

Who's in Charge Here?

April 4, 2017

Ajaan Suwat often talked about Ajaan Mun's favorite themes for a Dhamma talk. One was the customs of the noble ones and the other was practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. The customs of the noble ones are customs that go against the customs of practically every nation on earth, because they put the training of the mind first. They put the Dhamma first. It's for this reason that the customs of the noble ones are closely connected to the principle of practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma, because that's one of the two meanings of practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma: Instead of trying to change the Dhamma to fit you, you try to change yourself to fit the Dhamma. The other meaning, as it's defined in the Canon, is practicing for the sake of dispassion. This, too, goes against every custom, every culture in the world, all of which are aimed at passion.

There's the story in the Canon where some monks are going to a foreign country. After paying their respects to the Buddha, they go to say goodbye to Ven. Sariputta. He asks them, "When intelligent people in that country ask you, 'What does your teacher teach?' what are you going to tell them?" The monks say, "We'd like to hear what you'd say." So Sariputta says that his first answer would be that his teacher teaches dispassion. Then he goes on to add that intelligent people will then ask, "Dispassion for what?"

Most people in the world nowadays, however, wouldn't even bother to ask. They hear the word "dispassion" and they run the other way. Their society has trained them to think that their passions are good; their likes and dislikes are important, because society can get work out of people that way. You can get money out of people that way. But here the Buddha teaches something that goes directly opposed to that—which means that when you're practicing the Dhamma, you have to learn how to step aside and stand outside your culture. You have to be a self-starter.

There's a lot of talk about not-self in Buddhism, but to practice, you need a very strong sense of your own values: how you're going to train your mind to maintain your original intention that this is what you want to do. After all, if you can't depend on yourself—if you make up your mind to do one thing and then end up doing something else just because you felt like it—you can't trust yourself. When you can't trust yourself, you're not going to find anyone in the world you can trust.

So you have to sit yourself down and tell yourself, "This is what I really want. I see that I'm causing myself unnecessary suffering and I want to put an end to it." With whatever is in line with that, you've got to say, "I'm going to side with that, whether it comes from inside or outside."

As the Buddha said, one of the measures of your discernment, particularly with regard to effort, is seen with regard to four kinds of actions. There are the actions you that like to do that you know are going to give good results. There are the actions you don't like to do that are going to give bad results. Those two are basically no-brainers. They don't require much effort or thought. Things you like to do that give good results, you do them. Things you don't like to do that give bad results, you don't do them.

It's the things that you like to do but give bad results and the things you don't like to do, but give good results: That's where the rubber hits the road. You have to figure out, "How can I talk myself into doing the things that I don't like doing but will be good in the long run? And how can I talk myself out of doing things I like to do, but are going to be bad in the long run?"

The Buddha gives many examples of how you can think to get yourself around this impasse. One, of course, is to think about the principle of heedfulness. And this is where that sense of self comes in.

You realize that you're going to be on the receiving end of your actions. What kind of actions would you like to be on the receiving end of? Your actions are going to make all the difference in how you experience the world: the person you become; the world you experience. So you'd better be careful about what you do and say and think. As the Buddha said, this principle of heedfulness is what underlies all skillful activity, all skillful qualities in the mind.

Then, based on that, you can develop other skillful qualities, too. One is compassion for yourself, compassion for people around you, realizing that if you really love yourself, you're not going to let yourself do unskillful things, no matter how much you like them. If you're doing something that's skillful but suddenly you decide you don't like it anymore, you've got to ask yourself, "How am I going to feel after having given up?" If you really have compassion for yourself, you're not going to give up, because if you give up, then either you simply suffer the results or you put yourself into denial, saying, "Well, it wasn't that good anyhow," which cuts you off from developing a path you can really depend on.

Another quality that, again, goes with a strong sense of self is a sense of pride, healthy pride, that other people have done this. They're human beings. You're a human being. Why can't you do it too?

And as you start developing skills, you take a craftsman's pride in his skills. You don't want anything shoddy to come out in your thoughts or your words or your deeds.

Coupled with this is a sense of shame, not the shame that's the opposite of pride, but the shame that's the opposite of shamelessness. In other words, you look at what you might be tempted to do and, when you're frank with yourself, you say, "These things are beneath me." That right there raises your quality as a person. You don't want to stoop to anything that's beneath you.

Then there's having a good sense of humor and learning how to laugh at your foibles. Laugh at your greed. Laugh at your aversion. Laugh at your delusion. See how foolish they are. In the Canon, most of the humor is in the Vinaya, which is the section on disciplinary rules. You wouldn't think with discipline that there'd be a lot of humor, but this is how they make discipline palatable. Like the story about the monk who gets so drunk that the Buddha was inspired to comment, "Back when he was sober, he could do battle with a fire breathing naga, but now that he's drunk, he couldn't even do battle with a salamander." By seeing the humor in people's weaknesses and misbehavior, you put yourself on the side of not wanting to be weak and not wanting to misbehave. So when lust comes up, learn how to laugh at it. When greed comes up, learn how to laugh at it.

When laziness comes up: The Buddha has a nice passage where he talks about the things that people talk about to excuse their laziness, and they're precisely the things that other people would use to make themselves put out more effort. For example, you've been sick and you've recovered a little bit. If you're lazy, you say, "Well, I'm not quite well yet. I'd better rest some more." But another person who's beginning to recover says, "Here's my opportunity. The illness could get worse again. I'd better practice now." If you've eaten too much, you can make that an excuse for laziness. Or if you've eaten too little, you can make that an excuse for laziness. Everything becomes an excuse for laziness. But if you learn how to laugh at your excuses, you take some of the power of that defilement away.

But in every case, it requires having a good strong sense of self, a healthy sense of self.

We have so many different selves inside. You have to ask yourself which ones you're going to side with. The ones that are self-destructive? The ones that say, "Well, I just don't feel like it right now," without giving any good reason? Why do you want to nurture those and feed those senses of self inside? You've got so many better ones that you could nurture and feed. It's as if you have a whole stable. You feed the horses that are going to help you with the work. As for the ones that fight back, you let them go, because after all, it is your well-being that we're talking about here. The practice is not for anybody else's sake.

As Ajaan Fuang used to say, "Nobody hired us to practice. We're doing this of our own free will. Nobody's forcing us to practice. We should be in charge." So the question, of course, is: Who are you going to put in charge inside? When the Buddha talks about the faculties of conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment, that word "faculty" basically means who's in charge in the mind. So do your best to put someone good in charge and make them powerful so that they can keep control over everything inside. That's how your practice develops, and how you can maintain it—and how you become your own refuge.

We talk about taking the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha as a refuge. What that means is that we take their qualities and we try to realize them inside. Their potentials are there within us: the qualities of compassion, discernment, purity. They're there in potential form. And the Buddha shows that if you develop those potentials, they can take you far. So you take

him as an example. You take the Dhamma, you take the Sangha as an example and try to bring those qualities into being within you. You find that you have a refuge that you can depend on inside. As for the world outside, it's not all that dependable. What matters is what you've got inside yourself.