Maybe the Buddha Knew Something

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And John Lee tells about how when he first heard about the forest tradition, the principle of staying in the forest as a regular practice, it didn’t make any sense to him. Why would anyone want to live in the forest? Why live in the wilderness? You have to remember that was back in the days when there was no romantic attitude toward wilderness. Wilderness was a dangerous place, a place of deprivation. Dangerous animals, dangerous diseases. You went in there at your own risk. It certainly wasn’t a comfortable place. They didn’t have all the gear that we have now to smooth it. But he reasoned that the Buddha taught this, there must be some reason behind that. And the only way you’re going to find it out is if you try to do it yourself. So he tried it, and he said he learned many lessons. One of the lessons he learned was from the quail. He was on his alms round one time with a couple of other monks and a novice. They came across a mother quail with lots of baby quail. And the mother quail gave a sharp cry, and the baby quail went running into a pile of leaves. She threw the pile of leaves with a stick to see if it could scare the baby quail out. But they wouldn’t move. They stayed still, as if they were just leaves themselves. He said he learned a lesson. There are times when it’s good to be quiet. Make no noise, so that nobody notices you. That way you can stay safe. That’s one of the lessons he learned in the forest. From that attitude, maybe the Buddha knew something that I don’t know. This fits in with the theme that Ajahn Sohat said that Ajahn Ma would like to teach a lot, which is practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. Not in line with your preferences, but in line with what the Dhamma says. For the purpose of dispassion. Now, dispassion basically means you’re going to let go of your old life. The likes. The things that you used to get passionate about. Because you like them. But the Buddha says many of the things we like are actually causing us suffering. So in order to benefit from his teaching, you have to give him the benefit of the doubt. And it’s important to remember that the forest Ajahns were not a gullible bunch. They tended to doubt what the Buddha had to say in many areas. But they would give it a try. And they found by giving it a try, and having that attitude, maybe the Buddha knew something that we don’t know. That’s how they learned. So when you come across rules that you don’t like, or teachings you don’t like, ask yourself which defilements are the ones that don’t like them. Because the rules are not there to be liked. The teachings are not there to be liked. They’re to challenge you. Because everything the Buddha’s saying in the Four Noble Truths is very counterintuitive. We’re suffering not because of things happening outside. And we’re not simply on the receiving end of suffering. We’re actually doing it. We’re doing things that we hope will lead to happiness, but they’re leading to suffering, stress, disturbance. And often we don’t even see the connection between our actions and the results we’re getting. Here’s the Buddha saying, “Look at the connection. See the connection. Look at what you’re doing.” And often it’s the things you like to do. After all, you don’t crave things if you don’t like them. And yet he says craving is the cause. We don’t hold on to things. unless we like them. It’s as clinging as the suffering itself. So these truths go against the grain. This is why they’re noble. Or one of the reasons why they’re noble. The main reason why they’re noble is because they are the attitude you have to develop, the way of looking at things you have to develop, that will lead to the deathless. Something that doesn’t age, grow ill, or die. But another reason why they’re noble is because they have you step back from your preferences. Step back from your likes and dislikes. And see where they’re causing the trouble. There’s that famous Chan saying that the Great Way is not difficult for those with no preferences. And some people read that to mean we just accept everything the way it is. But more likely the meaning is that there are going to be things in the path that are going to require that you do things you don’t like. And go against your preferences. If you’re willing to put your preferences aside, then the path is not going to be difficult. But that’s the rub. Putting your preferences aside. It’s not easy. But that’s the mature attitude you’ve got to develop. Another teaching that Ajahn Mun liked to give, which is related to the principle of practice, practicing the Dharma in accordance with the Dharma, was following the traditions of the noble ones. On the Canon they talk about these as being the tradition of being content with your food, clothing, and shelter, and delighting in developing, and delighting in abandoning. And with the contentment with those first three things, you’re not just content, but you realize that even contentment has its dangers. Because you get the sense that you’re better than other people who are not content. Like that Onion article of the monk raising his arms in victory. He had been declared the most serene. So that attitude of “I’m better than everybody else because of what I’m doing” is a problem. You’ve got to watch out for it. And if you’re content with things, but you also manage to not fall into that trap of comparing yourself with others, then you’re really following the traditions of the noble ones. That’s for delighting in abandoning, and delighting in developing. That means to delight in abandoning unskillful qualities, and to delight in developing skillful ones. Here again, it tends to go against our habits. We tend to delight in our cravings, and we do a lot to develop them. But here the Buddha is saying, “Abandon them.” Things are supposed to develop and cycle, and they’re very hard. Take for instance, another one of the noble principles is developing virtue, pleasing to the noble ones. It’s a very delicate balancing act. On the one hand, it’s as you observe the precepts in a way that is unbroken. In other words, you really hold to the precepts. What they tell you to do, you follow them. Even if it demands changing your habits. One of the precepts I’ve noticed that people have trouble accepting is the one against lying. They always say, “Well, what about white lies? What about lies that are actually jokes, that are not meant to deceive anybody? They’re just meant to entertain.” The Buddha says, “If you want to be a contemplative, you avoid even telling a lie, even in jest.” Which means you’ve got to look carefully at your sense of humor. It’s not the case that the noble ones were humorless. One of the things I liked about a John Fuhrer was his sense of humor. And people who visited a John Mahamboa said that even though he was very strict, he also had a really live sense of humor. In fact, all of the Johns, even a John Munn, who was supposed to be the strictest of all, had a very wry sense of humor. And John Fuhrer tells of the time when he first went to stay with a John Munn. He was still young, good-looking. There was a nuns’ community down the road. The monks would go there for their alms. And there was one nun who was attracted to him. She started making special Central Thai food to please him. She would crochet little things to hold his spoons and other utensils. And John Munn noticed this. First he looked at a John Fuhrer to see if a John Fuhrer was interested. A John Fuhrer was not. So John Munn turned his attention on the nun. One time the nuns came for some instructions, one afternoon. He asked them if they were observing the eight precepts. They were. And then he told a story of Lady Vesaka seeing groups of people observing the precepts. She wanted to know why. So she asked a group of old people, “Why are you observing the precepts?” They said they were observing the eight precepts because they wanted to go to heaven. So she went from group to group. She asked a group of young women. She asked them why they were observing the precepts. They said, “We want something better than heaven. We want a husband.” That was the end of the crocheted things. That was the end of the special Central Thai food. So even a John Munn had his sense of humor. So the precepts are not meant to be humorless. They just make you focus on, “Well, what does your humor lie in?” There’s a lot of really good humor in the world that’s based on telling things as they really are. So there’s no need to make things up just for a laugh. So on the one hand you are straight and observing your precepts. That’s pleasing to the noble ones. But at the same time the way you observe the precepts is conducive to concentration. Now part of that is because you know that you haven’t harmed anybody. You’re pure in your virtue. But at the same time you don’t get worked up about little things in your precepts. You don’t get anxious. Because you realize that once you know the precepts and you intend to hold by them, you maintain that intention, then you’re secure. And if there are slips here and there, you learn how to pick yourself up and move on. You learn the right balance between being strict and not being obsessive. And the Buddha says the people who have mastered virtue in this way are stream-enterers. That’s because they’ve seen the deathless. And they’ve seen exactly what the role is that the precepts play. They’re there for training you in mindfulness and alertness and the principle of harmlessness. It’s not through being a good little boy or a good little girl and following all the rules that you’re going to get awakening. There’s a lot more involved. And what it’s having is maintaining a sense of self-confidence. That you are capable of doing this path. That’s confirmed. That’s stream-entry. Up until then you’re always in doubt. And that doubt can eat away at you. So you have to do your best not to let it eat away. And at the same time not get slack in your precepts. Because ultimately what you want is the ability to be virtuous but not define yourself in terms of virtue. That’s not done until stream-entry. So there’s work to be done. This applies to laypeople observing the five precepts and monks observing their many, many precepts. But the principle here is that we’re not just here for our leisure, for our entertainment, or to do what we feel like doing. We’re here to be trained. And training means doing things you don’t like. The image the Buddha gives is of capturing a wild elephant. Wild element. We’ve got a wild element down in the parking lot. Capturing a wild elephant. Tying it to a post. Now the elephant is going to pull and pull and be very unhappy at the post. Because it’s going to be thinking about its freedom in the forest. But you treat the elephant well. Play music for it. Give it food. And when it finally accepts the food, that’s when you know that the elephant will live. And here the Buddha says the food is the food of concentration. But tying the mind down means if you’re going to stay in concentration, now you’re just wandering around wherever the mind may go. Any thought that would pull you away, any desire that would pull you away, you’ve got to say no. At the same time you have to learn how to develop a sense of ease and well-being around the breath or whatever your type of concentration is. So that you’ll survive. Look for your pleasure here. And you’ll be more willing to give up the things outside that you may like. But are actually going to be a problem for the training. All this comes down to the principle that we’re here to look carefully at ourselves. To understand where our likes are actually causing suffering. Things we may not like to do will actually help us put an end to suffering. As the Buddha said, basic principle of wisdom or discernment is if you know something that you like to do will lead to long-term harm, you know how to talk to yourself in a way that makes you want to avoid doing it, stop doing it. If there’s something that you don’t like to do that you know will lead to long-term well-being, you learn how to make yourself want to do it. That’s the kind of wisdom we’re working for. Wisdom that’s pragmatic, strategic, that understands the ins and outs of your mind and can learn how to use them for the sake of the path. Develop that attitude and develop those skills. That’s when you can be said to be wise.

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