Step Outside Your Culture

December 24, 2008

Years back, during my second or third year with Ajahn Phuong, we had a particularly cold, cold season for Thailand. Every night there’d be a wind coming down from the north. Cold wind. I started feeling homesick. It was December. I started thinking about Christmas. I mentioned this to Ajahn Phuong. He said, “Yes, every culture has its silly customs, doesn’t it?” Then he proceeded to talk about a Chinese custom. Every year, early April, the family has to gather around the family gravesite. And if you don’t gather around, you’re considered an unfilial child. He said, “Why does it have to be that day? What’s so special about that day? Can’t you go any other day?” I must admit, as I started looking at Western and American customs around Christmas, it did seem rather silly. Why did it have to be that day? Why do we have to have generosity and goodwill for that day and then forget about it for the rest of the year? And as I thought about it, the more I realized how good it is to be able to step outside of your culture and see your own culture in new eyes, with new eyes, and examine your presuppositions, the assumptions you carry around. So you find that by carrying them around, you’re weighing yourself down. It’s good to let go, and that you can let go. As we’re meditating, this is one way of getting outside of our culture, even though we’re still here. The culture of meditation is that errant thoughts come up and you just let them go, no matter how important they may seem or how entertaining or whatever. You learn how to let them go. You’ve got another place to stay. You’ve got another duty, which is to stay with the breath. It may not be creative, and it may not be imaginative, and it may not be a lot of these other things that we value in our culture, but it’s necessary. It’s necessary for the well-being of the mind. This doesn’t mean that as a meditator you don’t think at all, but you have to get practice in learning how to say “no” to whatever thought comes up. You say “yes” only to the thoughts that keep you in the breath, grounded right here in the body, in and of itself. The Buddha says that you stay with the body in and of itself. You put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. In other words, you don’t get involved in all the narratives and ongoing storylines that connect you to the world. This can mean the world of the senses, the world of the culture you grew up in, because the body in and of itself is something that stands outside of those things. You want to get used to being here, that you have this perspective of distance. One of the images they have of the Arhat is someone who senses pleasure and pain disjoined from it. The Arhat knows there’s pleasure, knows there’s pain, but it doesn’t seep into the heart. Even though we haven’t reached that state yet, it’s good to be able to practice gaining a little distance from your presuppositions, your ideas about how you thought things have to be, and you get a chance instead to look at them just as they are, as they’re happening. It gives you a different perspective entirely, so that when you do have to deal with day-to-day things, the people around you, you can bring a different perspective. Jon Fung often talked about having your body in the world but your mind stepping outside of the world, not falling in line with it. As a meditator, we’re not totally devoid of culture, but we do have the tradition of the culture of the noble ones. And it is a culture that stands outside a lot of the values of household culture all over the world. Contentment, even though people like to teach contentment to children, is a whole in society, no matter where you are. It’s based on the idea that we need better food, better clothing, better shelter. Yet the culture of the noble ones steps outside of that. Whatever food you get, as long as it keeps the body alive, it’s enough. Clothing keeps you warm in the winter, protects you from inclemencies of the weather, keeps you properly covered, it’s enough. The same with shelter. The purpose of all this is because the culture of the noble ones places a great deal of emphasis on the mind. Particularly developing skillful qualities and abandoning unskillful ones, and learning how to take delight in that, to really enjoy developing skillful qualities and unskillful ones. This really goes against a lot of our culture, especially what we’ve seen in the past couple of decades here in America. Greed is the engine, somehow, of our well-being. That’s people’s attitude. It has become an article of fact. As long as greed is allowed to operate without bounds, without restrictions, things will all work out in the end. Years back, when American advisers were going to Thailand, this was back in the 1960s, they were concerned about communists taking over the country. They wanted to build a good, solid capitalist system, and they were concerned that Buddhism teaches contentment. This is not helpful, they thought. It was actually a directive that went out from the Thai government to Thai monks, “Don’t teach contentment.” The monks looked at that and laughed and threw the letter away. But it’s important that we realize that learning how to be content with your material things, so that you can focus on finding true happiness in the moment, is a special value. That’s an unusual value, but it’s a special value. It’s a value that allows you to step out of your conditioning and your internal attitudes. It’s not that you come with a pure mind that’s somehow soiled by growing up in society. If you didn’t have greed, anger, and delusion, the influence of society wouldn’t have any impact on you at all. But the ability to step outside of your culture also allows you to start stepping outside of your old attitudes. Ones that say, “This has to be this way, and that has to be that way.” It’s because we think things have to be in those certain ways that we suffer. That’s why the Buddha asked this different question, “Where is the suffering? Where is the stress?” Even in the attitudes we think we have to hold to. Maybe there’s a way to let go and still live skillfully in the world. To realize that, as a meditator, you’re learning how to step outside of your culture. It’s like those rites of passage that older cultures used to practice. A person became an adult. He or she was sent out into the wilderness for a while. As you were sent out, you got to clear your head a bit and think, “Who are you? What do you want to have as the path of your life?” After having had some time being on your own, then you were allowed back in. Whereas you meditate, you have time to be alone every day, every time you sit down and meditate. Try to think of that as a time totally to yourself, totally alone, totally independent, putting aside all the issues of the world—not just greed and distress, but anything that’s related to the world. So you can deal solely with the issues of trying to make the mind more skillful, to develop skillful qualities and abandon unskillful ones. What’s so special about the culture of the noble ones is that, unlike most cultures, it actually takes as its central value that you want to be happy, and that by intelligently pursuing your own true happiness, it’s going to be good not only for you, but for everybody around you. A lot of cultures are built on the idea that people are trying to be happy. If they’re not directed, if their opinions aren’t molded in a certain way, they’re just going to create a lot of problems. The happiness of the individual is not the main overriding value of the society. The overriding value is shaped by religious beliefs or economic beliefs. Somehow the individual is supposed to fit into the system, and the parts of you that don’t fit into the system have to get lopped off. That’s why, as we take on the values of our cultures, there’s going to be war inside. The part of you that wants to be happy keeps running against the role that society has for you. One of the customs of the noble ones, the attitude, is that if you truly understand what it is to be happy, your true happiness is not going to conflict with the true happiness of anybody else. The values of the society are all aimed in this direction. The values of the culture are all aimed in this direction. The conflict here, of course, is with your defilements. But as you look at your defilements, you say, “Well, they want to be happy too. I simply don’t understand.” So the nature of the war inside is very different. You have to learn how to educate yourself. Educate your greed. Educate your anger. Educate your delusion. But everybody’s operating on common ground. We want a reliable happiness. So as you learn how to adopt the values of this culture, you find that it changes your perspective. Being a meditator really is a countercultural kind of activity. Even in societies that are nominally Buddhist, the meditators really are a special subculture. This is one of the things I noted about Ajahn Phuong when I went to stay with him. He wasn’t like the typical Thai people I’d met over my years there. I got to know more and more of the meditators. I realized this was a special, different culture. So as you meditate, look at it as an opportunity to step outside of whatever cultural assumptions you’ve had. You’re putting yourself right here in the present moment, with the breath coming in and going out. And it gives you a very special vantage point. It allows you to decide which of your old attitudes are still useful and which ones are not. So it really does create a revolutionary change in the mind. We’re not just doing a technique. The technique puts us in a position where we can really examine our values. So we can drop the ones that don’t pass the test and we can make good use of the ones too.

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