

Maybe the Buddha Knew Something

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Ajaan Lee tells a story in his autobiography of how when he was a young monk he first heard the idea of going out into the wilderness to practice, and it didn't make any sense to him. "Why put yourself through all that hardship?" he said to himself. You have to realize that the wilderness in Thailand, back in those days, was very different from what it is now. Even people's attitudes toward wilderness were different as well. Nowadays, wilderness is just little bits and pieces, little islands surrounded by civilization, and it seems very tamed. We have all those wonderful pictures from the Sierra Club of how beautiful wilderness can be. We value it. We cherish it.

In Ajaan Lee's time, though, the situation was just the other way around: Civilization was just little islands of settlement in a sea of wilderness—and wilderness was scary: wild animals, dreaded diseases, all sorts of discomforts. Human society was all about taming wilderness, with a feeling that wilderness could take over at any time.

So the general value was very much against wilderness and this extended from the cities out into the villages. Still, Ajaan Lee said to himself, the Buddha said it's good for the practice. So he was willing to put his preconceived notions aside and give it a try. And he discovered many important lessons that come from being in the wilderness.

One was that you learn how to be very careful, very heedful. You learn from animals. He talked about the time when he and some of the monks and novices were going out for alms and they saw a mother bird, a wild chicken, calling out to her chicks when she saw the monks come. The chicks went running into a pile of leaves. Ajaan Lee knew that the pile of leaves was full of little baby chicks, so he had one of the novices take a stick and stir around in the pile, to see if he could get the chicks to come out, but they wouldn't. The chicks lay very still, very still, very still and that was their protection.

So the lesson here was that when storms go blowing through the mind or around you in society outside, sometimes the wisest policy is just to stay very still. You can watch and you're less likely to get blown around by the storm.

This was just one of many lessons, he said, that he could learn from living in the wilderness. The important thing here though, of course is that he was willing to put aside his preconceived notions and the values of his society at his time and give the Buddha's teachings a try. This has been a defining characteristic of the

Wilderness Tradition, the Forest Tradition all along.

Think about the time of Ajaan Mun. There had been reforms in Bangkok trying to bring in more texts, better versions of the Canon and commentaries, in the generation before his. And it was just in his generation, or the generation just before it, that a lot of these reforms were spreading out into the villages in the provinces. By the time they had spread there, new values had appeared in Bangkok. There was a strong sense that Thailand was being threatened from outside: England was eating away at Thailand from the west and the south, France was eating in from the east and the north, and Thailand was going to have to reform if they didn't want to be swallowed whole.

For one thing, they needed an educational system. So the government came up with the idea of having the monks become teachers. They had no teacher training colleges at that point. Monasteries were encouraged to give land to build schools, and to this day most of the schools you see in Thailand are built on monastery land. Monks were encouraged to—and ultimately told they *had* to—become teachers in the schools. There was actually a law passed, requiring monks to settle down and to get to work teaching the kids.

What the Forest Tradition did was go further into the forest, further into the wilderness. Ajaan Mun went way up into Chiang Mai and he was accused of being cowardly, unhelpful, and lazy because he wasn't falling in line with modern ideals. But we look back now: Who was actually preserving Buddhism at that time? Ajaan Mun, in his little grass hut, up in the hills. He was the person keeping Buddhism alive because he kept the practice alive and he was willing to say, "Whatever if the Buddha says, let's give it a try. Regardless of what our own preconceived notions are, maybe the Buddha knew something that we don't." This is the attitude that keeps the practice alive, this attitude of humility and respect.

Ajaan Mun called it following the traditions of the noble ones. There's a sutta, the Ariya-vamsa, which can be translated as the customs of the noble ones or the traditions or lineage of the noble ones. It lists four qualities that the Buddha says are true from time immemorial and that form the customs of the noble ones. Ajaan Mun's comment, when people accused him of not participating in modern ideals, was that the modern ideals have been worked out by people with defilements, but here are some customs left behind by people with no defilements.

I was talking last night to someone who was saying he trusts in modernization because he trusts in human nature. I was a little slow on the uptake but I should have asked him: Which part of human nature do you trust? Do you trust the greed, the aversion, or the delusion? The traditions of the noble ones are free of

greed, aversion, and delusion. So they're things that we should give a try.

They start out with three principles in being content: being content with whatever food you get, whatever clothing you get, whatever shelter you get.

This is an important principle. I was reading recently about an archeological dig they had done in Syria where they found traces of what was probably one of the earliest cities, even before Mesopotamia, and the message of the dig was that with the rise of cities and the rise of civilization also came the rise of warfare. In order to get nice things to consume, people had to go out and fight. They also had to protect what they've got. This is why we have armies. This is why we have huge defence expenditures: We want nice things to eat, nice things to wear, nice places to live.

So the principles of the noble ones go in the opposite direction, trying to be as content as you can with whatever you get. Monks are told when they're first ordained: "Be content with alms food, be content with whatever rags you can find, be content with living under the shade of a tree"—the principle being that the simpler your use of the requisites, the less of a burden you're placing on other people.

But an important part of this principle is that you also not pride yourself on how frugal you are compared to other people. So you don't exalt yourself, you don't disparage others because you're content in these ways. That's a tall order, but this is what makes our consumption of the requisites something without danger. On one hand, we use as little as possible, so we're oppressing others as little as possible in that way. At the same time, we're not letting our minds get puffed-up, which is the other danger that can come from this sort of practice. And human beings are amazing, they can get puffed-up about how many possessions they've got or about how their possessions are very few.

That's something that's worth contemplating right there: our ability to get proud about whatever. Some people are proud that they eat an awful lot; other people are proud that they can get by with very little food. Ajaan Lee talks about when he was a young monk, he and the other monks would have a contest to see who'd get by on the least food.

Which goes to show that the real danger lies in the mind. You've got to realize you're practicing frugality, you're practicing contentment, not to make yourself better than people or to show-off that you're better than other people but because the mind has this disease of greed, this disease of pride. And we've got to work on these diseases because otherwise they disturb the mind and create disturbances around us if we're not careful.

When I was living in Thailand, things were very, very meagre in Wat

Dhammasathit the first couple of years I was there. And it was good coming up against difficulties in having just water to use or in having just enough blankets at night. You wouldn't think about that being a problem in Thailand, but it could get relatively cold sometimes. This is what brings things up in the mind: You notice, "Oh, I'm attached to this, I'm attached to that". On the one hand, it teaches you ingenuity, how to make the most of what you've got. But it also makes you ask, "Okay, to what extent is comfort that important in life? What are the prices of comfort? What are the prices of having the choices of many different things to wear? What's the price of having a really nice place to live?"

There's that great story of the former king, Bhaddiya who was now a monk. He was sitting under a tree saying "What bliss! What bliss!" The monks heard this and they were concerned, afraid that he was missing his days as a king, so they informed the Buddha. The Buddha called Bhaddiya to see him and asked him, "What are you thinking about when you say, 'What bliss, what bliss!'" Bhaddiya replied, "I think about the time I was a king and couldn't sleep even though I had guards posted inside the palace and outside the palace, inside the city and outside the city, inside the country and outside the country. I was always afraid that someone would try to take away what I had. But now I sit under the tree, I don't see any danger from any direction, with my mind as free as a wild deer. That's when I think 'What bliss, what bliss!'"

So you when you're willing to submit yourself to the customs of the noble ones, the principles or the traditions of the noble ones, you come to call your modern cultural values into question.

The fourth tradition, you would think, would have to do with medicine. After all, we have that chant about the four requisites: food, shelter, clothing, and medicine. But here number four is something different. The fourth tradition is taking delight in abandoning and taking delight in developing. Of-course what this means is that you take delight in abandoning unskillful mental qualities and delight in developing skillful ones. Again, that goes against the values of our culture.

A lot of our culture is derived from greed. They like to aggravate our greed, they like to aggravate our aversion, they like to aggravate our delusion, so that we enjoy being greedy. "Greed is good," remember that? Look where it's taken us. People find it in their interest to get everybody really angry to the point where we can't talk to one another in a reasonable and civil way, and there are people who are perfectly willing to go along with that. Delusion is rampant. That's why it takes a lot of strength to pull out of those values and say, "Wait a minute, it may be in somebody else's interest to have me greedy and adverse and deluded, but it's

not in my interest—and it’s not really in our common interest to develop those things.”

So as you’re practicing, you’re really pulling out of the values of society at large. This applies whether you’re in India 2,600 years ago or here in America or Thailand, Japan, Korea, wherever, right now. The simple fact of trying to develop skillful qualities in your mind and to *delight* in developing skillful qualities and to delight in abandoning unskillful qualities: That really places you outside of the social norm. After all, we’re told that people who don’t give full expression, say, to their sexuality are warped and all cramped-up and unhappy people. But the Buddha said No. Restraint leads to happiness. Restraint is good. Not just because it makes you a good little boy or good little girl, but because it’s really good for you and makes you happy deep down inside.

There’s a part of the mind that really thrives on restraint. You find that as you look for purer and purer comforts in terms of things to look at and things to listen to. You turn more and more to the mind: the qualities you can develop in the mind that give a sense of well-being when things outside are not quite so comfortable. You find that there are huge dimensions of the mind—good dimensions—that, if you didn’t practice restraint, would be allowed to atrophy, allowed to shrivel-up and dwindle away.

So it’s an important principle, taking the Buddha at his word. Maybe he knew something. Maybe his teachings are worth giving a try. A normal Western attitude is that when we come up across something from outside our culture, our immediate reaction is, “Let’s reform it. Let’s change it in lines with how we think it should be.” But the Buddha’s basically telling us: “How about changing yourself? How about reforming yourself?” Everything he teaches points inside us. The real problems lie inside, so let’s work on them first. And when you take him at his word, you find you learn an awful lot of things that you wouldn’t have learned in any other way.

So it’s useful to keep in mind that image of Ajaan Mun up in the mountains of Chiang Mai just sitting, walking, being very alert: heedful, ardent, and resolute, as they say in the texts. That’s what kept the Dhamma alive for us. Have a sense of gratitude, a sense of appreciation, for what he did. And that, of course, should inspire you ask yourself, “What can I do right here?” Being heedful, ardent and resolute: That’s what keeps the Dhamma alive.