddha mentions is harmlessness. You don't want to harm anybody. When you do have to be critical, you try to find a way to do it in such a way that the person will be *willing* to listen, will take it to heart. It also means that if you're subjected to criticism, learn how to take it not as a sign of somebody's ill will. You take their words and you reflect on them.

As the Buddha said, when someone points out your faults, regard that as someone who's pointing out treasure. You look at what they have to say, and if it really is a genuine fault in your behavior, here's your opportunity to do something about it. But if it turns out that what they say is not true, just put it aside. Again, it's one of those things you have to learn how to endure.

The Buddha often puts endurance together with another quality, which is goodwill. No matter what other people do, you have to have goodwill for them. He talks about having goodwill as large as the Earth, as cool and as wide as the River Ganges. No one can make the Earth be without earth; no one can set the River Ganges on fire. Make it like space. People can try to write things in space, but it doesn't stick. You can take a pen and wave it around in space, and the ink doesn't hang there in the air because there's nothing there for it to stick to. You want to have a mind like that. When people say things, it doesn't reverberate, it doesn't stick.

Most of us have a mind like a big sheet of paper. If anybody has a pen anywhere nearby, it's like a magnetic sheet of paper. It pulls the ink out of the pen and becomes an indelible stain.

So when that happens, you have to remind yourself: Who are you going to blame? You're the one who made your mind like magnetic paper. Try to make your mind like space, where things don't stick. In that way, it's a lot easier to have goodwill, even when other people are misbehaving or behaving in ways you don't like. It helps you keep a larger perspective.

Then finally, the Buddha said to have a mind of sympathy. Sympathy is a little bit different from goodwill; not only do you have goodwill for others, wishing them well, but you actually do things that are good for them. You go out of your way to be kind. If everyone were to go out of their way to be helpful to everyone else, life would be a lot easier around here.

So look for little ways in which you can be helpful to others so that our living together is not a burden, and it's not an obstacle to the practice. That way, you find it actually is conducive to helping the mind to settle down, to look at itself, and to be encouraged to keep on practicing.

The principle of goodwill also shows up in the Buddha's principles for how to live together in a way that we can stay together for a long time. There are six altogether. The first three are goodwill: goodwill expressed in your physical actions, goodwill expressed in your words, goodwill expressed in your thoughts. The Buddha could have simply said "goodwill" once to cover all three, but apparently he wants to emphasize the fact: He's hammering it in: goodwill,

goodwill, goodwill—not only in attitude, but also in what you say and in what you do.

The other three qualities include sharing what gains you have. In other words, if you gain something special, you don't keep it for yourself. You think about other people. That, again, is the principle of kindness.

You have right views in common; not just views in common, *right* views in common. Everybody works to keep their views in line is what the Buddha taught.

And then precepts: Everyone holds to precepts that are appealing to the noble ones. In other words, you really hold to the precepts. If everyone does that, we can learn how to trust one another. That way, when someone says something, you know it's true. Someone does something, you know it's not going to be harmful. It's when we're not holding by the precepts: That's when mistrust develops in the group, and that can eat away at our harmony.

It's like someone coming to join a group of people playing music but playing in the wrong key, or playing with the wrong instrument: No matter how nice the rest of the music is, the one person really destroys it. So remember: Harmony is something you have to work at. It doesn't just come naturally. You may say, "Well, I'm just minding my own business," but that's a narrow attitude. Your own business also includes thinking of the group.

As Ajaan Lee used to say, "When you live in a monastery, make your eyes as big as the monastery." See where you can help—in line with that principle of sympathy, generosity, goodwill for one another. Be active in trying to make sure that harmony is something that's maintained, because it's so easy to destroy it.

As I said, with a glance or a word, it's as if you're playing out of key. So, actively think of this as something you want to work at, take some responsibility for it. If everybody's responsible, then harmony is sure to happen and sure to be maintained.

It's for our benefit—one of those cases where looking after things outside reflects back into the mind. It's going to make a much more conducive environment in which to practice.

You go back to your own place to meditate, and you're not carrying any recriminations, you're not carrying any confusion, any mistrust. You go back and

you can focus straight on what needs to be done inside. It's in this way that our friendship becomes admirable friendship, one of the factors most conducive to finding the noble paths.

Think about that. We can help one another here attain something noble by little acts in the course of the day. So see their importance, take it to heart, and the three months really will be beneficial.