

Customs of the Noble Ones

July 1, 2017

Try to content yourself with the breath right now. After all, it is a path, a path that leads somewhere good, and it doesn't save all of its goodness for the end of the path. If you're willing to watch the breath, get to know it, play with it a bit, try to see what kind of breathing feels good, it gives you an anchor in the present moment so that the mind isn't running out after all kinds of things. It's got a basic sense of well-being right here.

In the beginning, the well-being may not be all that impressive, but it's like a plant. You don't get upset at a seed because it doesn't give you fruit right away. You realize the seed is going to take time, so you water it, you care for it, and the seed will grow.

So talk to your mind to make it contented with what it's doing right now. This principle of contentment is very important. It lies at the basis of what the Buddha calls the traditions of the noble ones, or the family traditions of the noble ones. There are four altogether and three of them have to do with contentment: contentment with the food you get, contentment with the clothing you get, contentment with the shelter you get. Especially if you're ordained, you have very little control over these things. Sometimes you get a lot, sometimes you get a little. We tend to be a little spoiled here at Wat Metta, but there's no guarantee that things will always be good. And even with all the food that comes here, sometimes you want something sour and there's nothing sour at all for the day. You want something sweet, there's nothing sweet. I've had times in the past when I was in Bangkok and I had to walk down the street in the afternoon and they had grilled chicken for sale all along the street, and I kept thinking, "Boy, grilled chicken would be really nice." And then I'd get it in my bowl the next day and just the smell of it would make me sick.

So after a while you begin to learn not even to think about what the food is going to be. The same goes for the clothing. The same goes for the shelter. In putting up with these limitations though, you find you have freedom.

The limitations of course are the precepts: This you can't do, that you can't do. I was surprised when I ordained how many rules there were. I knew there were the 227 rules in the Patimokkha, but I hadn't realized that there were other rules as well, and I kept running into those. And of course there's always a sense of frustration because sometimes the things you do as a lay person, that are perfectly okay as a lay person, are not okay as a monk. You begin to feel hemmed in a little bit, but then you realize: This is a very small price to pay for the freedom you get to work directly with your own mind.

And that's what the fourth tradition of the noble ones is about. As the Buddha said, you delight in developing and you delight in abandoning. This is an area where you're *not* content. In other words, you don't say, "Well, my mind is just okay as it is. I'll put up with having greed.

I'll put up with having aversion. I'll put up with having delusion and I'll put up with the suffering that comes from these things." That's not what you do. You're discontent with the fact that the mind is creating suffering for itself. To stop that suffering, you want to learn how to delight in abandoning unskillful qualities and developing skillful ones, which often is the opposite of what we've been doing. We tend to delight in developing our craving. We don't delight in abandoning it. The idea seems very restrictive, very unpromising, but the more you think about it, the more you realize, okay, this is what's causing you suffering. So you learn how to delight in the fact that you're able to overcome a particular craving. It may not be once and for all for that particular craving, but you are able to overcome it in this instance.

If you find yourself thinking unskillful thoughts, then, as the Buddha said: If you're sitting, keep on sitting until the unskillful thought is gone. If you happen to be walking, well, just keep on walking until it's gone. And then when it's gone, the next morning when you wake up, remind yourself you're really glad that you were able not to give in to that thought. You were able to stop "weaving" it, as they say in Thai. That's what it means to delight in abandoning.

Then you think of the opportunity you have to develop all kinds of good qualities—all the good qualities of the noble eightfold path. As long as you're not worried about your food, not worried about your clothing and your shelter, you have lots more time, lots more opportunities to follow the path. So the trade is a good trade. You put up with a few restrictions but you've got a lot more freedom in return. And the more you're able to content yourself with whatever food, clothing, and shelter you get, the more free you are in other ways as well.

As you stay longer as a monk and you start teaching, you find that people have a lot of opinions about what they want to hear, what kind of Dhamma they approve of and what kind of Dhamma they don't. If you're afraid that they're not going to give you nice food, nice clothing, and nice shelter, you give in. And the Dhamma suffers; you suffer. But if you're able to do without, to say, "Okay, if I get it I'm fine, if I don't get it I'm also fine," then you're not afraid of other people's opinions. That's what helps keep the Dhamma true—and helps keep your mind true as well. As the Buddha said, when you practice these traditions of the noble ones, you conquer your discontent. In whatever direction you go, you're a conqueror in that direction. In other words, the traits of the mind that would make you give in to pressure to squeeze and distort the Dhamma, you're able to overcome. That's what it means to be a victor.

So when you're willing to put up with whatever happens to come in terms of food, clothing and shelter, you're free to focus on your real duties. Again, this is something I learned in my experience as a new monk. The cook we had in the kitchen was miserable. I had learned how to cook before I ordained and it was always frustrating to me that she would take perfectly good food and ruin it. I was getting all worked up about it until I realized, "Wait a minute, getting worked up about it accomplishes nothing at all. No matter how worked up I am, it's not going to change her cooking, and it's eating into my time to practice." So when I put away that

dialogue in my mind, I suddenly found a lot more time for concentration, a lot more time to do what I was really supposed to be doing.

As new monks, the Buddha said there are five things you want to focus on, and these things apply to lay people as they practice in daily life as well.

First is working on your precepts. Make sure you hold strictly to your precepts because as I said, things you used to do before you observed the precepts that you thought were perfectly okay, suddenly you've run into the precept and it says No, it's not. It's holding you to a higher standard. It's as if you used to look at your face in a very murky mirror, and you looked okay, but now you're able to polish the mirror. You've got a new or better mirror to see yourself more clearly. You can see your blemishes more clearly. That's the first principle.

The second principle is restraint of the senses. When you look at something, when you listen, when you smell something, when you taste something, when you touch something, who's doing the looking and the listening and so forth? In other words, are you doing it for the sake of greed, because of greed, or anger? If you do, you're just infecting the mind. You can't allow yourself to look and listen in line with your likes. You have to look and listen with the thought, "What inside me wants me to look in this particular way or listen in this particular way? And when I do, what are the results?" You learn to see your act of looking and listening and all the other sense engagements as part of a causal process. It's a kind of karma, your karma in the present moment, which as the Buddha pointed out is the important aspect of karma that's going to determine whether you're going to suffer from things or not.

So here's a preliminary rule to take on: If you find that by looking at things in a certain way gives rise to lust or anger, look in a different way. The same with your listening and all your other engagements with the senses. And if you can't think of another way to look, don't look. If you can't think of another way to listen, don't listen, until the mind can figure out how to be with sensory input and not stoke its defilements.

The third principle is to show some restraint in your speech. Again, here you're looking at your words not in terms of what you want to say but in terms of what you think is the right thing to say in that situation. When you speak in this way, what is it coming from and what does it lead to? Be strategic in your speech, reminding yourself that it's going to have an impact on the mind. What kind of impact do you want it to have?

The fourth principle to develop is seclusion. Find time to be by yourself. Don't be hanging around with people all the time, because the real work in life is the work in your mind, and the time that you have to work on your mind is precious time. Even here in the monastery, you find there are times when we have activities that don't give you much time. So when you do have the time, take advantage of it. When you're away from the monastery, the same principle holds, even more so. The world doesn't give you time to practice. You have to take it. You have to make it. Find whatever little cracks of free time you have and try to expand them, like a plant growing in a sidewalk. There may not be much space but you've got that crack there and so you

send out your roots and then the roots grow and they create more room for themselves.

Try to have that attitude to whatever spare time you have, whatever free time you have, not just when you're sitting with your eyes closed but also as you go through the day. Here around the monastery when you're doing chores, there's plenty of time to be with the breath as you're working on sweeping and making brooms and all the other activities that are involved in living here.

And finally the fifth principle is developing right view: realizing that if there is suffering it's not coming from outside. The suffering that's weighing your mind down is coming from inside. You've got to look at what's going on in the mind. Another aspect of right view is directly connected to those traditions of the noble ones: It's not simply that you learn to be content with food, clothing, and shelter and learn to delight in abandoning and developing, it's also that you learn how not to exalt yourself and disparage others over the fact that you have these qualities and they don't.

Remember the basic image of the Buddha as a doctor, and we who are practicing the Dhamma have illnesses in our minds. We're treating our own illnesses, which has nothing to do with other people treating their illnesses. There's no competition. In this way, you develop good qualities of the mind and you also protect yourself from whatever bad side you might be able to develop around those good qualities. In this way, you keep yourself protected on all sides and, in the Buddha's words, you're a victor in all directions. You've overcome your discontent with food, clothing, and shelter, and you've learned how to overcome your contentment with whatever muddled state your mind is in. And in developing this principle of skilled and nuanced contentment, you're free.

Think of the ways people exert power over one another in the world, and one of the primary ways is to make people fear about what their material circumstances are going to be. People in power can squeeze people in a lot of really bad directions that way, through fear. And what is the fear? That they won't have enough food, won't have enough clothing, won't have enough shelter. But if you'd overcome that fear, then you'd be free from all that unskillful pressure.

So these are principles not just for monks. They're also principles for lay people to practice. Because the possibility of being a noble one is not just for monks, it's also open to lay people as well. And as Ajaan Mun used to say, if you want to be a noble person, you live by their traditions, you live by their customs. Which have nothing to do with American customs or Thai customs or Lao customs or whatever... Chinese customs. It's through living in line with the customs of the noble ones that you become noble, too.