

In Accordance with the Dhamma

February 2, 2021

There's an argument you sometimes hear: that the Buddha said that suffering comes from resisting change, therefore there should be nothing wrong with changing the Dhamma, changing the Vinaya.

But that argument is wrong from the very beginning.

The Buddha never said that suffering comes from resisting change. He says it comes from clinging, which means that we have to turn around and look at what we're clinging to. We find that we're clinging to a lot of things we hold dear. This is why the Dhamma goes against the grain. The things that we hold to dearest, the Buddha says: That's your suffering.

So the question is: Are we going to give him a fair hearing or not? Or: Are we going to give his teachings a try or not? If we decide ahead of time that we don't like the teaching and we want to change it, how can we say that we've given the Dhamma a test? The Buddha said he's not forcing the Dhamma on anybody, he's offering it for a test. But to give it a fair test requires that it should be practiced as it's taught: what the Buddha calls practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma.

That's how we show our respect for the Buddha. You know the story of the night that he was passing away: The devas were playing celestial songs, throwing down celestial flowers, flowers, and incense. The Buddha told the monks who were gathered there what was happening, but added that that's not how you show respect to the Tathagata. You show respect by practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma.

After all, he went to all that trouble to find the Dhamma. He never made the Dhamma up. A lot of people say that we should refashion the Dhamma to fit with our time and place, but the Buddha never fashioned the Dhamma. He had to find it. As in that chant just now: There's this regularity to the Dhamma that's true whether the Buddha discovers it or not. But if he

doesn't discover it for us, we have no chance to practice it. So he went to all that trouble to discover it, and the texts tell us that he had the memory of many many eons, and so he could see what other Buddhas had done in the past.

In taking their example, he formulated the Vinaya. This is the part that he did formulate, but it wasn't a fly-by-night sort of "let's see what we can think of next" kind of Vinaya. The Dhamma was there and he uncovered it. When we make changes to it, we're covering it back up again. He said that the Dhamma is *akaliko*, timeless, and the more we try to make it fit in with our time, the further we get away from its timeless quality.

Because there is something about practicing the Dhamma as best you can in line with what the Buddha taught that erases the time between then and now. You feel close to him. You feel close to all the people who've practiced it over all that time. You're part of a long lineage of people who are close.

When we first came here, there was a lot of pressure from our visitors for us to change things: "So now that you're in America, you have to do things the American way." That kept me thinking about Ajaan Fuang's warning about people who go to foreign lands from Thailand to spread the Dhamma and what happens is that those foreign lands spread their defilements into the people who are supposed to be spreading the Dhamma.

So I told the people, "Here I am, far away from my teachers. The only thing that keeps me close to them is the fact that I'm practicing in line with what they taught. I'm not trying to change things, and I want to be able to pass that on." And so, by resisting that pressure, we've been able to survive. Because if our concern is trying to attract people here, then anything can change, and none of us could live in peace. New people come and make new demands, and we'd have to change this, change that, and the things we had learned would get thrown away.

When I first was ordained, I wasn't all that happy about all the rules. I kept looking in the books and saying to myself, "My god, there are more and more rules. The more you look, the more you find." But I began to realize

that the rules are there to make you free. They've designed a community that people can respect, and people respect us partly because they've seen us last so long, but mainly because the community respects the Buddha.

This way, we get support that enables us to practice as much as we can. We don't have to worry about the typical things that lay people have to worry about. So we're free.

At the same time, the rules are designed for a very harmonious living. When things are clearly laid out like this and they're not going to change, you know what to do. We need to know what to do on the external level, and when that's clear, it gives you more time to focus on what's wrong inside. Because that's the real point of all the Dhamma and the Vinaya: to point inside, to where you're clinging. How can you develop some disenchantment for that clinging? Because that's what the Buddha said: "When you're practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma, it leads to disenchantment."

The words go together. The word for clinging, *upadana*, can also mean to feed; the word for disenchantment, *nibbida*, is the realization that you've had enough of a certain kind of food. You don't want anymore. So we're working precisely on putting an end to our clinging, our old feeding habits, and so we find that our ideas, our views run up against things in the Dhamma.

Here it's good to think of that teaching, I think it's from the third Chan patriarch: "The Great Way is not difficult for those with no preferences." It's not saying you shouldn't prefer skillful actions to unskillful actions, or that you shouldn't prefer the end of suffering to suffering. You should prefer these things, it's simply that you figure out what has to be done and then, whether you like it or not, you're willing to do it: That's what it means to have no preferences. That's how you make the way easy for yourself.

And it always stands to reason that if you're suffering from what your views are, and where your idea of who you are is, in addition to sensuality,

and in addition to your ideas of how things should be done, then it's good to try what the Buddha recommended.

Because he offers different views, different ways for doing things, a different sense of self, but focused on the *doing*: practicing generosity, practicing virtue, developing concentration, developing your discernment. He gives very clear instructions on how to do these things.

So you want to clear away all the encumbrances that get in the way of really focusing where the problem is: your own clinging, your own feeding, things you hold very dear. If you can't let the things you hold very dear be challenged, there's no way you're going to get progress. So instead of rewriting the tradition, we should allow the tradition to rewrite us.

The story of someone who used to create suffering and learned how not to: This is what we respect in the ajaans. Ajaan Mun did everything he could to follow the customs of the noble ones as best as he could understand them. That's how he trained all his students, not in terms of his own ideas about things, but from what he discovered through his own practice: the discernment he had developed not just through reading, not just through thinking things through, but actually putting the Dhamma into practice and seeing the results. Having that kind of discernment, he was in a good position to teach others. He changed his thoughts, his words, and his deeds to fit in line with the Dhamma and gave them an example.

We should allow ourselves to do the same so that we can be a good example for the world. Because the best way to benefit from the Dhamma, the best way to test the Dhamma, is to follow it in line with the Dhamma. Only then can you say you've given it a fair test.

So however much the world may change, there's no reason for us to change with them. It's only then that we're going to be able to find the Dhamma that's really timeless.