

Customs of the Noble Ones

May 1, 2021

There's a common belief that the Buddha taught that we have to accept everything, but for the life of me I don't know what the Pāli term for "accept" is. He did teach that craving is the cause for suffering—and craving sometimes means the desire to have things differently from the way they are—so, from that, some people conclude that you just have to accept things and you'll be okay. But if you're still hungry, no matter how much you may accept the fact that you're hungry, it doesn't make you okay.

When you look more carefully at the Buddha's teaching, you realize that, in the four noble truths, he divides desire into two types: There are the three types of craving under the second noble truth; and then there's the desire that you generate under the factor of right effort in the path, the fourth noble truth: You generate desire to abandon unskillful qualities that have already arisen, to prevent ones that haven't arisen from arising, to give rise to skillful qualities that are not there, and to maintain and develop the ones that are.

So it's not that we don't want things to be different from what they are; we just have to be very selective in where we focus our desires, and learn how to curb the desires that are actively causing suffering. Ultimately, at some point in the path, you get to the point where you have to let go of *all* desires, but you don't do that until the path has done a lot of its work.

So as you're sitting here meditating, it's perfectly fine to want to get the mind into concentration and to want to get past the hindrances. It's simply a matter of learning how to be skillful in acting on your wants.

When you want something that strongly, what do you do? You look for the causes. What helps the mind to settle down? The Buddha says, "views made straight and purified virtue." Those are the bases for right mindfulness, and then right mindfulness is the basis for right concentration. So make sure your views are straight: that if there is suffering in the mind, it's caused by the mind. No matter how much you may be suffering over bad things outside, you have to realize that the important part is how you *process* the bad things outside—and how you process the good things outside, too. Because it is possible for things outside to be perfectly fine and yet you can make yourself miserable. And it is possible even though things are bad outside that you don't have to suffer from them at all. That latter skill is the skill the Buddha's asking you to develop.

It means you focus on how you're processing things. How are you processing the breath right now? As soon as you turn your attention to the breath, the breath is going to change—based on your perception of the breath, your intentions around the breath—which means the breath is a really good mirror for seeing these things in action.

We know that one of the principles of causality that the Buddha taught was that there are some things that, as soon as the cause comes, the effect is going to come, and as soon as the cause goes away, the effect goes away. The relationship between the mind and the breath can often be that particular type of cause-and-effect relationship.

So what image are you holding in mind right now? And how does the breath respond? If you change the image, how does the breath respond? Learn to experiment. We read about what Ajaan Lee has to say about the breath and we give that a try, but we also have to remember that he played with the breath quite a lot and would come up with other ways of conceiving the breath, other ways of manipulating the breath as well, so it's up to us to try that out too and then see what results we get. When you do this, the meditation becomes *your* meditation and not necessarily Ajaan Lee's meditation.

As long as it's getting results, that's what matters. Ajaan Maha Boowa made that comment in one of his Dhamma talks, saying, "Even though there may be things that the Buddha didn't say, but if you try them out and they get good results, they're Dhamma, just as much as anything that he did say."

This way, you get to learn how to read your desires. Because if your desires are focused on the causes, then you look at the causes you're creating with your actions and then the effects you're getting from your action. That way, you can get a better and better sense of which desires really are skillful and which are not.

So when things are not going well, you don't just content yourself with the fact that the mind is distracted, sleepy, blurry. You want to overcome any of the hindrances, overcome any of the things that are getting in the way of clear, mindful, alert, steady concentration. And it's perfectly fine to want as much as you can in that direction, just as long as you do it skillfully.

As for desires outside that would pull you away from the concentration—no matter how much you've identified with them in the past, no matter how much the mind can give all kinds of reasons for why it should want this kind of food, and this kind of clothing, and this kind of shelter, and this kind of whatever—you've got to realize: Those are desires are the cause of suffering.

This is why we practice contentment; this is why contentment with material things—food, clothing, and shelter—is one of the customs of the noble ones. It’s in the sutta we chanted just now.

But it makes a distinction: You also take delight in developing, delight in abandoning. In other words, you take delight in changing the level of skill in your mind. That kind of desire’s perfectly fine; it should be encouraged and should be developed. As for the desires that aim at getting your food just like this, getting your shelter just like that, your clothing just like this: Those are the desires that should be curbed.

When you’re behaving in this way, you’re following in line the customs of the noble ones and, as the Buddha said, you’re learning how to overcome delight and irritation. You learn to be a conqueror.

That sutta on the customs of the noble ones seems to be a take-off on a customary belief back in those days, when you’d have your family traditions, and you would claim, especially if you were a noble warrior, that your family traditions would protect you in all directions, because you would be a conqueror in all directions.

You would conquer your enemies. The word for enemy in Pāli, *ari*, is very close to *arati*, displeasure, which is what the Buddha substituted here. If you’re going to be a noble one, a member of the noble tradition, you learn to overcome displeasure. And when you can overcome displeasure, you can go anywhere—east, west, north, south—and not be defeated when you don’t meet up with the food, clothing, or shelter that you’d like.

So when things are good, learn how to show some restraint, because they’re not always going to be good. Focus your real desires on how you’re going to train the mind, so that you can develop the kind of concentration that will stand you in good stead no matter what things are happening outside. Mountains can move in, crushing living beings, but you can still be okay if the mind is well trained. That’s the kind of mind state you want to develop. And the desire to develop that mind state is to be encouraged and trained so that it really is effective.

When you learn how to take a mature attitude toward your desires—recognizing which ones are skillful, which ones are not, and how to skillfully say “no” to the unskillful ones, and how skillfully to say “yes” to the skillful ones—that’s when you really are following the customs of the noble ones. You’re safe wherever you go; you conquer your defilements wherever you go. That’s what genuine safety’s all about.