

Customs of the Noble Ones

November 20, 2013

We spread thoughts of goodwill to put our minds in the right frame to practice: “May I be happy; may all beings be happy.” This means we want a happiness that doesn’t cause harm to anyone, and we want them to find a happiness that doesn’t cause harm to anybody else either.

Where are you going to find that happiness? You’ve got to find it inside. The happiness we get from things outside is the kind that can go only to some people and not to others. In other words, you eat something? It means somebody else can’t eat it. You gain something? Someone else loses it. They gain; you lose. That’s the way it goes with a lot of the pleasure and happiness of the world. But happiness that comes from inside doesn’t take anything away from anyone else. And it actually puts you in a better spot, where you can be more conducive to the happiness of others.

So as the mind is beginning to settle down but then starts thinking about other things outside, you can keep reminding yourself: “This is for the purpose of everybody’s good, what I’m doing right here, right now, trying to stay with the breath. And I don’t have to take on anybody else’s issues right now or any other issues of my own right now. I need to train the mind.” The only way you’re going to find happiness inside is by training your mind.

Thinking that way gets you ready to settle down with the breath because the mind can come up with all kinds of reasons for not staying here. You’ve got work you’ve got to do; things you’ve got to plan—whatever. But when you realize that the work you’re going to do and the things you’ve got to plan will go much better when the mind is trained, it’s easier to put those issues aside.

It’s like knowing that you’ve got to stop and eat your lunch in the middle of the day. You might say, “Well, there’s still work to be done.” But if you don’t eat your lunch, you’re not going to have the strength to do the work. And the same goes with the mind. When the mind is well trained, it can do all of its tasks with a lot more strength, a lot more clarity, and a lot more precision.

So think your way to settling down. Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths and notice where you feel the breathing. Where it seems to be most prominent, focus there. And allow your attention to stay there all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out. This part of the meditation requires training because the mind is so used to noting something and then skipping on to the next thing, telling itself, “I know this already. What’s next?”

We don't know *this* thoroughly enough. If you really stay with the breath, you begin to realize that there are lots of other sensations of energy in the body as well. They all count as breath. And they're all affected by the way you breathe in and breathe out. There's a lot to learn here. There's a lot to explore. You can breathe in a way that's really conducive to helping the flow of the blood go to all the different parts of the body, which is good for the health of the body. When the body feels comfortable like this, the mind has a much better place to stay.

But to be sensitive to these different flows of energy in the body, you have to be here with the breath for a good, long period of time to sensitize yourself to this part of your awareness. This is a part of the awareness that we tend to block out when we're doing other work—and we're very good at blocking it out. When you want to think about the future or think about the past, you've got to block out your awareness of the body. So you have to overcome that habit.

When the mind feels a temptation to go wandering off, you've got to settle back into the body again. Reestablish your connection with how the different parts of the body feel as you breathe in, as you breathe out. Where there's a tension or tightness in one part of the body, you could think of the energy flowing through there. In the beginning, you're going to see just a mental picture of the energy flowing through. But as you stay more and more continually with the breathing process, you begin to realize that the energy actually does flow. You feel it. There are some places where it's blocked, but when you can relax the blockage, there will be a flow of energy.

Sometimes the blockage is right where things feel tense or tight, and other times it's in another part of the body. So if you try to relax one part of the body and it won't relax, then the first line of attack is to go to the opposite side. If there's a problem on the right, focus on the left. A problem in the stomach? Focus on the energy in the spine. A problem in the spine? Think of the energy in the stomach. Ajaan Fuang talked about how, when he was young and getting started with the meditation, he'd have really bad headaches. He discovered if he could think of the breath energy flowing down the spine and out through the tailbone down into the ground, that relieved a lot of the pressure in his head.

So there's a lot to experiment with here. There's a lot to explore. It's not just in, out, in, out, in, out because if that's all there is, pretty soon the mind will go out, too, and it won't come back. It'll be out looking for something else, something that's more interesting, that seems more worthwhile or productive. It requires a lot of patience to stay with this, but patience is a quality that's good for all of us. Our culture trains us in the other direction. It trains us to be impatient. Otherwise, we won't buy their things. But we're not here to buy anything. We're

here to train the mind to find true happiness, so we've got to develop different qualities.

Patience is a good one to start with. But patience, here, doesn't mean that you just sit around and wait for things to happen on their own. It means that you work on the causes until you get results. If you don't do it skillfully enough the first time around, well, you try it the second, the third, and the fourth. It doesn't matter how many times you work at this. What matters is that you're observant and notice when things are going well, when they're not going well. When they're not going well, what can you do to improve them? And when they *are* going well, what can you do to maintain them?

This quality of noticing what works and what doesn't work is called *vimamsā* in Pali. It means using your powers of discrimination, understanding what the causes are and what the effects are, which causes are good ones and which ones are not, based on the results they produce. It's one of four qualities that the Buddha called bases of success. They lead to success in the meditation.

The first base of success is desire: You have to want to do it—but you have to learn how to focus your desire properly. If all you can think about is the results, nothing gets done. Nothing gets accomplished. Focus your desire on the causes. You want the mind to settle down and be still, but the cause for stillness is staying with the breath. So focus your desire on the breath. You don't have to focus on thoughts of how much you want stillness. Tell yourself, "I'm going to stay right here with this breath, and this breath, and this breath."

That leads to the second quality, which is persistence: really sticking with this, putting energy into this. In the beginning, you'll notice that you're with the breath for a while, and then it'll fade away. Then you notice you've wandered off, and you come back to the breath. Next time around, try to stay with the breath a little bit longer. Then, when the mind wanders off the next time and you bring it back, try to stay a little bit longer. Just keep at it, trying to make it longer and longer and longer.

Ajaan Chah, one of the forest ajaans, has a nice analogy. He says it's like pouring water out of a kettle. If you tip the kettle a little bit, there will be water in drops: drop... drop... drop. Tip it a little bit more and the drops will come closer: drop, drop, drop. Then it gets faster: drop-drop-drop. And finally, it's just a stream of water. Where does the stream come from? It comes from those little drops. They simply get more and more connected. That's the quality of persistence.

Then there's *citta*, intentness. You really want to pay close attention to what you're doing. If the meditation starts getting mechanical or automatic, pretty soon

you're going to be off someplace else, and you won't know how you got there. You want to pay very careful attention to how things are going.

Then again, there's your ability to analyze to see what's working, see what's not, and make adjustments as you see fit. There's a lot of experimentation that goes along in the meditation. One way of breathing doesn't feel good? You can change it.

Ajaan Lee recommends starting out with some long breathing because most of us tend to be starved of breath energy. This helps to wake up things in the body and wake up things in the mind. Then, if long breathing feels good, you stick with it. Otherwise, you can make it a little bit shorter. Or have short in and long out; that can be very relaxing. Long in and short out can be more energizing. You can make the breath more shallow, more refined, or make it heavier. There are all kinds of things that you can experiment with and learn from, because the needs of the body will change. The needs of the mind will change. You want to be able to stay on top of that, and to provide the body with whatever it needs.

Now, these four qualities—desire, persistence, intentness, and using your powers of analysis—are useful for any activity. So it's good to learn how to train them here, right here, right now with something simple like the breath. Then you can apply them to more complex projects. The important thing always to keep in mind is that we're here in training. So this is not a time to think about just whatever you want to think about.

The mind needs to be brought into shape because if it's not, it can cause a lot of trouble. There's nothing else in the world that causes as much trouble as the human mind. You can see it on a large scale and you can see it in your own life. You're sitting around, nothing seems to be happening, and all of a sudden a mood comes up and takes over. You find yourself doing and saying things. Then after the mood has passed, you wonder why it was so strong, why it seemed to be so overwhelming, and why you felt compelled to follow it, because when you look back on it, you realize how stupid it was. But at the time, it seemed to make a lot of sense. Well, what was that? It's a mind that doesn't know itself.

This is why we need standards from outside. It's why we need training to bring the mind back into shape so that it can learn to be more alert to what's going on. This is one of the basic principles of the forest tradition, that we need standards against which to train ourselves. We're not here just to follow our likes and dislikes. We have to realize that our likes and dislikes are out of control. But if we develop the qualities of concentration and discernment—these four qualities of the desire to get the mind trained, persistence in doing it, really being intent on

doing it, and using our powers of analysis—that can change the mind, make it more reliable.

We tend to think of the forest tradition as being very Thai or very northeastern Thai. But when it was starting out, people were complaining about how Ajaan Mun and Ajaan Sao didn't do things the way everybody else did. The way Buddhism had developed fit very nicely into everyday Thai culture, but Ajaan Mun and Ajaan Sao saw that it wasn't leading to nibbana.

When people would complain to them about the fact that they weren't eating like other monks, or dressing like other monks, or staying in the village temples like other monks—they weren't following Thai or Lao customs—they said, “Look, Thai and Lao customs, like the customs over every country in the world, are the customs of people with defilements. People's minds are out of control.”

What they wanted to follow was the customs of the noble ones—in other words, real standards. The word *ariya* means noble, but it also means objective, universal standards. So if you want to become a noble person, you have to follow the customs of the noble ones. Take their standards as your standards. And there are basically four.

The first three start out with contentment with things outside: food, clothing, and shelter. You learn to be content with what you've got, and you're careful not to get proud of the fact that you're content.

That's one of the tricks the mind likes to play on itself: All too often, when you give something up, the only way you can stick with it is to get proud of the fact that you're giving up something that other people can't do without. And that just becomes one more defilement of the mind. So on the one hand, you are content. But on the other hand, you realize that you're doing this not to compare yourself with other people. It's because the mind needs this kind of training.

If you spend all your time looking for better food, better clothing, better shelter, if you have to have food just like this or that, clothing just like this or that, or more shelter than you really need, you're wasting a lot of time, wasting a lot of energy. And it encourages the mind to stay out of control. That's why we so often have that chant about reflecting on how to use the basic requisites—what attitude to foster. If you have enough food to keep the body going, you're fine. If you have enough clothing to protect you from the cold when it's cold, from the heat when it's hot, you're doing fine. It's the same with shelter.

What's interesting is that the fourth requisite, medicine, is not mentioned in the customs of the noble ones. What is mentioned, though, is that you delight in developing skillful qualities and you delight in abandoning unskillful qualities. In other words, you give rise to *chanda*, the desire to do this. It's the first base for

success. For a lot of us, that's difficult because often the skillful thing is going to be really hard to like doing, as when you have to develop goodwill for someone you don't really like, or you have to put in more hours of the practice than you want to. This is where you learn how to talk yourself into liking it so that you're not just grudgingly putting in the time. Try seeing this as an adventure, something you're exploring or something that you're learning afresh—however you can present it to yourself that makes it attractive.

It's the same with abandoning unskillful qualities. We really like our greed, aversion, and delusion. In fact, we identify ourselves with our suffering. As the Buddha said, suffering comes from clinging to the five aggregates. And what is our identity made out of? Out of the clinging to those same five aggregates. We identify with our suffering. So of course it's going to be hard to let go as long as we say, "This is me" and "This is mine." This is why you have to look at these things as "not me" and "not mine." At the very least, tell yourself there must be something better. If you're going to identify with anything, see if you can find something better to identify with.

But the important thing is that you learn how to make yourself want to do the practice. This is where the customs of the noble ones and the bases for success come together, with that desire: the ability to delight in abandoning unskillful qualities and to delight in developing skillful ones. Learn how to see that as a really positive accomplishment in your life. That's what helps you stay here. That's what gives energy to your persistence and intentness and your ability to analyze things. Those four qualities can turn around and help you with the customs of the noble ones. They help raise your mind to a higher standard as to what kind of behavior is acceptable and what kind of behavior is not.

You're focusing primarily on *your* behavior and not letting the standards of the world take over. There are lots of unskillful things that the world will let you do and turn a blind eye or, sometimes, actually encourage you to do. They really are against the Dhamma, really against the principle of finding true happiness inside. So you want to take the standards of the noble ones as your guide, because those are the only ones that are reliable. The standards of the world change, and it's all pretty arbitrary which direction they're going to change and when. But the standards of the noble ones stay the same all the time. The way they were in India 2,500 years ago is the same way they are now. And it's by holding to those standards that we have hope for true happiness.

So learn to have the desire to bring your mind in line with those standards. You'll benefit. The people around you will benefit as well, because this leads to a happiness that harms no one. More than that, it leads to a happiness that doesn't

disappoint in any way at all. It leads to total satisfaction: a mind that has a real sense of “enough,” not because it’s trained itself to lower its standards, but because you’ve raised your standards. That’s where true happiness can be found.