Customs of the Noble Ones, The

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. Or, like tonight, the chant on the world being insufficient, insatiable, asleep, or craving. And then we finish up with a chant that begins with “May I be happy.” That’s our challenge, seeing how there’s so much suffering, so much craziness in the world. It’s not just the world outside; it’s the world inside our minds as well. Given that situation, we still want to be happy. Some people counsel to simply let go and accept whatever comes and find happiness that way. But that’s like lying down and letting the trucks run right over you. The quest for happiness requires determination. We’ve got to make up our minds that this is something we really want. Then pursue that determination as wisely as we can. There are four factors to any kind of determination, and the very first one is just that, discernment. Figure out what kind of goal is a worthy goal in your life. As the Buddha said, “Determination is the discernment that begins with the question, ‘What, when I do it, will be to 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, there’s a question you address to other people. You want some advice. You don’t have it. You have to keep reinventing the Dharma wheel all for yourself. But they can only give that, just the advice, the work that we have to do ourselves. That’s the second realization. “What, when I do it, will be to my long-term welfare and happiness?” It has to come from your own actions. It’s based on a realization that long-term happiness depends on understanding causality, and that the kind of happiness you want is long-term. I mean, there’s so much short-term happiness out there. But then 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. But there’s also the realization, buried in there, that you want something that goes beyond causality. Because anything that depends on causal factors is going to have to change when those causal factors change. So the underlying question is, is there happiness that can be found that takes you outside of causality? Or is there a path of action that can take you outside of causality? That was the Buddhist discovery, and that’s what sets this 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, is there a course of action that takes you outside of the causal cycle, of the causal network? So 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 the seeds of a lot of implications, that you want a happiness that lies outside of any conditioning at all. And it’s going to require a skill. And the skill is nourished by three other qualities that complete the determination. And 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. And you’ve got to realize that that’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, but 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. And your ability 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 do you do 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 people ask, “How can you Americanize this stuff?” This was a person asking the other question, the opposite question, “How do you keep true?” This is where the customs of the noble ones come in. It’s not a question of going over and just taking on Thai culture or Asian culture, because even over there, the Dharma is countercultural. You try to take on the customs of the noble ones. The first three have to do with the requisites, being content with what you have in terms of food, clothing, shelter. Not pride. Priding yourself on your contentment, 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. 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 to play along. In the course of playing along, you’ve got to do things and say things and think things that people in their right minds wouldn’t say or do or think. But when you’re caught in an abyss in which you want more of what they have to offer, you’ve got to play along with their game. This is how the noble ones pull out of that, by developing this quality of contentment. The fourth of the customs you might think would have to do with medicine, because that’s the fourth of the requisites, but it’s not. 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 contented. When you see that there’s something in your mind that’s 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 things, in this project, because if it’s just plain old work and drudgery, you won’t last. You can force yourself for a 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 they’re in the fourth Noble Truth. At the heart of the truth is right concentration. One of its factors is bliss or pleasure, happiness. And another one is rapture. So this is when we talk about practicing the Dhamma. The focus is on practicing concentration, getting the mind to settle down, have 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 the breath. This is a very immediate and visceral way of showing good will 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 like we’re stepping on the breath to see something else, trying to climb over the breath to see something else. Let’s 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. We try to be sensitive all around. How does the breathing process as a whole affect your body? What kind of 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, the breath coming in your spine, the breath coming in and out your legs, your toes, all over the body. Finding where the patterns of tension in your body are. Finding where the trigger points are. You’ll begin to notice that there are a few spots here and there in the body, but if you keep those spots open and relaxed, they have a domino effect. It keeps other spots relaxed as well. Once you learn to take those as your point of reference, if you can stay with that point, keep it relaxed, and just go through the day with that point relaxed, you’ll find that 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 it gets important, because if you can come to the practice with this sense of energy, this 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 support. See how you can approach the issues of greed, anger, and delusion. You can approach all the various cravings in the mind, not as someone who’s hungry, because that’s exactly what craving means. It’s a kind of hunger. It’s a kind of thirst. If you see a craving arising, but you’re feeling full, energized, you ask yourself, “Why would I want to identify with that kind of craving? Why would I want to take on that hunger?” And you 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. In this way, you bring that 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, and it seems to be a very long, long road that you’re going to go down, it’s hard to keep the mind at peace. You get worked up over it, and you find that you have less and less energy to bring to the practice. But you can develop this sense of peace and well-being. At the heart of the path are these factors of being true to your determination, letting go of what has to be let go, and maintaining that sense of peace. You find that you’re going to actually develop that sense of delight, which can carry you through. So this is how you’re going to start. Now you keep that sense of focus in the midst of the craziness of the world outside and 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, you find a sense of ease and 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 look at all the craziness of the world. In 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 they do. 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. You take on the cultures of the noble ones. Even over in Asia, John Mun used to get a lot of flak 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 and Laotian culture are just like any human culture. Those are the cultures of people with defilements.” He wanted to follow the customs of the noble ones, because this is how you maintain those noble qualities in your mind. Truthfulness, relinquishment, peace. You need to keep those qualities going. After all, we’re not trying to feed off food, clothing, and shelter more than we actually need. For the rest of the ones in the mind, we take the path as our food. The Buddha has an analogy at one point in his teachings for the practice of being like a fortress. After all, in the midst of this crazy world, you need a fortress. Some of the qualities he liked to sermon on are the plaster coating on the walls. In other words, if you just had a plain old rock wall, people could climb up the rocks and get over your walls. But if you cover it with plaster, there are no toeholds, no footholds, no handholds. So your discernment is your outside protection. For the right concentration, that’s your food. And even with the best protection, you can’t survive without the food. So focus on this. Make sure you’re well-fit. Make sure the mind is well-fit. And that keeps the rest of the path strong.

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