

Counter-cultural Values

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There's a part of practicing meditation that doesn't really challenge the values we grew up with. Finding a quiet place in the mind, having a place where you can rest and relax: Everybody can understand that there's a place for that. And so when the mind is feeling really frazzled, it's very easy to see that meditation is something you want to learn how to master, that concentration— getting the mind still, finding some seclusion where are you can let go—is understandable and easy to appreciate.

But then our society gives only so much space for that sort of thing. Once you've rested and relaxed, then it's time to get back to work, the kind of work that they encourage. And this is where the practice of the Dhamma parts ways not only with American culture, but what you may call domestic culture at the world over. Because the work that needs to be done is viewed in a very different way in domestic culture than it is from the point of view of the Dhamma.

There's a story that when Mahapajapati was first ordained, she went to see the Buddha and asked for a short Dhamma teaching that she could use in her practice. He told her about eight values that would determine what is Dhamma and what is not Dhamma. When you look at those values carefully, you realize that a lot of them go against what our ordinary, domestic culture encourages.

They fall into three sets. One has to do with the attitudes you develop in the course of your practice. One has to do with how you relate to other people as you practice. And the third one has to deal with the goals of the practice. All three sets go against our ordinary culture. This is why Dhamma practice can be difficult. But it's also why monasteries are important places, not just for monks to stay, but for lay people to have the opportunity to come and step out of domestic culture for a while, to look around and see: What do you really believe? What do you really hold as important in your life?

The eight values are these: In terms of the qualities you develop in the practice, there's contentment, persistence, and shedding.

Contentment means being content with what you've got in terms of your physical surroundings: food, clothing, shelter, medicine, that kind of thing. And it's not really good for the economy. There was a period back in the 50s when American advisors went over to Thailand. The American government was afraid that Thailand was going to become the next Vietnam and so they sent a lot of sociologists to study Thai values, Thai village life. And the sociologists came back

with the conclusion that Buddhism was not really good for a capitalistic economy because it taught contentment. And so word went out from the Thai government to the monks around the country: Stop teaching contentment. Everybody laughed because they realized that was an important part of the Dhamma. You can't just drop this value for the sake of developing a consumer economy—though, of course, over the years, things have changed in Thailand.

But that's one thing that we have to look at: To what extent do you want your life to be dominated by the acquisition of things, being dissatisfied with what you've got, and wanting something more? As TV moves into a country—and in Thailand it was very dramatic because it came so quickly—you're exposed to a lot of advertisements they make you miserable. You see all the things that other people have that you don't have, and the advertisements are designed to make you want them, to see that kind of life as attractive.

So it's good to step away from a society that has those kinds of views, and remind yourself: That's not where the meaning of life is. It's in learning to be content with things outside you, because you have to be persistent in another way.

The persistence here is persistence in developing the mind, working on the qualities of the mind. Domestic society goes along with that to some extent, but when we start talking about abandoning sensuality, abandoning our possessiveness, abandoning our idea of self, that goes against ordinary values. And you need a lot of help in that direction.

Similarly with shedding: Most of us have had a life of accumulating, gathering up this, gathering up that, not only material things but also our pride: the things that we're proud of having accomplished, the abilities we have, whatever it is that we hold onto that we feel makes us better than the people around us. Those are the things the Buddha says you've got to let go of, you've got to put down, you've got to shed. Which, again, goes against a lot of our acquired values.

So those are just three of the eight. The next set of three also goes against ordinary values in society in terms of our relationships with other people: We want to be modest, we want to be unburdensome, we want to be unentangled. That goes against what society wants. It wants us to find our happiness in our relationships.

To get ahead in work, you can't be modest. You've really got to assert yourself, advertise what a fine person you are.

As for being unburdensome, on the face of it, it might sound something like a version of being frugal, but it goes deeper than that. The Buddha says one of the main ways we place a burden on the world is by having a family, creating more people, and then having to support that family. So the ideal way of being

unburdensome is to be celibate. You simply don't create new people. That goes against the values of domestic society in a very direct way.

At the same time, for the family to function properly, you've got to get entangled not only with the other members of the family, but also with the people you have to work with, the connections you have to make, the networking you have to do, in order for you to be able to support the family. When the Buddha teaches the value of unentanglement, it goes very directly against our social ideals. It sounds very unsociable—and it is. But it's a necessary value to adopt if you want to create the time and space to make progress in cleaning out your own mind.

And then finally there are the two qualities associated with the goal: to be unfettered and to have dispassion. Every time I've talked about dispassion with groups of people, there's a lot of discomfort around the topic. It sounds like someone who's dead. But that's not the case. It means freedom, because your passions are fetters, things that tie you down. Now, as you practice you have to develop a sense of passion for the Dhamma. But eventually even that is something you'll eventually let go of. When you find true happiness, you don't have to be passionate about anything. You're not dead, you've simply found what you want, found what you needed—something that really is satisfying, that doesn't need to be shored up and doesn't have to be looked after—so there's no need to stir up any passion to look for anything further.

So these are the values of the Dhamma, and it's good to be clear on the fact that they do go against the normal values of our culture—and not just our culture. We're not here to take on Asian values as opposed to American values, because even in Asia, even in the time of the Buddha, these eight values ran against the society.

So as we're meditating we have to realize it's not just relaxation, it's not just resting so that we can go back to our ordinary lives. We're thinking about a happiness that goes beyond the ordinary, beyond the typical, something that will change our lives. We're learning the tools as we meditate that allow us to pull back and choose our own direction. Because, as you're sitting here, a lot of those values in the society are sitting in your head as well. And the question is: How much do you really want to follow them? If you don't, how are you going to pry yourself a loose of them? Because you've identified so much with many of them for so long.

Take sensuality for instance. A lot of our society is built on that. According to the Buddha it's a fetter. It's something that ties us down and keeps us coming back again and again and again, to be disappointed again and again. And so when it comes up in your mind, what are you going to do? Society has already provided you with a lots of arguments for why it's a good thing. If you don't give into your

sensual desires you're going to get twisted, distorted, like that old Ken Russell movie years back, *The Devils*, where poor Vanessa Redgrave has been a nun for so long that she can't even walk with her head straight. She's been so warped by her celibate life: That's our society's attitude. But if you go over to Thailand and meet the great ajaans, you realize that these are really happy, healthy people and that a lot of their freedom comes from their ability to overcome sensual desires.

So what weapons are you going to use? The same ones we're using as we meditate. The Buddha talks about three kinds of fabrication. There's bodily fabrication, which is the breath; verbal fabrication, which is the way you talk to yourself about things. You direct your thoughts to a topic and you evaluate it. These are the sentences with which you describe things in your mind. And then there's mental fabrication: perception and feeling, which are the raw materials from which you might talk about things—feelings of pleasure pain, neither pleasure nor pain, and the images that the mind creates to communicate with itself.

When a really strong emotion comes into the mind, it's made of these three same things. But while you're meditating, you're learning to gain some control over them, some control over the way you breathe, some control over the way you talk to yourself about things. When you're sitting here with the breath, how do you talk to yourself in a way that keeps you interested in the breath and allows you to play with the breath and adjust the breath so that it's a really nice place to be? Then there are the feelings that arise from the way you relate to the breath, and the perceptions you use to keep yourself with the breath, or to make the breath more refined.

You can think of the breath as something you have to pull in from the outside, or you can think of it as an energy that swells up from within. The perception of pulling in is a perception of hunger. The perception of the breath rising up from each little cell, swelling up, and in that way getting the air to come in through the lungs: That's a different kind of perception of the breath—a perception of fullness—and it's going to have an effect on the way that you breathe. If you hold in mind the image that the breath is just able to come through those two little holes in your nose, that's going to create a lot of pressure, especially when you've got a cold and your nose gets stuffed up. But if you hold in mind the perception of breath-openings all over the body, with every little pore a possible breath-opening, what does that do to the way you breathe? You begin to see the power of perception over physical processes like this.

So you're getting some hands-on experience with these three kinds of fabrication. And then you want to learn how to use these three kinds of

fabrications as you master them to deal with other emotions that come up. Say there's a really strong sensual desire. Learn to look at it as a composite of those three things. There's the impact it has on your breath—and then the impact the disturbed breath will have on the mind; there are the stories you weave around it; and then there are the basic perceptions you hold in mind. Every desire is going to have all three parts. Sometimes a desire comes on and it seems like just a brute force. But if you take it on as simply a brute force, you've fallen for one of its tricks right there. It has its reasons, but usually its reasons are really bad. That's why it's using force. It's like a bully in the schoolyard. The bully has bad reasons for why he beats you up, so he just beat you up. He doesn't want to talk about it. He just uses a brute force. So what brute force do you have to respond? You want to use all three fabrications. In terms of the force, of course, there's the energy of the breath. Can you change the way you breathe around a particular sensation in the body? How about relaxing the backs of your hands, relaxing the tops of your feet? Relaxing your wrists? What does that do to the force equation inside the body?

Then look at the stories you were telling yourself about that sensual desire. Part of it will say: "This is how you're going to find happiness. If you don't find happiness this way, you're going to be starved." You have to remind yourself that you've been looking for happiness in that way for who knows how many lifetimes. It's the same old stuff over and over and over again. How about trying to find a new way of happiness? If this kind of happiness were really all that good, everybody in the world would be happy because they're all finding sensual pleasures. But look, everybody's miserable. There's never enough. As the Buddha one said: If gold coins fell down from the sky as rain, it still wouldn't be enough for our sensual desires. There are all those suttas in the Canon where the Buddha describes the person who is able to overcome sensuality as a true soldier, as a warrior who really is victorious. So the fact that we're not pursuing our sensual desires is not a sign of weakness or of our being wimps. It's the other way around. So those are some of the verbal fabrications that you might use.

And then finally there are the mental fabrications, those basic perceptions, the parts that deal with your lizard brain. Something deep down inside says: sensual pleasures, sensuality is something really attractive, really appealing. It's where you get real satisfaction. But how about looking into the other side, looking at the whole thing?

Ajaan Lee has a really fine passage in his autobiography, where he's made up his mind that he wants to disrobe. This was when he was still a very young monk. He decides he should prepare himself mentally for what it's going to be like, so he starts thinking about what would happen. In the beginning it's a really nice

fantasy. He gets the woman he wants, the best job he can think that he can probably get. But then he realizes that that's as good as it's going to get and then it goes downhill from there. His wife dies, leaving him with a kid. He ends up getting another wife, she has a kid, and then of course there's turmoil in the family. He was able to look at the picture from all sides. That's what got him out of that particular desire.

And there's a story in the Canon of a monk named Sundara Samudda. He was doing walking meditation one day and he had a vision of a gorgeous woman standing at the end of the path, her hands palm-to-palm in front of her chest, saying: "Why are you wasting your young life as a monk? When you're young that's the time for sensual pleasures. Come and enjoy sensual pleasures with me, and then when we're both old, then we can both ordain after we've tasted these pleasures." And in that moment, instead of falling for that image, he had this perception: "This is what the snare of death is. This is a trap. And this is how the trap is disguised." By holding that perception in mind, he was able to get past that desire, and he actually had his experience of awakening. He realized that all the attractions of sensuality were just that: bait for a trap, death's trap.

So those are some of the ways in which you use these three kinds of fabrications, on the one hand, to understand sensual desire, and on the other hand, to undo it. You realize you have the alternative. And this is an important part of the practice: realizing that a lot of the things you've picked up living in this society, living in any kind of domestic society, a lot of these attitudes that you've adopted as "your" attitudes are not necessarily in your own best interest. Maybe there's another kind of happiness. Maybe there's another way of thinking.

This is why the Dhamma is so valuable. They talk about how, as Buddhism goes from country to country, it fits into the society where it goes. Well, Buddhism doesn't do that. The people change the Dhamma as it comes to them. But the people who get the most out of the Dhamma are not the ones who change it to suit themselves, they're the ones who change themselves to fit in with the Dhamma. They use the Dhamma as a tool to find freedom from their cultural conditioning, from their cultural background.

So it's important to keep in mind the fact that there are these alternatives. There is another way of looking for happiness. There is a freedom that lies beyond our cultural conditioning. And as we're meditating it's not just a matter of learning a relaxation technique. It's learning to look very clearly at the way we look for happiness and at the type of happiness we can imagine, and to expand our imagination, to expand our range of tools and strategies, so that we can find the happiness that really is worth the effort that goes into looking for it, pursuing it,

finding it, and realizing it really was worth the effort, more than worth the effort. As they say, it's more than you can imagine. But it is true, and it is attainable, so you always want to keep that in mind.