In Gratitude- Ajaan Suwat

April 3, 2022

Today we’ve come together to think about Ajahn Sawat, the person who founded this monastery. In two days’ time, it’s going to be twenty years since he passed away. So we’ve come to think about all that we owe to him. He could have stayed on in Thailand. His teacher was the teacher of the king. After his teacher passed away, his teacher was Ajahn Phan. Ajahn Sawat was responsible first for the funeral, which was a royal state funeral, and then for the building of a museum and memorial to Ajahn Phan, again sponsored by the king. He was involved in being in touch with a lot of senior monks in Bangkok, government officials, officials from the palace, as well as the royal family. When that was over, he wanted to find a place where he could just go off and be by himself for a while. He had a friend in Bangkok, a monk at one of the monasteries there, who had just started a monastery here in America, up in Seattle. So he invited Ajahn Sawat to come and spend a couple months there. He came here and began to see the difficulties that Thai people were having in getting good monks to come. So he decided to stay on. And as a result, people in Thailand began to wonder about him. Most of the monks who came here to America had a bad reputation. They came here to escape the Vinaya. It got to the point that one time Ajahn Sawat was back in Thailand during the winter. He was visiting Ajahn Mahaprabhu, and Ajahn Mahaprabhu decided to give him an opportunity to say in front of a lot of people, “So I understand you’re there in America fixing your own food.” And Ajahn Sawat’s reply was, “Well, there may be some monks who are doing that, but you can be confident that your students would not do anything like that.” Another time, the king invited Ajahn Sawat to the palace. He asked him, “Why are you staying on in America? If Westerners want to study the Dhamma, they can come here to Thailand easily.” And Ajahn Sawat’s response was, “Well, I’m not there for the Westerners. I’m there for the Thais, who don’t have any money to depend on.” Of course, as he came here, he began to see that it was not just the Thais who needed the Dhamma. It was everybody. Which is why he ended up founding Marmetha. After several years in Thailand, basically being in suburban homes, he finally had a place out in the country. And as he said, this was going to be a place where everybody could come and practice, no matter what their background, no matter what their language, no matter what their nationality. This was the place where we weren’t going to be holding any one particular country’s customs. As our standard, we’re going to be holding the customs of the noble ones. This was a principle that he had learned from Ajahn Mahan. As he said, this was one of Ajahn Mahan’s favorite Dhamma themes, following the customs of the noble ones. Ajahn Mahan himself had been criticized as he was taking on the ascetic practices, trying to follow the Vinaya as strictly as possible. He was deviating from a lot of things that had become customary in Thailand and Laos. When people commented on this to him, he said, “Well, the customs of the people in Thailand or Laos or any country in the world, those are the customs of people with defilements. If you want to get past your own defilements, you have to follow the customs of those who already have gotten past their defilements, in other words, the noble ones. So we follow the customs of the noble ones. The custom of being content with our food, clothing, lodging. The custom of delighting in abandoning unskillful qualities. The custom of delighting in developing skillful qualities. If you stick with these, then you’ve got the Dhamma that’s appropriate for everybody, no matter where they’re from. So we’ve tried to maintain that principle here as well. When the monasteries first started, we had lots of Westerners coming here saying,”Now that you’re here in America, you have to do things the American way.” And the American way seemed to be at odds with a lot of things we were doing. As long as Ajahn Suat stood by the customs of the noble ones, as we said, we’re not trying to impose Asian customs on anybody here. We’re trying to make the customs of the noble ones available. In the years after Ajahn Suat left, again, people would come and request changes. And as I told them, here physically we’re far away from my teachers in Thailand. The only way I feel close to them is by following what they taught me. If you had me changed from that, then I’d be far away, both in body and mind. And like an uprooted plant, I’d die. So I’ve held by that principle. I’ve followed Ajahn Suat’s example. And that’s what’s enabled us to make a place where everybody can come and practice, as long as they’re really serious about doing the practice. Because, as he said another time, we’re not here to get other people. We’re here to get ourselves. And that requires holding closely to the Dhamma and the Vinaya. If other people see what we’re doing and like what we’re doing, and they want to come and join us, we’re happy to have them join us. But we’re not going to sacrifice ourselves in order to get others. Because there was another statement he liked to make, which was that with all the people in the world, there’s really only one person, and that’s our Self. What he meant, of course, was that there’s only one person that you can truly be responsible for. Even if you have children, you can’t be responsible for their actions 100 percent. Especially as they grow older, they get more and more independent in their thinking. But you can be responsible for your own actions. The problem is that most people are not. They’re more concerned about what other people are doing, and their own actions get left to whatever defilements may come up in their mind. So you have to be very careful. Make sure that your actions stay in line with the Dhamma. That’s your responsibility. Someone brought us a book one time. There was a logo in Thailand that came up right about that time, about the time when it was published. It said in Thai, “Ya Hin Kya Dua.” It should be translated as, “Don’t be self-centered.” And as Ajahn Suet said, that’s not in line with what the Buddha taught. The Buddha said you’ve got to be self-centered, but in a wise way. You’re not self-centered in being selfish, but you are self-centered in realizing that the big problem in life is the problem of the suffering that you are causing yourself. So you’ve got to focus there, inside yourself. Straighten out things inside yourself. Make that your center. Once the center inside is straightened out, then you have time for others. Of course, this doesn’t mean that you’re not generous in the meantime, because part of straightening out yourself inside means that you have to overcome your stinginess, your lack of generosity. It also means that you have to get rid of any activities that would break the precepts. So as you’re being self-centered in this way, you’re actually helping a lot of other people in the meantime. But the main focus is right here, where you’re responsible. As long as you don’t lose your focus, then you’re practicing in line with the customs of the noble ones. And this connects with another teaching that Ajahn Suet got from Ajahn Mun. As he said, this is one of Ajahn Mun’s favorite topics, was practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. In other words, you have to change yourself to be in line with the Dhamma. You don’t try to change the Dhamma to be in line with your own defilements. Boy, stick by the Dhamma in this way. Then it’s as if we’re on a main road. This is the Buddha’s own example. You follow the Noble Eightfold Path, the way he taught it. It’s like you’re on a major highway. It’s smooth. It’s safe. If you leave this path, it’s like going off on a rough path into the forest, up the hills and down. If you’re on a cart, which is what you had back in those days, you finally get to the point where the axle breaks, the wheels break, and then you’re stuck. But if you stay on the major highway, you’re safe as long as you’re on the highway. And it’ll take you to where you want to go, to the end of suffering. There’s no other path that can guarantee that. So we want to follow the path that’s been tested again and again. And again and again for more than 2,600 years. So as long as we stick by these principles, we’re on the safe path. And we can be confident that someday we’re going to get where we want to go.

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