

Getting Yourself

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When we first set up the monastery here, Ajaan Suwat made a comment that has stuck with me ever since. He said, “We’re not here to get other people. We’re here to get ourselves. If we spend our time trying to get other people and lose ourselves, we’ve lost. But as we’re practicing, training the mind, if other people like the way we’re training and want to join in, that’s fine. But if not, at least make sure,” he said, “that you get yourself.”

When he said that, I knew I could stay here with a sense of confidence and safety, that things weren’t going to be sacrificed simply to attract other people, that we weren’t going to make any changes simply because they’d be popular. As Ajaan Suwat himself once said, one of Ajaan Mun’s favorite topics for a Dhamma talk would be the customs of the noble ones. One thing we tend to forget, when we look at the Thai Forest tradition that seems so very Thai, is that as Ajaan Mun and Ajaan Sao were setting out, they were going against a lot of traditions that had built up around Thai and Laotian Buddhism over time. They were often criticized for not doing things the way other monks did them, bucking the current. Ajaan Mun’s response always was that the customs of Thai people, the customs of Lao people, are like the customs of any people around the world: They’re the customs of people with defilement, based on greed, anger, and delusion. He was more interested in the customs of the noble ones, customs that had been set down by people who had no greed, no anger, no delusion.

So we take that as our guide. There’s nothing in the Buddha’s teachings simply to please people. All the teachings are there because he found that they worked. In particular, there’s one passage where the Buddha himself talks about the customs of the noble ones. They come down to four things.

The first three have to do with food, clothing, and shelter. In other words, you learn how to be content with whatever food you get, whatever clothing you get, whatever shelter you get. You see the drawbacks of being attached to these things and you look for their escape from that attachment, the escape from that danger.

Given that list, you’d think that the fourth item on the list would deal with medicine, but it doesn’t. It says that you delight in developing and delight in abandoning. In other words, you find delight in developing skillful qualities; you find delight in abandoning unskillful ones. That’s a delight hard to master, but it can be done as you begin to see the results of developing skillful qualities in the mind and of abandoning unskillful ones.

But across the board in all four, the Buddha also said that you don't exalt yourself for abiding by these customs and you don't disparage others who don't. In other words, we follow these customs not to be better than other people, but simply because we ourselves are suffering.

This is something we have to keep in mind all the time. It's what the teaching is all about: the fact there were suffering, we've got stress. We've got discontent and distress in our mind. We have to look into that.

This is what Ajaan Suwat meant by getting yourself. He didn't mean it in a selfish way, simply that our real work is right here in the mind. It's not trying to spread Buddhism or spread the word or whatever. As long as there's still stress and suffering in the mind, there's work we've got to do right here. After all, look at the pattern the Buddha established. He gained awakening first before he went out to teach people. He had to find a path to the end of suffering before he could teach with any conviction, with any force, any power.

So he had to focus first on himself, making sure he got his mind straightened out. All during that period when he was looking for the way, trying various practices, you don't read about him being engaged with a lot of other people. There were a few teachers who he tried and found wanting. There were the five brethren who were hanging around while he was doing austerities, but you don't hear of any conversations that he had with them. The narrative is totally focused on what was going on in his mind, how when he was practicing austerities, whatever pain arose he made sure the pain didn't overcome his mind. When he found the right path, when he was practicing deep concentration getting the mind into the various levels of jhana and gaining the different insights that came from that concentration, whatever pleasure arose in his mind, he didn't let that overcome his mind, either. He was closely keeping watch on his mind, and only when he'd straightened out his mind did he turn to deal with other people.

So as we do our practice, remember it's not to make ourselves better than other people. I think I've told you the story about how my first grade teacher, who was a Roman Catholic, once told my mother, "If being Roman Catholic doesn't make you better than other people, what is it good for?" My mother passed that story onto me, and even at age six I could tell that it did sound kind of stupid. The issue is not whether we're better than other people or worse than other people or equal to other people. The issue is that we're suffering, and the suffering is coming from our own actions. We've got to learn how to train ourselves in how to think, how to speak, how to act in such a way that we're not causing suffering. We have to be more circumspect. We have to be more alert to what we're doing.

I was reading about an experiment they did with children to measure the children's ability to exercise delayed gratification. They offered each kid a marshmallow, and told them to wait a certain amount of time, and if they hadn't eaten the first marshmallow, they were going to get a second one. Each kid was then left alone in a room. The question was to see which kids could wait so that they'd get the second marshmallow, and which ones couldn't wait.

Then they did follow-up studies of the two groups over the years, and they found that the people who had been able to wait were the ones who were able to observe their minds and notice, "If I think about the marshmallow, it's going to be hard not to just give right in." So they tried diversionary tactics, thinking about something else, playing something else, keeping themselves from thinking about the marshmallow, knowing that that would lessen the desire just to give right in. In other words, they occupied themselves with an alternative pleasure. Whereas those who couldn't wait were the ones who weren't able to observe their minds to see what works and what wouldn't work, to make it easier to delay the gratification.

So the lesson here is that if you've really got to learn how to observe your own mind in a way that's effective so that you can master your defilements.

The second lesson I learned from the experiment was that they could actually teach the ones who originally had trouble with the marshmallow, in other words, the ones who tended to give right in. The researchers recommended different tactics, different strategies, for delaying the gratification. The kids had never thought of those things, but once the strategy was taught, they could master it. They could wait long periods of time.

So the principle of delayed gratification can be taught. And once you start suggesting to kids like that that they can think in different ways, they begin to observe their own minds.

This is why the Buddha taught after he had found his awakening. He realized that it's a skill that not everybody could think up or master on their own. But once it was suggested that there is such a path that can be found, there would be people who would be able to follow it.

This also means we can learn from one another. So when you're looking at other people, don't look at whether they're better than you are or worse than you. You look for two things. First, what skills have they mastered that you haven't mastered yet? And what can you learn from them? Second, what do they do that's just like you, and how does it look? Sometimes they have some unskillful habits that are just like your unskillful habits. It's hard for you to see them when you're doing them. Someone said our defilements are like ghosts. There's a tradition that

if you see somebody in a room and you look in the mirror and that person doesn't appear in the mirror, then that somebody is a ghost. Looking for your defilements is often like looking for ghosts in the mirror. You can't see them. They're there but you can't see them. But when you see them in other people, they're pretty blatant.

So those are the two things we look for in other people. If you're going to make comparisons, those are the comparisons to make. In other words, what activities have they mastered that you haven't mastered yet, and what can you learn from them around those activities? Second, which traits do you share with them, and how do those traits look when you see other people do things that way? That's how you look when you are doing them that way.

And of course there's the comparison that Ananda told to a nun: When you see other people who are able to do the practice, you remind yourself, "That person is a human being and I'm a human being. They can do it, so why can't I?" That reflection is useful when you're feeling inadequate, nothing seems to work, and you start getting down on yourself. Reflect on the fact that there are other human beings out there a lot worse off than you are. There have been people in the past who were a lot worse off than you are now, and yet they were able to become noble disciples.

These are a few areas where comparing yourself with other people can be useful. But you have to be careful, that you don't read the "I am" into it, or the "they are" into it as in, "I'm better. I'm worse. I'm equal to them." Those thoughts, as Ajaan Maha Boowa used to say, are the fangs of ignorance. You're looking at other people in terms of categories that are really irrelevant. How could you define another person? What's the standard that you are going to make a comparison? Compare actions instead, and you can learn from the comparison.

There's that old story of when the Buddha recommended that the time had come for there to be a hierarchy in the monastic Sangha. So he asked the monks: What should it be based on? Different monks came up with different ideas. Some said it was about the birth, whether one was brahman or noble warrior. Others said it should do with attainments: which jhana you've reached, which psychic powers you've developed, which noble attainment you've attained.

And it's very easy to see that different people's standards for measuring one another are very different. People tend to find a standard where they came out on top. So the Buddha introduced a totally neutral criterion, which was seniority, i.e., the number of years, the amount of time someone had been a monk. This had nothing to do with personal worth at all, it was purely conventional, which is why the hierarchy is livable. We're not asked to measure one another as to intrinsic

worth to figure out who's going to sit where in the line-up. We simply use an automatic number that has no meaning at all about the person's worth.

The lesson of the story is of course, you can figure out all kinds of different types of measurement to say that you're better than someone else, and other people have probably figured out some other standard of measurement to decide they're better than you are. And given the fact we're all suffering, it's all a huge distraction, especially when you realized that the "I am" that gets built up around things is a major cause of suffering.

There's that passage where the Buddha talks about a monk who has gained various levels of jhāna. He looks down on the other monks who haven't gotten that jhāna. This, according to the Buddha, is a sign of a person no integrity. That's not what you're doing the jhāna for. It's not to be better than other people. It's because it's a useful tool in looking into the mind. It's a useful strategy for getting the mind very still, very clear, very balanced, with very strong sense of well-being, so that you can start looking into the parts of the mind you normally don't want to look into, and see the defilements that you ordinarily pretend not to see. Then you can work with them. This is how you get yourself—to borrow Ajaan Suwat's phrase.

In other words, you do the work inside it needs to be done.

So always keep this in mind. That's what we're here for. We're not here to get anybody else. We're here to get ourselves. To free ourselves. And of course, that's not a selfish proposition. Once the mind is free from defilement, you're going to be causing a lot less trouble for other people. And you've got a basis for which you can teach other people, recommending tactics they might use as they try to get themselves.

Another frequent teaching of Ajaan Suwat was that each of us has only one person. In other words, we're responsible only for one person: ourselves. You're responsible for your choices. I'm responsible for mine. So make sure you look after your own responsibility.