

# Humility

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Ajaan Suwat often mentioned that that one of Ajaan Mun's two favorite Dhamma talk topics was the "customs of the noble ones": the *ariyavamsa* in Pali. One of his reasons for focusing on this teaching was something that we tend to miss when we look at the forest tradition from an American perspective. From our perspective it's a very Thai tradition. But Ajaan Mun got a lot of flack in his day for going against Thai customs, Laotian customs – following the *dhutanga* practices, eating only one meal a day, eating out of his bowl, living out in the forest. People criticized him for this, saying that he was breaking with Thai custom. His response was that he wasn't interested in Thai customs or Lao customs or anybody's customs aside from the customs of the Noble Ones. He said, "If they're not the customs of the Noble Ones then they're the customs of people with defilement."

That applies to American customs, European customs, customs all over the world. "Only the customs of the Noble Ones," he said, "can keep you on track to the Noble Attainments." So it's good to keep those customs in mind as we're practicing. There are four all together, but the one immediately relevant to what we're doing right here as we're meditating is the fourth. The first three have to do with the use of the requisites: You make do with whatever food, clothing, or shelter you have. If you don't get good food, clothing, or shelter, you're not upset. You're content with what you've got. If you do get good things, you don't get carried away, you don't get careless. At the same time, you don't pride yourself over the fact that you're more content with these things than other people are. You use the requisites without doing harm to yourself or to anyone else. Those are the first three.

You'd think, listening to the first three, that the fourth would deal with medicines, but it doesn't. The fourth has to do with "delighting in developing, delighting in letting go" – in other words, delighting in developing good qualities in the mind, delighting in letting bad qualities go. In fact, the word *bhavana*, "developing," here, is the same word for meditation, but it means specifically developing whatever good qualities are needed in the mind. No matter how much effort needs to be invested in developing mindfulness and alertness, you're happy to put in the effort. You see the benefits that come from training the mind.

The same with delighting in letting go: Many things that we really should let go of are things we hold onto dearly. In terms of the customs of the Noble Ones, though, you have to learn to delight in letting go, to delight in renunciation, to

delight in giving those things up, for you see the benefits that come when you give them up.

As long as you have these two attitudes, you're on the path. In other words, you realize that there's always room for improvement, either in terms of developing good qualities or letting go of bad ones.

The question often comes, "Is my practice good enough?" Well, are you an arahant yet? If not, it's not yet good enough. There's more to be done. That's setting a very high standard. Many people don't like living with high standards, but remember what happens when you set a target for archery: You never hit higher than you aim. If you wish for true happiness, aim high, and then try to live with high standards. This means, on the one hand, not being complacent. On the other hand, it means not brow-beating yourself over the fact that you haven't reached the goal, not getting discouraged in ways that will actually get in the way of your reaching the goal. You need to have the right attitude toward making progress along the path, focusing on what needs to be done rather than on your image of what or where you are. What this means is that you don't get down on yourself but you realize that there's always a better way to do things. You learn how to focus cheerfully on where to improve. This is why so much of the practice lies in focusing on the present moment, because this is where the improvements can be made.

It also involves learning *where* to focus in the present moment – realizing that a lot of the big, abstract issues in the mind come down to events, very specific patterns of events. This is a lot of what discernment is: seeing the processes of the mind as they give rise to greed, anger, and delusion, or to mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. Even though these things have abstract names, they're specific events. Choices are made each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out. Look for the specific choice, look for the specific movement of intention that heads either in a skillful or an unskillful direction. Try to notice the trigger points that set off anger, set off delusion, set off greed or fear. Also look for the trigger points that help develop mindfulness, that remind you of what you should be doing. In other words, learn to break down the big job facing you into specific events in the mind, specific choices in the mind. See where you can make a difference with the specifics right here, right now.

This is a constant learning process. If you want to gain a sense of confidence in the practice, gain it from the fact that you're always willing to learn, instead of talking about how good you already are – which is a very hollow sense of confidence because it always has to be shored up as it's crumbling away. If you're willing to learn all the time, it can give you a solid basis for confidence on the path.

I noticed that Ajaan Suwat, even though he'd gone very far on the path, was always working on a little something here and there. Sometimes he'd take a volume of the Canon down to his hut, read about things, see if he could expand his knowledge of some of the details of the Dhamma. A year or two before he left

America, he asked me to come up with the English translations that we chant here in the evening. Up to that point we'd been chanting in Pali and Thai during the morning and evening chants. One day he said, "It's time we had some English translations around here." So I worked them up, and *he memorized them*. It took him quite a while, because English was of course not his native language, and he had never formally studied it, but he memorized the chant in English. He was always working at something.

What this attitude requires is humility: realizing that there's room for improvement, and that there are lessons to be learned all around. I've been reading a book on tracking animals, the physical and mental skills needed to go out into the wilderness and notice things that you wouldn't ordinarily notice. The author says that one of the qualities needed in tracking is *empathy*: empathy for the animals you're trying to follow, realizing that you have something to learn from them. Even though they're common animals, they've got something to teach. You empathize with them, and you have humility. As he says, those are two qualities sorely lacking in our society. We reward people who come on with a really strong sense of self-confidence, a sense of self-esteem, a strong sense of pride. And yet those attitudes get in the way of learning a lot of subtle, important things.

So remember, we're here to learn – not only from the obvious places, such as Dhamma books and Dhamma talks, but also from all the specific things around us. They're teaching us lessons in terms of cause and effect. Last week someone came with the question of how to welcome difficult events in life. Well, look on them with humility. There's a lesson to be learned. When you're open to learning that lesson, you gain in knowledge. That way there's hope. When you close off your willingness to learn, there's no hope for you on the path.

So even with little things like sitting here with the breath: You watch one breath and you can ask yourself, "How can this breath be more comfortable than the one before it?" Look and see what your sense of the body has to tell you that way. It might be a part of the body you've been ignoring all along. Give it some good breath energy. Then, when the next breath comes in, here's another chance to learn from the breath. And the lesson might be, "Don't mess with me. Just sit and watch." But whatever the lesson, try to watch carefully. Try to empathize with each breath.

And try not to be mechanical in the way you breathe, thinking that if you can somehow get through a thousand breaths you're going to gain Awakening. It's best to take each breath one at a time, because that's all you've got: one breath at a time. We're not just trying to get through the breathing to the end of the hour. We want to open up and appreciate each breath for what it has to teach us. It teaches us about the processes of breathing, it teaches us about where our blind spots have been.

So, approach the breath with an attitude of humility and empathy. Delight in the opportunity it gives you – each time you breathe in, each time you breathe

out – to abandon unskillful mental qualities and develop skillful ones: more mindfulness, more alertness, more consistency in the way you make an effort in the meditation.

Several skills are involved here. In addition to the attitude of empathy with the breath and humility in learning the Dhamma, there's also an ability to break down the larger issues in this recalcitrant mind of ours into smaller ones. We have to learn how to break down all of its unskillful qualities into manageable bits so that we can really observe how they take control. That way we can see how specific skillful qualities can be strengthened to fend them off. You can read the books and learn all about the names for these skillful and unskillful qualities, but to get results you really have to be alert and sensitive to each individual movement of the mind. This is where the humility lies, because a lot of time the lessons we're going to learn are the lessons that come from little things.

A few days ago I was in a Dhamma discussion in Laguna Beach and we got into the first precept, dealing with ants and termites. After a while, someone made a sarcastic comment: "Gee, what a profound Dhamma discussion we're having here, talking about ants and termites." Well, that comment misses the whole point. The way we treat ants and termites is very important in our practice. It's in how we deal with the little things that spreads out and influences how we deal with the larger issues. If you learn to show respect for ants and termites, it means you can learn how to show respect for other things as well, little things that you wouldn't anticipate.

There's that classic story about the Buddha during his quest for Awakening. He had attained all the states the teachers of his time recommended but he still wasn't satisfied. He had tried years of self-torture, but hadn't gotten anywhere. He was at an impasse. Then he came across the simile of the lute that was strung too tight, the lute that was strung too loose. One version of the story says that a woman happened to pass by in the forest singing a song on this topic. He learned something from her that he hadn't learned from all the highly respected teachers of those times.

That's what's meant by an attitude of humility: a willingness to learn from the little things, no matter where they show themselves. Humility requires being attentive, watchful, not assuming that you already know, that you're already good, realizing that there's always room for improvement. You have to delight in that fact, to delight in actually making the improvements, letting go of the unskillful qualities in the mind, developing the skillful ones. This is how we follow the customs of the Noble Ones. And that way we open ourselves to the opportunity of experiencing the attainments that the Noble Ones have attained.