Getting Yourself

May 15, 2009

When we first set up the monastery here, Ajahn Suwat made a comment that has stuck with me ever since. He said, “We’re not here to get other people. We’re here to get ourselves. If we spend our time trying to get other people and lose ourselves, we’ve lost. But as we’re practicing, training the mind, we’re going to be here to get ourselves. If other people, like the way we’re training, want to join in, that’s fine. But if not, at least make sure,” he said, “that you get yourself.” When he said that, I knew I could stay here with a sense of conviction and safety that things weren’t going to be sacrificed simply to attract other people, that we weren’t going to make any changes simply because they were popular. As Ajahn Suwat himself once said, one of Ajahn Mun’s favorite topics for a Dhamma talk would be the customs of the noble ones. One thing we tend to forget when we look at the Thai forest tradition, and it seems so very Thai, is that Ajahn Mun and Ajahn Suwat were setting out to go against a lot of the traditions that had built up around Thai Buddhism and Laotian Buddhism at the time. They were often criticized for not doing things the way other monks did them, bucking the current. Ajahn Mun’s response always was, “The customs of Thai people and the customs of Lao people are like the customs of any people around the world. The customs of people of defilement are based on greed, anger, and delusion.” He was more interested in the customs of the noble ones, the customs that had been set down by people who had no greed, no anger, no delusion. So we take that as our guide. There’s nothing in the Buddhist teachings there simply to please people. All the teachings are there because Ajahn Mun found that they worked. In particular, one passage where the Buddha himself talks about the customs of the noble ones comes down to four things. The first three have to do with food, clothing, and shelter. In other words, you learn how to be content with whatever food you get, whatever clothing you get, whatever shelter you get. You see the drawbacks of being attached to these things, and you look for the escape from that attachment, the escape from that danger. Given that list, you’d think that the fourth one would have to do with medicine, but it doesn’t. You delight in developing and you delight in abandoning. In other words, you delight in developing skillful qualities and you find delight in abandoning unskillful ones. That’s a delight that’s hard to master, but it can be done as you begin to see the results of developing skillful qualities in the mind and of abandoning unskillful ones. But across the board, in all four, the Buddha also adds that you don’t exalt yourself for abiding by these customs, and you don’t disparage others who are not. In other words, we follow these customs not to be better than other people, but simply because we ourselves are suffering. This is something you have to keep in mind all the time. This is what the teachings are all about, the fact that we’re suffering. We’ve got stress, we’ve got discontent, distress in our minds. We have to look after that. This is what Ajahn Swart meant by gaining yourself or getting yourself. He didn’t mean it in a selfish way, simply that our real work is right here in the mind. It’s not trying to spread Buddhism or spread the word or whatever. As long as there’s still stress or suffering in the mind, there’s work we’ve got to do right here. After all, look at the pattern of the Buddha. He gained awakening first before he went out to teach people. He had to find the path to the end of suffering before he could teach it with any conviction, with any force, with any power. So he had to focus first on himself, make sure he got his own mind straightened out. So during that period when he was looking for the way, trying various practices, you don’t read about him being engaged with a lot of other people. There were a few teachers whom he tried and found wanting, and they say that there were the five brethren who were kind of hanging around while he was doing austerities. But you don’t hear of any conversations that he had with them. The narrative is totally focused on what was going on in his mind, how when he was practicing the austerities, whenever pain arose, he made sure that the pain didn’t overcome his mind. Then when he found the right path, he was practicing deep concentration, getting the mind into the various levels of jhana, and getting the different insights that came from that. Whatever pleasure arose in his mind, he didn’t let that overcome his mind either. He was constantly keeping watch on his mind. And only when he’d straightened out his mind, that was when he turned to deal with other people. So as we do our practice, remember, it’s not to make ourselves better than other people. I think I’ve told you that story about my first-grade teacher who was a Roman Catholic. One time she told my mother, “Being a Catholic doesn’t make you better than other people. What is it good for?” I remember being six years old when my mother passed that story on to me. And even at six years old, that didn’t sound kind of stupid. The issue is not whether we’re better than other people, or worse than other people, or equal to other people. The issue is that we’re suffering. And the suffering is coming from our own actions. We’ve got to learn how to train ourselves, how to think, how to speak, how to act in such a way that we’re not causing suffering. We have to be more circumspect. We have to be more alert to what we’re doing. I was reading about an experiment they did with children to measure their ability to exercise delayed gratification. They were offered a marshmallow, and if they were able to wait a certain amount of time, they were told they were going to get two marshmallows. The question was to see which kids could wait so they could get the second marshmallow and get both marshmallows, and which ones couldn’t wait. And then they did studies of the two groups, and they found that the people who were able to wait were the ones who were able to observe their own minds. They noticed that, “If I think about the marshmallow, it’s going to be hard not to just give right in.” So they would try diversionary tactics, think about something else, play something else, keep themselves from thinking about the marshmallow, knowing that that would lessen the desire to just give right in and find an alternative pleasure. Whereas the ones who couldn’t wait were the ones who weren’t able to observe their own minds to see what would work and what wouldn’t work. They were making it easier to delay the gratification. So the lesson here is that you’ve really got to learn how to observe your own mind in a way that’s effective. The second lesson they discovered was that they could actually teach the ones who originally had trouble with the marshmallow, in other words, who tend to give right in, that they were recommending different tactics, different strategies, for delaying the gratification. The kids had never thought of those things, but once the strategy was taught, they could master it and they could wait for long periods of time. So the principle of delayed gratification can be taught. And once you start suggesting to kids like that that they can think in different ways, observe their own minds. This is why the Buddha taught after he’d found the way to his awakening. He realized that it’s a skill. Not everybody could think it up or master it on their own. But once it’s suggested to them that there is such a path and it can be followed, there would be people who would be able to follow it. This also means that we can learn from one another. Other people don’t look at whether they’re better than you are or worse than you are. You look for two things. What skills have they mastered that you haven’t mastered yet? What can you learn from them? Secondly, what do they do that’s just like you? And how does it look? Sometimes they have some unskillful habits that are just like your unskillful habits, and it’s hard for you to see them when you’re doing them. Someone once said, “Our defilements are like ghosts.” You know, there’s that tradition that if you look in a mirror, if you see somebody in the room and you look in the mirror and that person doesn’t appear in the mirror, then they’re a ghost. Looking for your own defilements is often like looking for a ghost in a mirror. You can’t see them. They’re there, but you can’t see them. But when you see them in other people, they’re pretty blatant. So those are the two things we look for in other people. If you’re going to make comparisons, those are the comparisons to make. In other words, what activities have they mastered that you haven’t mastered yet? What can you learn from them around those activities? The second one is, which traits do you share with them? How do they look when you see other people doing things that way? That’s how you look when you’re doing things that way. And, of course, there’s the comparison that Ananda told the nun. In other words, you see other people who are able to do the practice and you remind yourself, “That person’s a human being. I’m a human being. They can do it. Why can’t I?” That’s a reflection that’s useful for when you’re feeling inadequate. When you start getting down on yourself, reflect on the fact that there are other human beings out there a lot worse off than you are. There have been people in the past a lot worse off than you are right now, and yet they were able to become noble disciples. So there are a few areas where comparing yourself with other people can be useful, but you have to be careful that you don’t read the information. You don’t read the “I am” into it or the “they are” into it. “I am better,” “I am worse,” “I am equal to them.” That, as Ajahn Mahaprabhu used to say, is the fangs of ignorance. You’re looking at other people in terms of categories that are really irrelevant. How can you define another person? What’s the standard? That’s that old story of the Buddha recommending that the time had come when there needed to be a hierarchy in the monastic sangha. So he asked the monks, “What should it be based on?” The different monks came up with different ideas. Some said it was about the birth, whether you’re a Brahmin or a noble boy. Some said it was about your attainments, which jhana you’d reached, which psychic powers you’d developed, which noble attainment you’d reached. It’s very easy to see that different people’s standards for measuring one another were very different. People would tend to find a standard where they came out on top. That’s when the Buddha introduced a totally neutral standard, which was seniority. The number of years, the amount of time someone had been in the monkhood, had nothing to do with personal worth at all. It was purely conventional, which is why the hierarchy is livable. We’re not asked to measure one another to figure out who’s going to sit where on the line. It’s simply an automatic number, which has no meaning at all about a person’s worth. The lesson of the story, of course, is that you could figure out all kinds of different types of measurement to say that you’re better than someone else. And that other person has probably figured out some other standard of measurement to decide that he’s better than you are. And given the fact that we’re all suffering, it’s all a huge distraction. Especially when you realize that the “I” is the one who’s suffering. The “I am” that gets built up around things is a major cause of suffering. There’s that passage where the Buddha talks about a monk who’s gained the various levels of jhana. He looks down on the other monks who haven’t gotten that jhana. He says, “This is a sign of a person of no integrity.” That’s not what you’re doing the jhana for. It’s not to be better than other people. It’s because it’s a useful tool in looking into the mind. It’s a useful strategy for getting the mind very still, very clear, very balanced, with a very strong sense of well-being. So if you can start looking into the parts of the mind you normally don’t like to look into, and see the defilements that you ordinarily pretend not to see, then you can work with them. This is how you get yourself. In other words, you do the work inside that needs to be done. So let’s keep this in mind. That’s what we’re here for. We’re not here to get anybody else. We’re here to get ourselves, free ourselves. Of course, that’s not a selfish proposition, because once the mind is free from defilement, you’re causing a lot less trouble to other people, and then you’ve got a basis for which you can teach other people, recommend tactics that they might use as they try to get themselves. Another frequent teaching of the Jon Swets was that each of us has only one person. In other words, we’re responsible only for one person. You’re responsible for your choices. I’m responsible for mine. So make sure you look after your own responsibility.

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