Outside the Culture

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The commentary tells the story of how the Buddha, when he first returned home after his awakening, went out for alms in the morning. The word got to his father, the king. His father was upset and went down into the street and told his son to stop. This was disgraceful. Nobody in their lineage, nobody in their tradition had ever done anything like that, going for alms in the street. He thought it was disgraceful. The Buddha said, “I no longer belong to your lineage. I no longer follow the traditions of your lineage. I now belong to the lineage of the noble ones. Going for alms is part of the traditions of the noble ones.” There are lots of implications to this story. It shows that even in the time of the Buddha, the practice of the Dhamma was something that was outside of society. It didn’t follow along with the customs of the culture. It was an alternative culture, and it’s been that way ever since. People who practice the Dhamma stand outside of their culture, whatever the culture may be. We look at the forest tradition in Thailand and see it as a part of Thai culture. And forget that when Ajahn Mun first went out into the forest to follow the ascetic practices, practice meditation as it was taught in the Canon, he was criticized for breaking with Thai custom, with Lao custom. In many, many ways. His response was always this, “Thai customs, Lao customs, whatever the customs, those are the customs of people with defilements. If you aim at the noble state, you should try to follow the customs of the noble ones.” As Ajahn Suat once commented, this was one of Ajahn Mun’s favorite Dhamma talks, because it was an issue all through his life. He did things differently from other people, differently from other monks, and was many times criticized for it. The same thing happened here in America. When they were first setting up the Dhammud order here, they started having annual meetings for the abbots of the different monasteries. They would invite high-ranking monks from Bangkok to come. And all those monks ate off of plates sitting at tables. One of the monks asked Ajahn Suat if he would stop eating out of his bowl, at least for the duration of the meeting. It looked like he was setting himself apart from the others. He was showing off. He said, “It’s not that I’m showing off. It’s just that I feel sorry for Ajahn Mun and all the effort he went to to revive this custom.” And it would be a shame if he just threw it away. He said, “If what I’m doing is embarrassing to you, or if you think it’s disgraceful, then I’ll be happy not to come to the meeting.” Well, they couldn’t do that, so they let him continue eating out of the bowl. That’s among the ties where Buddhism has been established for hundreds of years. The contrast is even more striking. When you think about bringing the Dhamma to America, how many times you hear that if Buddhism is going to survive here, it has to fit in with the local customs. They talk about Buddhism as if it were some sort of amoeba who is moving into the culture, moving into the society. If it’s going to survive here, it’s going to have to adapt. Buddhism doesn’t have a will. It’s not a living organism. It’s a tradition. It’s passed on from one generation to the next. And how each generation handles it is going to determine how long it survives. And part of that survival is realizing that some things cannot adapt. It’s always stood outside of the culture. What we see as the Thai adaptation of Buddhism, or the Chinese or the Japanese, those are the parts that actually end up deviating from the Dhamma. The fact that it’s been done in the past doesn’t justify it being done right now. And if you look more carefully in each of the cultures, you see that there always have been people who realized you’ve got to step outside of the culture if you’re going to be true to the practice. Those are the people who have kept the Dhamma alive. So as we do our practice, we have to realize that we’re stepping outside. And sometimes it’s lonely to step outside. This is why you need a community of other people who are practicing, to at least have contact with them, if you can’t live with them all the time. And always remember, you’re doing this for your own sanity. If you just go along with other people, where does it lead? It leads to the same place all other defilements go—continued wandering on. And the fact that you’re stepping outside, even though it may seem a little bit lonely, is a good example for other people, at least something to make them stop and think. A lot of people will not stop and think. They’ll just see you as weird. But we’re not here to please them. We’re suffering, and we have to do what it takes to stop suffering. It’s not just that we’re suffering inside. When we suffer, it starts spreading around to other people as well. So we want to do what it takes to stop the suffering, both for our own sake and for the sake of the people around us. Whether they appreciate it or not, that doesn’t matter. You have to be solid in your conviction that what you’re doing is really worthwhile. Now, there are customs in the Noble Ones, traditions in the Noble Ones. There’s a discourse where the Buddha enumerates them as four. The first three deal with requisites. They deal with food, clothing, and shelter. You’re content with whatever food, clothing, and shelter you get. You don’t do anything unseemly to get more of it. And you use these things conscious of the dangers of getting attached to them. So it’s not just contentment. It goes further than that. And it goes further still when the Buddha says, “And you don’t pride yourself on the fact that you’re content and other people are not content.” In other words, you’re not here to compete with other people or to compare yourself with others. You’re not doing this to be better than somebody else. You’re doing it because it’s conducive to the practice. When you look around you, you see how many people keep working, working, working, so they can have lots of stuff. Sometimes some people take two jobs. Now, what about all that stuff that they get? Is it really worth it? If you can learn to be content, you have a lot more time to practice. It extends to material things. As for your practice, the Buddha said discontent is important. It may sound strange, but he made the point that this was how he was able to achieve awakening. He didn’t allow himself to rest content with wherever he was in his practice. He always kept digging away, digging away, to see if there was anything he could do better, if there was any subtle level of suffering that he hadn’t found yet or hadn’t realized yet or hadn’t understood yet. So you practice contentment with material things so you can focus your efforts on improving the mind. This is where we come into the fourth custom or tradition of the Noble Ones, which is to delight in abandoning and to delight in developing. The abandoning refers to unskillful mental qualities, greed, anger, and delusion. The developing refers to skillful ones, learning how to abandon greed, anger, and delusion, learning how to develop good qualities in their place, the factors for awakening, the perfections, whatever is a good quality in the mind, beginning with generosity, virtue, and the development of goodwill. All the way up through the discernment that leads to release. You want to learn how to delight in these things. Here again, the customs of the Noble Ones go against our ordinary, everyday customs. Ordinarily, we like to develop our greed, anger, and delusion. There’s that word papanca, which means proliferation, elaboration, and complication. The mind loves to elaborate on its greed. It loves to elaborate on its passions. It’s very easy to focus, say, on a thought of lust or a thought of anger and decorate it for hours. That’s what we normally like to do. We take our defilements as our friends, and we have long, involved conversations with them. But in the customs of the Noble Ones, you want to learn how to cut these things off. You realize these are not your friends. They destroy you. They obstruct you. So you want to learn how to delight in overcoming them. Try to figure out ways in which you can learn how to undercut your lust, how to undercut your anger, how to undercut your delusion. And when you’re able to do it, take pride in it. That kind of pride is actually a help on the path, because otherwise, if you keep dismissing your efforts in this area, it looks like you’re going nowhere, accomplishing nothing. And there doesn’t seem to be any reason the next time around, when greed, anger, and delusion come, that you would want to try to outwit them again. In particular, you’ve got to watch out for that thought that says, “Well, even though you let go of lust this time, it’s going to come back. So why bother?” You have to say, “Well, I don’t care about the next time around. I’m going to work on it this time. Next time around, we’ll see what happens. But just for this once, I’d like to see how I can undercut lust.” Think about how different this is from the normal values of society. They say that anyone who tries to abandon lust is sick, twisted, neurotic, whatever. They spend all their time trying to elaborate it, make more out of it. So you can see how the values of the Dhamma and the values of general society really are running in opposite directions. It’s the same with greed, anger, and fear. There are people out there who want you to be angry. They thrive on your discontent. They want you to be fearful. All those subliminal messages that are being broadcast through TV. I happened to be visiting a friend of a home one time. He was watching Fox News 24. They stopped for an advertisement for the evening news. They were reporting that tonight’s big news story had something to do with the fight against terrorism. The words were actually flashing across the screens, “Be afraid, be afraid, be afraid,” on a blank part of the set. So I mentioned to my friend, “Gee, they’re kind of pretty blatant, aren’t they?” He said, “Well, yeah, that’s the way Fox News always is.” I said, “Wait a minute. Did you see the words flashing across the screen?” He said, “No.” So I don’t know what it was. Maybe it’s the fact that I don’t watch TV. My brain was tuned to a different frequency, but I actually saw the subliminal messages being flashed there. I don’t think that was the only time it ever happened. The society out there wants you to be greedy, angry, delusional. They want you to lust. And there’s no way that the Dhamma is going to survive if you try to go along with it. Along with those ideas, along with those values, you’ve got to stand apart. So once you realize that, it makes it a lot easier to deal with the feeling that you’re in a strange land with strange values. You say, “Yep, that’s the way it is. They’re sick. We’ve got better customs to follow.” It’s not that we’re following Asian customs, because, as I said, the Buddha, Ajahn Man, all the great meditators in all the different Asian societies, they had to stand outside of their culture. This is one of the things that attracted me to Ajahn Phuong in the very first place. He wasn’t a typical Thai person. He seemed to have his own outsider’s perspective on Thai society, which I, of course, could identify with. Being an outsider myself, I’ve noticed that quality in all the great Ajahns. They don’t accept things simply because everybody else accepts them. They always question, stand apart, look at things for what they really are, as opposed to what everybody thinks they are. This is an important part of the practice, learning how to be comfortable standing apart. Being confident standing apart. You’re not standing alone. You’ve got the customs of the noble ones behind you. You’ve got the traditions of the noble ones behind you. It’s through following their traditions that you can become a noble one as well. That’s where the value of the survival of Buddhism really lies. If it simply survives as a tradition that has adapted to the society, that kind of survival doesn’t really mean anything. But if it still provides the opportunity for people to stand apart and embody the traditions of the noble ones, then they become noble ones as well. That’s when the survival of Buddhism really means something. So make sure that at least it means something for you. And through your example, it may help other people as well.

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