

Customs of the Noble Ones

December 16, 2004

Often in the chants leading up to the meditation in the evening, there's that strange juxtaposition. We have the chant on aging, illness, death, and separation, and, like tonight, the chant on the world being insufficient, insatiable, a slave to craving. Then we finish up with the chant that begins, "May I be happy." That's our challenge. We see how there's so much suffering, so much craziness in the world—not just the world outside, but also the world inside our mind—yet, given that situation, we still want to be happy.

Some people counsel to simply let go and accept whatever comes, and to find happiness that way. But that's like lying down in a road and letting trucks run right over you. The quest for happiness requires determination. We've got to make up our mind that this is something we really want, and then pursue that determination as wisely as we can.

There are four factors to any wise determination, and the very first one is discernment. Figure out what kind of goal is a worthy goal in your life. As the Buddha said, discernment begins with a question: "What, when I do it, will be for my long-term welfare and happiness?" He recommends going to ask people who know, or have given some indication of knowing.

So let's take that question apart. First, you address the question to other people. You want some advice. You don't have to keep on reinventing the Dhamma wheel all on your own. But others can only give that: advice. The work is work we have to do ourselves.

That's the second realization in the question, "What, when I do it will be for my long-term welfare and happiness?" is that happiness has to come from your own actions. It's based on the realization that happiness, long-term happiness, depends on understanding causality, the results that come from your actions. And that the kind of happiness you want is long-term.

There's so much short-term happiness out there. But when it turns into something else, it doesn't turn into more happiness, it turns into the opposite. You realize that life requires effort. No matter what kind of life you lead, it's going to require effort. So your question comes down to: What kind of effort pays off? What kind of effort is worth it?

There's also the realization buried in there that you want something that goes beyond causality, because anything that depends on causal factors will have to

change when those causal factors change. So the underlying question is, is there a path of action that can take you outside of causality?

That was the Buddha's discovery. That's what sets his teaching apart. Otherwise, we work and work and work, and get something that lasts for a long time, but even long times come to an end. The trick is to find a course of action that takes you outside of the causal cycle or the causal network, so that there comes a point finally where you don't have to do anything anymore. That's the ultimate skill.

So there in that question are seeds with a lot of implications, leading to the implication that you want a happiness that lies outside of any conditioning at all. It's going to require skill. The skill is nourished by three other qualities that complete the determination. Your discernment lies in your ability to develop those qualities.

One is truthfulness, the second one is relinquishment, and the third is peace. In other words, you want to be true to whatever determination you've come up with. You've got to realize it's going to require some relinquishment. The Buddha said, another sign of discernment is your ability to give up the things that you might like because you know they're going to get in the way of your more long-term values, and to develop things that may not be pleasant to begin with but ultimately will take you where you want to go. You need to be able to talk yourself into doing those things. That's a sign of discernment. This is where the customs or the values of the noble ones come in.

A few days ago I was asked a question that I had never been asked since coming back to the States, at least not by a Westerner. It was: "What you do in order to make sure that you don't go back to your old American ways, don't get sucked into the way society is over here?" Most Westerner have been asking, "How can you Americanize the Dhamma?" This was a person asking the opposite question: "How do you stay true?" This is where the customs of the noble ones come in. It's not a question of taking on Thai culture or Asian culture, because even over there, the Dharma is countercultural. We're trying to take on the customs of the noble ones.

The first three customs have to do with the requisites: being content with what you have in terms of food, clothing, and shelter—not priding yourself on your contentment, but simply realizing that the contentment is something you need to develop in order not to get sucked into the dangers of being attached to food, clothing, and shelter, or wanting more than what you've got. After all, this is how any culture makes you fall in line with its way of seeing things: You want more food, you want more shelter, you want more clothing, you want more of this,

more of that, and you've got play along to get those things. In the course of playing along, you've got to do things and say things and think things that people in their right mind wouldn't say or do or think, but when you're caught up in wanting more of what they have to offer, you've got play along with their game.

So this is how the noble ones pull out of that: by developing this quality of contentment.

The fourth of the customs you might think that would have to do with medicine, because that's the fourth of the requisites, but that's not what the custom is. It's called delighting in developing and delighting in letting go. Specifically, this refers to skillful and unskillful qualities in the mind. This is one area where you don't rest content. When you see that there's something in your mind is causing suffering, you want to find a way to let go of the cause and to develop the factors that help you overcome that suffering. You want to find a way to delight in these projects, because if it's just plain old work and drudgery, you won't last. You can force yourself for certain amount of time, but if there's no sense of enjoyment, it all dries up. This is why right concentration is the heart of the path. In those four noble truths that the Buddha taught, this is where happiness lies.

The noble truths focus on suffering and stress, but there in the fourth noble truth, at the heart of the truth, is right concentration, and one of its factors is bliss or pleasure, happiness. Another one is rapture. This is why, when we talk about practicing the Dhamma, the focus is on practicing concentration, getting the mind to settle down, having a sense of ease here in the present moment, staying with the breath, which is the force of life, and getting on good terms with it. This is a very immediate and visceral way of showing goodwill for yourself. No one can force you to breathe in an uncomfortable way, and yet we're always letting ourselves squeeze the breath, force the breath, because we're interested in other things. It's as if we're stepping on the breath to see something else, trying to climb over the breath to see what we can see other places. As a result, this basic force of our life gets squeezed out of shape.

So we take time to back off and look at it, get sensitive to it. Try to be sensitive all around. How does the breathing process as a whole affect your body? What effect do different ways of breathing have on the body? This is where you can start using your ingenuity, playing with different kinds of breathing, experimenting, thinking about the breath coming in the back of the neck, breath coming in your spine, breath coming in and out your legs and your toes, all over the body, finding where the patterns of tension in your body are, finding where the trigger points are.

You begin to notice that there are a few spots here and there in the body that, if you keep those spots open and relaxed, you create a domino effect, keeping other spots relaxed as well. As you learn to take those as your point of reference—if you can stay with any of those points, keep them relaxed, and just go through the day with those points relaxed—you'll find you have a very different experience of your body, a very different experience of the energy that you bring to other things.

This is where playing with the breath becomes important, because if you can come to the practice with a sense of energy, a sense of well-being, it's a lot easier to delight in developing and to delight in letting go. It doesn't feel like an onerous task at all. In fact, it becomes your sport, to see how you approach the issues of greed, anger, and delusion in the mind, all the various cravings in the mind, but not as someone who's hungry. After all, that's exactly what craving means. It's a kind of hunger, a kind of thirst. If you see a craving arising, but you're feeling full, energized, you can ask yourself: Why would I want to identify with that kind of craving? Why would I take on that hunger? You can see it pass.

This is where it gets fun. This is where you can find a sense of delight in letting go of these things. Then you're more up for the challenge of developing more skillful qualities as well.

This way, you bring a sense of peace, which is the fourth factor needed for a good determination. In other words, if all you can think of is how hard the path is, and how long you've been on it, and you look down the road, it seems to be a long, long road that you are going to go on, it's hard to keep the mind at peace. You get worked up over it. You find you have less and less energy to bring to the practice. But if you can develop a sense of peace and well-being at the heart of the path, then these factors of being true to your determination—letting go of what has to be let go of, maintaining that sense of peace—you find that you can actually develop a sense of delight that can carry you through.

This is how you keep your focus in the midst of the craziness of the world outside, the craziness of the world inside: having a very strong sense of what you really want in life, then using the practice of concentration, using the practice of stilling the mind with a sense of ease, well-being, and ultimately equanimity, to keep you on the path, to keep you energized all along the way. When you have this kind of energy, then you can let go of all the craziness of the world.

One, you can see it more clearly, because you don't have to lie to yourself. This is where the contentment comes in as an important factor. If you're not craving the things that society has to offer, you don't have to see things the way society does. You don't have to put blinders on yourself. That keeps you true to the path, true to your own deepest desires.

So as we practice, it's not a question of taking on an Asian culture. Instead, we take on the cultures of the noble ones. Even over in Asia, Ajaan Mun used to take a lot of flack for not following traditional Thai and Laotian ways of doing things. He said, "I'm not interested in their ways of doing things, because Thai culture, Laotian culture, are just like any human culture. They're the cultures of people with defilements." He wanted to follow the customs of the noble ones, because this is how you nurture and maintain noble qualities in your own mind: discernment, truthfulness, relinquishment, peace.

What we're doing right now is giving ourselves the energy we need to keep those qualities going. We try not to feed off food, clothing, and shelter more than we actually need to. For the energy of good qualities in the mind, we take the path as our food. The Buddha has an analogy where he compares the practice to a fortress. After all, in the midst of this crazy world, you need a fortress, along with qualities like discernment, which he says is like the plaster coating on the walls. If you just had a plain old rock or wooden wall, people could climb up the rocks and wood and get over your walls. But if you cover with the walls with plaster, there are no toe holds, no foot holds, no hand holds. So your discernment is your outside protection. But right concentration: That's your food. Even with the best protection, you can't survive without food. So focus on this. Make sure your mind is well fed. That keeps the rest of the path strong.