

The Essence of the Dhamma

July 28, 2012

We look at the forest tradition and to us it seems very Thai. We forget that when Ajaan Mun was alive he was often accused of not following Thai customs, or Lao customs. He followed the Vinaya very closely, and that required that he not follow a lot of the customs that had developed around village Buddhism in Thailand and Laos. But every time he was accused of not following those customs, he replied that the customs of Thailand, or Laos, or *any* country are the customs of the people with defilements. He was more interested in following the customs of the noble ones.

As he said, if you wanted to become a noble one yourself, you have to follow their ways of doing things and not be concerned about the customs of the country you come from or your background. You have to be willing to remake yourself in line with the Dhamma, rather than trying to shape the Dhamma to fit your own ideas.

The phrase “customs of the noble ones” appears twice in the texts, once in the Canon, once in the commentary. In the commentary it comes in the story of the Buddha’s life after he gained awakening and began teaching. He was invited back to his home city, and the day he came back, he went out for alms. The Buddha’s father upbraided him for this, that in their family lineage they had never done anything like that. He was a member of a noble warrior caste, and it was considered disgraceful for a noble warrior to go for alms. The Buddha replied, “I no longer belong to the lineage of noble warriors; I no longer follow their customs. I belong to the lineage of the noble ones. Theirs are the customs I follow.”

That’s a harsh thing to say to your father, but it was necessary. The Buddha had to break with many Indian customs, just as Ajaan Mun had to break with many Thai customs. Of course, as we bring that principle into our own practice, it means that we’re going to have to break with American customs, or European customs, or Australian, New Zealand, whatever customs. We have to hold to whatever’s required by the path.

This is where the Canon's teachings on the customs on the noble ones come in. There are four. The first three have to do with contentment. You're content with whatever clothing you have—which, for a monk, means content with your robes. You're content with whatever food you get. You're content with your shelter. You don't get worked up about trying to improve these things—because you look at what you've got and you realize it's good enough for the practice. Part of that chant in today's ordination ceremony dealt with the basic supports for a monk: alms food, rags robe, the foot of a tree for your shelter. It's not much. What we have here is a lot more comfortable than that, which means that what we've got here is good enough for the practice.

This frees us to focus on that fourth custom of the noble ones. You would think—with the first three covering contentment with food, clothing, and shelter—the fourth one would cover contentment with medicine, but it doesn't. It covers taking delight in developing and taking delight in abandoning: in other words, taking delight in developing skillful qualities of the mind and delight in abandoning unskillful ones. This is one area where you don't just rest content with what you've got. You're always trying to improve things in the mind. The Buddha himself said that part of the secret of his gaining awakening was that he didn't rest content with skillful qualities. He kept trying to find out and to master what was more skillful.

This means that you turn your attention away from trying to make your hut as nice as possible, or your robes as nice as possible, or worrying about the food, or the diet. Those are not the issues. The issues are the skillful and unskillful qualities in your mind.

Now in addition to being content about the right things, the Buddha also says you don't exalt yourself or disparage others over the fact that you are content and they're not content with the surroundings. That's a danger that you've got to watch out for. The fact that you live a simple life is not the goal in and of itself. It's a means. Look at it as your medicine. You've got your illness, you take your medicine. Other people may be ill and whether they're taking their medicine or not is no grounds for you to exalt yourself over them.

You don't even exalt yourself over the fact that you're more likely to find delight in developing skillful qualities or abandoning unskillful qualities than other people are. Again, the delight is medicine for your mind. It's like being in a hospital. Some people take their medicine, other people don't, and you feel sorry for those who don't, but you don't exalt yourself for the fact that you're taking your medicine. You've got your disease; they have their diseases. You work on yours. And be very heedful of the fact that one of your diseases is this tendency to exalt yourself over other people. So always keep that in mind.

You look in your mind and you see what needs developing. Right now it's mindfulness. Alertness. You want to be as consistent as possible in keeping your breath in mind, and in being alert to the breath, at the same time being alert to what's going on in the mind. Anything that might pull you away from the breath, you've got to be on top of it. Don't let yourself get hoodwinked by it. If you find that you've left the breath, then come right back. You don't have to tie up the loose ends of your thoughts before you leave them and return to the breath. Leave the thoughts dangling. Leave the loose ends loose. Come right back to the breath.

And learn how to use the breath as a means for staying present in the moment. This means taking an interest in the breath, exploring the possibilities of this breath energy in the body. How can you breathe in a way that helps the mind to settle down? How can you best think about the breath? What mental image do you have of the breath that makes the breath more satisfying? You can try different ways of thinking about the breath. Think of it coming in and out of all your pores. Or if you have a headache, think of the breath energy going down as you breathe in. If you're feeling heavy or sluggish, think of the breath energy coming up.

Take an interest in the present moment, because this is the most interesting part of your life. We tend to measure our life in terms of our plans for the future and our memories of the past. But the way your mind is shaping your life is happening right now. This is the only place where you can watch it in action and make a difference in the choices it's making. So you want to do your best to find something in the present that keeps you interested and

keeps you anchored here, so that you can watch the processes of the mind and see what really is skillful and what's not.

Now these standards are always true. Some people think the idea that there's something unchangeable about the Dhamma is ironic. After all, didn't the Buddha teach all about change? Well, yes, he did teach about change, but he didn't say that change was a good thing or a bad thing. It depends on where the change is going.

And remember, his whole purpose in practicing the Dhamma to begin with was to find something that didn't change. He saw that he himself was subject to aging, illness, and death. He was looking for happiness in other things that were subject to aging, illness, and death, and he realized that that was totally pointless. Is there something that doesn't age? Doesn't grow ill, doesn't die? That would have to be something outside of space and time.

That doesn't mean you have to go to the edge of the universe to find it, he said. You look inside the mind. Is there dimension that you can touch within the mind that's unchanging? That doesn't come under space and time? And the Buddha found that there is. That's the most important thing about his life.

I've been reading some academic books on Buddhism, and they all talk about how we shouldn't fall for the essentialist fallacy. In other words, they say that we shouldn't believe that there's an unchanging essence to the Dhamma. But you have to ask yourself: What do academics know? They just read books. They can talk about all kinds of things regarding Buddhism, but they can't talk about the Dhamma. Their scholarly methods can't touch the most important issue about the Dhamma, which is: Did the Buddha really find a deathless happiness?

That, after all, *is* the essence. He said that's the essence of the Dhamma. All dhammas he said, have release as their essence. So you have the word of the academics saying that nothing has any essence at all. And you have the word of the Buddha saying this is the essence of the Dhamma. Whose word are you going to take?

This is what makes the Dhamma valuable: the fact that there is an essential, deathless happiness that can be found through our efforts. This is why we're not concerned about remaking the Dhamma in our own image. We're trying to make ourselves fit in

with the Dhamma, to follow the customs of the noble ones that lead to this noble attainment. And it is noble. It harms no one. It requires all the good qualities of the mind. It's what makes human life special, the fact that we can train ourselves to reach this.

A magazine recently had an article about the different realms that the mind can occupy. For the deva realm, they had a picture of someone meditating in a cabana by a beach: Club Med, in two senses of the word. The human realm was a couple lying on the grass. I would put that second image in the animal realm. What makes the human realm really good is not the sex. It's the fact that you can develop the mind and you can find something really solid worth. The word essence in Pali, *sara*, also means heartwood, like the heartwood of a tree, the part that's really valuable, the part that lasts, that you can get the most use out of.

That's something about the Dhamma that never changes—which is why the customs of the noble ones never change. And we do ourselves a great favor by trying to raise the level of our minds: to take delight in abandoning the unskillful qualities that would pull us off the path, and to develop the skillful ones that aid in reaching something that really is of true value, true essence. Something worth giving your life to.