

## *Attāhi Attano Nātho*

*April 1, 2023*

Tomorrow marks twenty-one years since Ajaan Suwat passed away—enough time for someone who was born on that date to be an adult now. But his teachings are still with us. And of course, the monastery he founded is still here, offering an opportunity for us to practice. So it's good to extend thoughts of gratitude his way.

Of course, the best expression of gratitude is to continue the practice every day, to take his teachings and make them your own. Each of us fabricates his or her experience, so our understanding of what he had to say, what he had to teach, is going to be filtered by the way we fabricate things. This is why the Buddha, when he was teaching Rahula, started out by saying, “Be truthful.” So let's try to register correctly what you experience and what you're doing.

Then be reflective. Look at how well what you've learned is helping you. If it's not helping you, there are two possible problems: One is that what's coming in from outside may not be good. The other is that you haven't learned how to put it together well. A lot of times, both things are the problem. When you make up your mind that you really are convinced by what the Buddha had to say, you want to listen more carefully to what he had to say—and every teaching that's in line with what he had to say—to make sure you get the message right.

Then figure out, “Something is wrong, still. Where is it wrong?” It's wrong in how you're putting things together. You have to learn how to correct yourself. The teacher is there to help make suggestions, give pointers, but ultimately, the work is up to you: in being truthful, in being reflective, in being observant as you're reflective.

Ajaan Suwat made this point again and again. All the forest ajaans would talk about how much you have to depend on yourself, because all of them had to depend on themselves. Most of them came from very poor backgrounds. Ajaan Suwat apparently had eight siblings, born in a very poor part of Thailand. And what he made of himself was what *he* made of himself. In other words, he had to pull himself up by his bootstraps.

You can imagine how audacious that may have seemed in Thai culture in those days—that the forest tradition took birth among people who were at the bottom of the social ladder. But they saw that the Buddha's teachings were available and that they were good. They decided to lift themselves up to be worthy of those teachings.

So try to follow their example and listen to what they have to say. One of Ajaan Suwat's favorite sayings was that each of us has only one person—ourselves—that we're responsible for. We have to be responsible for listening to the teachings properly, looking at our behavior, seeing where our behavior doesn't measure up, and then figuring out what we can do to make it measure up. It's a matter of skill, and you can't make other people skillful. The best you can do is give them advice, set a good example by being skillful yourself. But it's up to each of us.

So we reflect on what we're doing, how skillful we are. We have to be responsible for ourselves. Our problem is, all too often, we're trying to be responsible for other people. We try to say, "They should do this *this* way, and they should do that *that* way." Our own work gets tossed off to the side, neglected.

Like right here, focusing on your breath: No one else can focus your mind on the breath. I can stay here and keep repeating over and over again, "Stay with the breath, stay with the breath," but that doesn't focus your mind on the breath. It gives you an idea of maybe what to do, but it's up to you to have the mindfulness and the alertness, and to make your mindfulness and alertness better and better, so that you really can stay with the breath. That's the element of ardency. That's what you're responsible for.

You're doing this because you know that your thoughts and your words and deeds are your contribution to your experience of the world, and also to everybody else around you. So in looking after your own well-being, your own skill, you're helping other people as best you can.

This relates to another comment Ajaan Suwat made one time. There was a teacher in Thailand who had made the statement that all the Buddha's teachings boil down to "don't be selfish." The Thai way of saying that is "don't look out for yourself," the implication being that you should look out for others instead. They even took that phrase and made a little Buddha sketch out of it. In the Thai it's *yaa hen kae tua*. *Yaa*, which means "don't," became the head. *Hen* became the neck. *Kae* became the shoulders, arms, and torso. And *tua* became the legs. The little diagram was all over Thailand because the teacher was famous.

Ajaan Suwat took issue with that. He said, "You *do* have to look out for yourself. After all, who else is going to look out for you?"

The question is, do you look out for yourself in a skillful way? If you really look after your true best interest, it's not going to harm anybody. Too many people see that our choice is either that we help ourselves or we help others, that we can't do both. But the Buddha's insight is that if you really are helpful to yourself, it's going to spread out. It's going to be helpful to other people, too, because you're looking

for happiness in a way that doesn't harm anybody. If you harm others, it's going to come back and harm you.

So we have to work on this skill, and it's a skill that requires work, persistent work. It's not that we jump from being totally unskillful to totally skillful all at once. It's success by approximation. You work at it and you find yourself getting more and more perceptive, more and more sensitive, more and more discerning as the practice progresses, as you keep committing yourself to the practice and reflecting on what you're doing, and then taking what you've noticed and plowing that back into your next decision for what to do.

So you do look out after yourself. This is what the phrase *attāhi attano nātho* means: You're your own mainstay. You have to depend on yourself. This relates to another teaching Ajaan Suwat made one time. We were just getting the monastery started, and he said one day, "We're not here to get other people. We're here to get ourselves. Now, if other people come along and they like the way we're practicing and they want to practice, too, we're happy to have them join us. But we're not going to change the Dhamma to attract people, to 'get' other people, because if you do that, you lose yourself."

The practice keeps pointing back in here, inside. Try to practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. So when you're practicing mindfulness, what is it? Keeping track of the body in and of itself, ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. It points inside: body, feelings, mind, mental qualities, all in and of themselves, right here. That's where the work is to be done. That's your frame of reference. Other people are just thoughts in that frame of reference. They're not the focus. The focus is on what you're doing, because what you're doing is what shapes your experience and shapes the world around you. So you want to shape it well.

And take responsibility. That means being truthful and admitting your mistakes. The term in Thai for "responsibility," *khwam rap phit chawp*, means that you're willing to accept what was right and what was wrong in your behavior. In accepting it, you admit that you're the one who made the choice, and you're the one who's going to have to face the consequences. So when the consequences depend on what you do, you pay careful attention to what you're doing. Don't let your focus get distracted outside.

There's an aspect of the practice that has an impact on other people, but it comes down to the qualities of your mind. You want to be unburdensome. You want to be modest. You want to be content with what you've got in terms of material things. That has an impact on other people, but these are qualities you develop inside your mind.

There's that image of the acrobats. When you keep your balance, it helps other people keep their balance, too. As you focus inside, keeping your balance means being focused on any of the four frames of reference in the establishing of mindfulness. It helps other people maintain their balance.

It's too bad that that particular sutta doesn't have an image to go with the opposite side of its message, which is that when you're helpful to other people, it comes back and develops good qualities in your own mind: kindness, goodwill, patience, equanimity. So it's not the case that we don't think about other people at all. In fact, we think about how *not* to be harmful, and how we can benefit by helping them. In that way, the real skill develops, which is how to find happiness in a way that harms no one, and how you can depend on yourself to do this.

Be responsible. Look after yourself—or, in Ajaan Suwat's words, "get yourself." That's the task for each of us. As we focus on that task, that's how we show our gratitude to the people who've maintained the teachings of the Buddha, maintained the Dhamma through all these generations—and especially for Ajaan Suwat, for his desire to start a place where people of all races and nationalities can come and practice together in an environment that's conducive to the practice.

So we've got the trees. We've got the orchard. That's conducive. Try to make your attitude conducive as well. Keep looking inside. See how you can improve what's inside. When you take responsibility like that, good things are bound to come.