

Customs of the Noble Ones

July 8, 2011

According to Ajaan Suwat, there were two Dhamma themes that Ajaan Mun would talk about more than anything else. One was the customs of the noble ones, and the other was the practice of the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. The two themes are essentially the same: They point to the attitude where we practice the Dhamma not in line with our preferences, but in line with the way the Dhamma really is. We also practice not in line with other people's preferences.

This, for Ajaan Mun, was a very live principle and, of course, it's live for us today. Looking at the forest tradition in Thailand, we tend to miss the fact that when Ajaan Mun was starting out into the forest—the same with Ajaan Sao—they met with a lot of resistance. People kept accusing them of not following Lao customs or Thai customs.

Ajaan Mun would say, "The customs of the Laos and the Thais, as the customs with any country, are the customs of people with defilement." Indian customs, American customs, and European customs: These are all shaped by defilement. He, though, was interested in becoming a noble one, which meant that he had to follow the customs of the noble ones. That's why he was very strict in his observance of the Vinaya and the ascetic practices—and it caused a lot of controversy.

I was recently reading a conversation between Ajaan Chah and some lay people. He talked about how Ajaan Mun and Ajaan Sao tended to create controversy wherever they went. The ecclesiastical head of that area had asked them to go out and teach the Dhamma to people, so they went out and, as Ajaan Chah said, they taught the truth, which was very different from what was normally taught. You'd get families falling apart—husbands arguing with wives, children with their parents—because they'd take what Ajaan Mun and Ajaan Sao taught and compare it with what the other monks were teaching. And the question was: Who was right? More and more, they would check the texts, as they became available. And they began to realize Ajaan Mun and Ajaan Sao were right. This was what the Buddha actually taught.

So in following what the Buddha taught, there's always going to be some controversy. It's a matter both of not following your own preferences and of not following the preferences of other people. You've got to look and see what the Dhamma teaches, what the Vinaya teaches, because it's a training; it's not a product for sale.

Of course, this issue is very live with us. As the Dhamma comes West, there's always the temptation to turn it into a more palatable kind of teaching to fit in with American, European, or Canadian tastes. But we have to watch out for that, because otherwise, bit by bit by bit, the Dhamma disappears.

It's always important to think about the trouble that Ajaan Mun and Ajaan Sao went through in order to reestablish a teaching that was closest to the customs of the noble ones—closest to the practice of the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. When the Dhammayut monasteries here in the States started having abbots' meetings, they would invite senior monks over from Bangkok, so of course, they would have meals on tables and monks eating off of plates to accommodate the Bangkok monks. Ajaan Suwat was the odd man out. He would always eat from his bowl. He was asked by the other monks to please stop eating from his bowl, at least for the duration of the meetings, and to sit at a table and eat off plates like everybody else.

As he said, as he told them, it's not that he was trying to show them that he was better than anybody else. But he said simply that he would think about Ajaan Mun and all the hardship Ajaan Mun went through in order to reestablish this practice, eating out of the bowl, and he felt sorry for him. It seemed like such a shame to throw it away so quickly. As he told the monks, "If you see that my eating out of the bowl is causing controversy and disharmony, I'll just not come to the meetings." So they backed down.

Then, sure enough, as soon as he stopped going to the annual meetings, the pressure came again. I was told that by eating from the bowl I was making life difficult for the lay people. But then I asked the lay people, and they all said they'd be happy to provide food for monks eating from the bowl. So the first day I was the only one eating out of the bowl. Then, sure enough, the next day a few of the other monks who'd been trained in the forest tradition started bringing out their bowls and eating from their bowls as well.

So you never know where the pressure's going to come from. But I've always liked that comment from Ajaan Suwat. It's not that we're trying to be better than other people. We just think about all the hardship that Ajaan Mun and Ajaan Sao and all the other forest ajaans went through in order to reestablish this practice. If we let it go, then some place down the line, someone else is going to have to go through all those hardships to establish it again. So you want to hold the line and not give in to that desire simply to be pleasing to other people.

The practice of the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma is, of course, meant to make you look more seriously at your defilements, and see that they really are defilements. This is another teaching that tends to go against the grain here in the

West. People don't like being told that they have defilements in their minds. How they feel about it is their business, but you have to look at your own mind. Are the thoughts that you dwell on obscuring the mind, making it dark, making it hard to see things clearly?

That's one of the problems with the hindrances: They deceive you. When sensual desire comes in, there's a part of the mind that wants to side with it, so: "Yeah, that person or that object really is desirable." When ill will comes, "That person really is horrible; he or she really deserves to suffer." When some sleepiness comes in: "Ah, yeah, the body really needs some rest." Restlessness and anxiety come in: "Well, those are things you really do have to worry about." Uncertainty comes: "Oh yeah, that really is uncertain."

If you're not on the lookout for these kinds of thoughts, you just get swallowed up by them. They're your old patterns of thinking. It's so easy to fall into those old ways, which is why it's important to hold to the principle of the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. What does the Dhamma have to say about your thoughts? What does it recommend that you do with those thoughts? What are the standards for deciding what's skillful and what's not? Be willing to hold yourself to that standard.

There's that old saying from the third Zen patriarch that the great way isn't difficult for those with no preferences. There's only one way that that saying makes sense, which is that you don't let your preferences get in the way of following whatever the path tells you to do. After all, do have the preference of wanting to put an end to suffering—of wanting to train the mind to follow through with all the skills of the four noble truths to comprehend suffering, abandon its cause, realize its cessation by developing the path. That preference you don't abandon. But the preferences that would go against those duties: Those are the ones that you have to learn how to put aside if you want to practice the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma and get the results of the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. If your practice deviates from that principle, then of course the results are going to deviate, too.

The same principle applies to the customs of the noble ones. The texts mention this principle in two places. One is in the Commentary. The Buddha returns to his home and, the first day he's there, he goes out for alms. The king, his father, tries to stop him. He says, "This is disgraceful. Nobody in our family has ever followed this practice of going out and begging in the streets. This is not one of our traditions; this is not one of our family customs." And in essence, the Buddha says, "Well, I'm sorry to inform you I'm no longer following the traditions of the family. I belong to a new family. I'm following the traditions of the traditions of

the noble ones—the customs of the noble ones—and going for alms is one of those customs.”

So when you ordain, you really are setting out against the normal customs of lay society. From their point of view, going out for alms is disgraceful. From our point of view, it's a pure form of livelihood. We eat what people give. We don't beg; we don't ask; we don't take what they haven't given. Whatever they freely give: That kind of food is blameless.

The other place in the text where they talk about the customs of the noble ones is in the Canon, in a sutta that identifies those customs with four practices or four attitudes. The first three have to do with the requisites. You're content with whatever clothing you're given. You're content with whatever food you're given. You're content with whatever shelter you're provided. And you watch out for the dangers that come from eating food and wearing clothing and using shelter. What would those dangers be? Well, you can get attached to these things. On the other hand, if you're content with very little, you might start getting proud of the fact that you're content with little, and you might look down on those who are living more luxuriously.

So there are dangers in both directions, and you have to be watchful for both. You remember you're not here to compete with anyone else. You're here to compete with your own defilements. You're treating your own disease. It's like being in a hospital. There may be other people in the hospital who aren't taking their medicine. You can't really do anything about that, and it doesn't really concern you. You're there to take your medicine because you've got a disease, not to win a contest of being a better patient.

The first three customs of the noble ones have to do with contentment on the one hand and watching out for pride on the other side. Now there is an honor to practicing the teaching. It's a dignified teaching that we're practicing, but you have to watch out for that tendency to compare yourself with other people. There's a fine line between healthy pride and unskillful pride, and you always have to be careful not to cross that line and go over to the unskillful side.

Now given that the first three of the customs have to do with the first three requisites, you'd think that the fourth would have to do with the fourth requisite, medicine. But it doesn't. The fourth custom is to delight in abandoning and to delight in developing. In other words, you try to delight in abandoning unskillful qualities and to delight in developing skillful ones. Normally, the mind goes in the other direction. The mind delights in pride, it delights in its lust, and it delights in its anger. It really likes to feed these things. But when it comes to giving these things up, it resists.

Then there are the skillful qualities of mind that you have to work to develop but part of you doesn't delight in them. You wake up in the morning, and it seems really hard to get up. You start telling yourself, "Well, it's not going to make any difference if I miss this one meditation session. I've had all these other sessions. I don't have much to show for them. Why bother?" The mind can tell you all kinds of reasons for not wanting to get up and make the effort. So you have to learn not only how to get yourself up, but also to *delight* in getting up—to look forward to the fact that you have the opportunity to practice. Another day has come. You're still alive. The opportunity to practice is here. You learn to delight in that. And as for seeing the greed go away, or the lust or the anger: Train yourself to delight in that as well.

This, of course, connects with that factor in right effort of generating desire, learning to *want* to follow the practice. If something has to be abandoned, you learn how to delight in figuring out how to do it. As for qualities of the mind that need to be developed—mindfulness, alertness, concentration, discernment—you try to be up for the challenge. That's how you maintain the customs of the noble ones so that you can become a noble one as well. That's what this is all about.

All the noble ones of the past: They didn't start out as arahants. They all started out just like us—people with defilements filling their minds. Yet they recognized the defilements as defilements. They saw them as a problem and were able to dig around inside until they found the strengths and potentials within themselves that they could develop and turn into the path, taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha to the point where they became members of the noble Sangha and an object of refuge for others, too. So in this way, in following the path, you not only follow the customs of the noble ones, but also keep them alive for other people, too, both as you practice and if you happen to reach the end of the path.

As Ajaan Suwat used to say, if you're following the path, you try to keep it as free of weeds and rocks as possible because you want to get to the goal. Once you've arrived at the goal, then whether the path gets covered with weeds—as far as you're concerned, your own personal needs—it doesn't really matter. But you look at other people. You see them struggling along, and so you don't want to see other people growing weeds and placing rocks in the path. You want to do what you can to keep the path as free of obstructions as possible.

This is why the Buddha—after he mentioned that the true way of paying homage to him was to practice the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma—then went on to say that as long as the monks practice properly, practice rightly, the world will not be empty of arahants.

There's a complaint you hear over and over again in the forest tradition, that a lot of people seem to be practicing for the purpose of making sure there are no more arahants in the world. But you can't police the waterfront. Your concern is that the path is here. This is your opportunity. The more you can cleanse your mind of defilements, the more you're helping not only yourself but also everybody else to make sure this is a world that still has some arahants. Keeping that point in mind is what keeps us practicing in line with the Dhamma.

There's another passage where the Buddha says that to practice in line with the Dhamma is to practice for the sake of seeing things as inconstant, stressful, and not-self so that you can give rise to the sense of disenchantment and dispassion that leads to release. If you make that the direction in which you're practicing, you're going to benefit, and it's going to benefit others as well.

Remember the Buddha's teaching on the acrobats. When you maintain your balance, it helps other people maintain their balance. When you're kind to others, it's a training for yourself. When you're being mindful and developing the purity of the mind, it's an act of kindness all around.