

To Get Ourselves

October 17, 2020

When we first started the monastery, Ajaan Suwat said something that really captured my attention. He said, “We’re not here to get anyone else. We’re here to get ourselves. If other people like the way we’re practicing, they’re welcome to come. But if they want to practice some other way, they can go someplace else.”

His was an attitude that Ajaan Fuang shared. In fact, this was common with all the really great ajaans: that you take the Dhamma and the Vinaya as your guide, and you don’t let people’s opinions pull you away from that.

This relates to a couple of themes that Ajaan Suwat said Ajaan Mun would talk about quite a lot. One was the theme of the customs of the noble ones. Ajaan Mun, as he was practicing out in the forest, was criticized many times. We tend to think of the forest tradition as being very, very Thai. But he was attacked for *not* doing things the Thai way, not doing things the Lao way. The way he wore his robes, the way he ate, the way he stuck by the ascetic practices, was very different from what was common back in those days, and he got a lot of flak.

And his response was always, “If you want to attain the noble attainments, you have to follow the customs of the noble ones—not the customs of the Thais, not the customs of the Laos, or any customs of the world aside from those of the noble ones. Because everybody else’s customs are the customs of people with defilement.” If you follow their customs, you’re not going to get out. The customs of the noble ones are designed to get you out.

This was a reference to two passages in the tradition: one is in the Canon; the other is in the Commentary. In the Commentary, it refers to a story where the Buddha comes back home for the first time after his awakening, and the very first morning he goes out for alms. This upsets his father: No one in the Sakyan family has ever gone out for alms like that, and he thinks it’s disgraceful. So he tells his son to stop. The Buddha’s response is that he doesn’t belong to the Sakyan tradition anymore, he belongs to the traditions of the noble ones, and one of their traditions is that they go for alms. There’s nothing disgraceful about it, it’s a way of developing a sense of detachment toward your food, a willingness to eat whatever you get, so it helps scrub away some of the defilements of the mind.

The other reference is in the Canon, where the Buddha talks about four traditions of the noble ones. We chant it every now and then. The first three have to do with contentment: You’re content with any old robe-cloth at all, any old food, shelter. Whatever you get in terms of those things, you’re content with it. But at the same time, you don’t exalt yourself over the fact that you’re content—you see that sometimes, people who puff themselves up over how little they can get along with. Instead, you use these requisites realizing that there are some dangers in the attitudes that you can develop around them. So you’re alert to the dangers and

you do what you can to avoid them. You don't exalt yourself as being better than other people in that area.

The fourth tradition you might think would have to do with the fourth requisite, which is medicine, but it doesn't. It has to do with taking delight in developing and delight in abandoning. And this relates to the Buddha's statement that *discontent* with skillful qualities was the secret to his awakening.

This means that contentment is not a blanket principle of putting up with whatever comes by, both outside and inside. With things outside, you learn how to adapt. If it's good enough to practice, it's good enough. With things inside, though, if anything unskillful comes up in the mind, you have to delight in abandoning it. As for skillful things that are not there yet, you delight in trying to give rise to them and developing them even further.

This is not usually where we take our delight. We tend to delight in our unskillful qualities. They've been our companions, as the Buddha said, for a long, long time. But you've got to realize that they're untrustworthy friends. They're not really friends at all. They're the type of friends who try to get you to break the law and then when you do they go running off and you're the one left with the punishment.

So if you see there's something unskillful in the mind, you don't just sit there and be content with it. You may have to sit for a while to watch it, but the purpose of watching is so that you understand what's causing it, where it's coming from, why you go for it, what its allure is. When you really see the allure and can compare that with the drawbacks, you see it's not worth it. That's when you let it go.

So those are the customs of the noble ones.

The other principle that Ajaan Mun liked to teach about was practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. In other words, you don't practice it in line with the customs of your day and age. You don't practice it in line with your defilements. You practice for the sake of giving rise to disenchantment.

Years back, I did a book on Buddhist Romanticism. The purpose of the book was to look at the Western tradition from the point of view of the Buddhist tradition. And one of the strange criticisms I got was, "Why can't we have a book that criticizes Buddhism from the point of view of the West?" Well, we have all too much of that. You open up books, newspapers, and magazines having to do with Buddhism and it's all about how Buddhism has to adapt. They go back and they look at the tradition of adaptation through the centuries and say, "See? Isn't that a good thing?" Yet they've never really made the case that it really *was* a good thing. They just take it as a given.

We have to remember that the Buddha was the best authority on awakening and on how it can be found. So it behooves us to be skeptical about our ideas about awakening and our ideas about how it can be found, and not use *them* as a standard. We should try to use *his* as a standard and see if ours measure up. See if we can develop some disenchantment toward our

old ideas, the ones we hold on to. That's when we know that we're practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma: when our cherished ideas can get called into question. That way, we can raise ourselves up to the level where we're worthy of the Dhamma.

People in the West tend to regard the Dhamma as a commodity. And as with any commodity, it's the customer who's the final judge. But what if it were the other way around? The Buddha's offering something for free, so it's not a commodity. And the question is: Are we up to it? Are we worthy of it? If you can hold the Dhamma as your guide, as your standard of measurement, and do what you can to lift yourself to that, that's when you get the most use out of the practice.

That's what it means to *get yourself*. When you're trying to get other people, there's always the question: "Well, why do you want other people? What do you want out of them?" But when you're trying to get yourself, you look at the fact that you're suffering, and someplace in the mind is that desire to *stop* suffering. When you're honest with yourself, you realize that the really heavy suffering is the suffering you impose on yourself. So the work has to be done right here. You have to get yourself—in other words, pin down where it is that you're lying to yourself or deceiving yourself or letting yourself down, and get the mind trained to a point where it's not letting itself down anymore.

That was Ajaan Suwat's intention in setting up this monastery to begin with. We try to maintain it, and it's something we maintain every day as best we can. He didn't have to gain anything from us. This was a pure gift. It was late in his life; he was already seventy when we were starting the place. He was able to get himself as we built the monastery, but in so doing he left a lot for us.

So it's not selfish, as he would say, to get yourself. If you really do, there's a lot of good that you can leave behind for other people who want to get themselves in the same way.