

Customs of the Noble Ones

August 29, 2022

When Ajaan Suwat was a young monk, he spent some time with Ajaan Mun shortly before Ajaan Mun passed away. He said that during that time there were two Dhamma themes that Ajaan Mun liked to teach more than anything else. One was practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma, and the other was the customs of the noble ones.

We tend to think of the forest tradition as being very Thai or very Lao. But Ajaan Mun was accused of *not* following Thai customs, *not* following Laotian customs, because most monks back in those days were pretty domesticated. Ajaan Mun was still a wild monk, you might say, living in the forest, eating only one meal a day, wandering around, and being very strict about the Vinaya. That was why people accused him of not following Thai or Laotian customs.

He would tell them he aspired to be a noble one, and if you want to be a noble one, you have to follow the customs of the noble ones. As for the customs of Thai or Laotian people, like the customs of societies everywhere, they were the customs of people with defilements. He wanted to find some way to get out of those customs.

Think about that as you're practicing here. We keep running into things that are not quite the American or Western way of doing things, but don't think you're being forced to simply follow Thai customs. We're trying to follow the customs of the noble ones.

There's a sutta where the Buddha lays them out. There are four. The first three have to do with the first three of the requisites: You're content with any old cloth at all for your robes. You're content with any old food. You're content with any old shelter. In other words, as long as it's good enough to practice, it's good enough. You don't have to aspire to anything more than that.

Right there you're bucking a lot of the customs of the world, because so much of society, and particularly the economy, is based on people wanting more than they really need. There was that incident back in the fifties, when Americans were afraid that Thailand would fall to the communists. So they wanted to study Thai culture and Thai traditions to see what there was in the Thai tradition that might make them susceptible to become communist, and how that might be changed. One thing they focused on was the teaching on contentment.

They advised the political leaders of the country: "You should not teach people to be content." After all, they wanted Thailand to be a good capitalist country, and

that would require people to want more than they really needed, to get more into debt than they had to. So word went out from the government for monks to stop teaching contentment. Well, everybody laughed. At least back in the fifties, they had the good sense to laugh. Now, however, you see that the attitude of contentment has pretty much disappeared from Thailand. And it weakens the country.

You look at that on the large scale, and then you look at yourself on the small scale. When you're not content—when society can try to sell you on wanting more than you really need in terms of food, clothing, and shelter—you have to play along with their values. If they want you to be fearful, they can threaten you: “You're going to suffer from hardships. You're going to suffer from lack. Things are going to become scarce and more expensive.” So one way of getting out of the control of customs based on defilement is learning how to be content with just enough to practice. It's your expression of freedom. Think of it that way.

There were times in Thailand when the people in the neighborhood of Wat Dhammasathit were trying to exert pressure on Ajaan Fuang, so they would withhold alms. But because he was used to living very simply, it had no effect on him. One by one by one, different people who had agreed to withhold alms ended up realizing, “We're missing an opportunity to make merit.” So, they started giving alms again. That just goes to show that in contentment is strength and freedom.

However, there can be the problem of pride, which is why the Buddha says that, as part of the customs of the noble ones, you try to make sure you don't have pride over your contentment. In other words, you don't look down on people who are not content, and you don't exalt yourself for getting along with just a little. You can think of that *Onion* article about the monk raising his arms in victory after being declared the most serene in the Dharma Olympics. We're not doing this to compete with anyone else. We're doing this because we see we have a disease within our minds—the disease of greed—and we need to develop contentment as a way of counteracting that disease. So, just as you don't compare yourself with other people who are sick and think, “Who's better at taking medicine? Who's better at getting cured?” you focus on your cure. You focus on why you're doing this. You also encourage others that they would do well to be content as well.

Now, given that the first three of the customs have to do with the first three requisites, you'd think that the fourth would also have to do with the fourth requisite, medicine. But it doesn't—at least not in the Theravāda tradition. The Buddha explains the fourth custom as finding delight in developing, finding

delight in abandoning—in other words, to delight in developing skillful qualities, to delight in abandoning unskillful qualities.

This is where you're *not* content. You don't simply tell yourself, "Okay, here comes an instance of suffering. I'll just watch it come and go and not be worked up about it. Here comes some craving. I'll just watch it come and go and not get worked up about it"—because if you just take that attitude as a passive observer, these things will keep coming back. No matter how fancy you make your explanation as to how you're like an awakened person by being very equanimous about these things, you have to remember: We're following a path, and the path is not going to be the same thing as the fruit of the path.

Think of the road to the Grand Canyon. The road to the Grand Canyon is not a canyon. It's a road. It goes through some very flat land that doesn't look like a canyon at all—at least the road coming from the south. And of course, the road doesn't *make* the Grand Canyon exist. But if you follow it, it takes you there.

So we follow the road, and this is what the road entails: developing skillful qualities, abandoning unskillful qualities, and learning how to delight in it—because all too often, as Ajaan Suwat would say, we take craving as our friend and we see pain as our enemy. But you have to learn how to see that friendship is something you really want to end. Part of that is learning how to spend some time with pain. Get to know it well. You become friends with it to the extent that you're willing to be intimate with it, so that you can really understand it, so that ultimately you can get past it.

But as for your friendship with craving, you've really got to put that under the microscope. See *where* it is that you're craving and *why* you're craving—because craving can be devious. You think you're craving one thing, but actually it's something else. When that's the case, you can tell yourself all about the drawbacks of that first thing, but it doesn't really affect the craving at all, because the craving's actually focused surreptitiously on the second thing. As the Buddha said, you might be focused on sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, or ideas. You might be focused on your sense of sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, or ideation. You might be focused on feelings around these things, perceptions around these things, thoughts, acts of evaluation, even craving for these things—you can crave the craving.

So when you think you crave one thing, ask yourself: Is it really that thing? Is that where your craving is located? Maybe it's in the perception you have about this thing, an association you have with it. This is how advertising works. They get you to associate their product with something you find appealing.

This is another reason why it's good to practice contentment, because when you're exposed to advertisements, and they're trying to get you to associate the item they're selling with an attitude or perception of yourself, the fact that you're trying to be content with little makes it easier to see through these associations. It's an education in how to understand your desires, about where they're focused, how they can deceive you. Take this as a challenge, and be up for the challenge. It's a puzzle you're trying to take apart.

So as the practice of contentment pushes you up against some desires, don't get frustrated by it. Don't get frustrated by the training. Get frustrated by the fact that you don't understand things. But don't let that frustration stop you. Try to understand it. Think of this as a puzzle you're trying to take apart. And you're fascinated by the puzzle, because what could be more fascinating than the way the mind lies to itself, and then searching it out and uncovering the lies? This is your own mind, and it's been deceiving you. So you want to be able to look through the deceptions, trace them down.

And take some joy in this. There is joy in effort, with that sense of accomplishment, the sense of understanding things that were unclear before. So when you take joy in trying to develop skillful qualities and abandon unskillful ones, don't regard it as something that frustrates you or that blocks what you really want to do. Turn your focus around: "Okay, why is it that I'm feeling hemmed in by this situation?" Actually it's not the situation, it's your craving that's hemming you in. Get rid of the craving. Then you're free.

We're working on freedom here. Contentment with material things is aimed at freedom. Delighting in developing skillful qualities and abandoning unskillful ones—that's aimed at freedom as well: not the freedom of just doing what you want, but the freedom of coming out from under the power of your craving. This way, on the one hand, society outside can't push you around, because you don't fall for their baits. And your greed, aversion, and delusion also don't push you around, because you don't fall for their baits, either.

So when you follow these four customs, remember that they're customs for the sake of freedom. That's why the noble ones left their teachings behind. They found freedom this way, and they said this is how you can find freedom, too.

Think of Ajaan Mun and all he had to learn. He was one of those people who, in the course of Buddhist history—you find one every now and then—when the tradition gets moribund, have to bring it back to life. And it wasn't easy. But again, he found delight in doing that, even though it was hard. Now we've got the teachings available. The situation around us—for the time being, at least—is more comfortable. It may not last that way for long.

So look to these traditions. Look to these customs. See them as customs that liberate you from whatever customs you've been following before. They're not an imposition. They're opportunities. When you see them in that way, the requirements of the training become very light, because you see they're basically on your side—as long as you want true freedom, as long as you want true happiness. They're showing you the way.