Values of the Noble Ones

February 20, 2025

We live in a land of wrong view. We tend to think that if we lived in a Buddhist country, it would be easier to practice, more people would respect us for practicing, create a better environment for practicing. And there are some places, say in Thailand or the other Asian countries where Buddhism is prevalent, where the atmosphere really is conducive. But you also have to remember there’s a lot of non-Buddhist attitudes in those countries as well. In government bureaucracies, anyone who says we’ve got to make sure that we’re not corrupt is told, “Go live in a monastery.” “Don’t bother us.” As people go their way. And people who tend to practice the Dharma get pushed out. So it’s not the case that you’ll find the ideal environment over there, everywhere. You have to be really selective. And it also means that while you’re practicing, you have to be able to carry the practice with you, carry the attitudes with you, whether you’re in a Buddhist country or a non-Buddhist country. You have to have your own counter-cultural attitudes. Because the cultures of the world, as Ajahn Mun used to say, are the cultures of people with defilement. They encourage greed, they encourage anger, they encourage delusion. That’s true not only here but everywhere. Whereas people who are trying to get rid of their greed, aversion, and delusion, are going against the stream. So you’ve got to have some inner strength. This is why we take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. Refuge, the word in Pali, sarana, also means something you keep in mind. This is the mindfulness practice that will carry you through. I was reading today about high school students taking mindfulness courses. The way mindfulness courses are taught here is just basically that you’re aware of whatever comes up, and you accept it. Don’t do anything about it. And they discovered, and they were surprised, that this kind of mindfulness makes people more aware of their problems, but also leaves them without any tools to deal with them. Of course, that’s not the mindfulness the Buddha taught. His mindfulness is to provide you with the tools you need. To recognize when something skillful has come into the mind, you try to encourage it. And how you encourage it, you remember that. When unskillful things come into the mind, how do you abandon them? You try to remember that. And you keep this in mind. That’s an important activity. I mean, you go out in the world and you get a job. That’s not part of the job description. Abandon unskillful qualities and develop skillful ones. The job description basically says, “Do this and get this done.” And as for your attitude, as long as you don’t talk too much about your attitude, when it’s negative, you’re okay. So it means you’re left to fend for yourself, as far as your attitude is concerned. They want something else out of you. So you’ve got to have some counter-values, and you have to carry them with you. That’s one of the reasons why we practice mindfulness of the Buddha. To think about what would he do in a situation where you find yourself? In many cases, the Buddha would have not gone into that situation to begin with. But suppose he did. What would his attitude be? What would he recommend you do, if you were there, at your shoulder, to recommend things? He basically would say, “Step back from the situation and view it from a different perspective.” Because when you’re dealing with other people, they try to pull you into their worlds, their attitudes. And you’ve got to pull yourself out. Make sure you stand apart. But at the same time, you want to do it in such a way that you don’t ruffle too many feathers. So think of yourself as an undercover agent, trying to bring Buddhist values into your office, into your workplace. Those values include working on your mind, trying to figure out what would be a good perfection to develop here in this imperfect environment, the kind that’s ten altogether. The Buddha himself never came up with this list, but the list does include things that he advocates elsewhere, in scattered places. His generosity, virtue, renunciation, discernment, persistence, endurance, truth, determination, goodwill, equanimity. Those are all good things to develop. You’ve got to figure out which one is appropriate now. If the list of ten is too long, just think, “Well, how about goodwill?” Goodwill is not just a pink cotton candy attitude that you spread out with cloud machines. Basically thinking, “What would be the skillful thing to do here?” Because it’s through your skillful actions that you’re going to be happy. And if there’s any way you can induce other people to be skillful in their actions, that’s going to make them happy. They may not realize it yet, in which case you have to do a sales job that requires a fair amount of skill. But it’s good to have these skills because you’re protecting your practice. Sometimes you can use humor, sometimes you can just simply step back and not get involved. And keep your eye out for times when you can insert something that’s in line with the Buddhist values, the Buddhist sense of duties, like we chanted just now. How do you comprehend suffering? What does that mean? Suffering is basically clinging. Clinging is kind of an addiction. We do something over and over again and it’s causing suffering, but we feel compelled to keep on doing it. We’re feeding on things that we know are going to be bad for us, but we feel compelled. And part of that is because we lack the imagination to think of something else we could do. We can’t imagine ourselves not doing that. And we can’t imagine other things that we could do. This is what the Dhamma is all about. It’s to help improve our imagination as to what your possibilities are. In fact, you could say that’s what the Dhamma is all about, is opening your mind to possibilities that you didn’t consider before. After all, the four Noble Truths. We’re not suffering. We know there’s suffering. But then the Buddha says it’s not because of people outside. It’s because of our own cravings. That’s unexpected. Then the Buddha says that you can actually have dispassion for your cravings and find happiness. That too is unexpected. Then the path he gives, from right view through right concentration, probably wouldn’t have occurred to you if you hadn’t heard it from him. So look at your clingings as a form of addiction and look at the problem of addiction as a failure of the imagination. And one way to improve your imagination is to step back from situations and ask yourself, “What am I assuming here about this situation that’s actually keeping me trapped?” “What am I assuming about myself that’s keeping me trapped?” Those are good questions to ask in general. And specifically when you find yourself in an environment that is pulling you down. So try to think outside the box a little bit. And the Buddha gives you tools for analyzing it, even what he’s called. He calls it a state of becoming. That’s a world of experience and your identity in that world of experience. These two things are centered on a desire. You can ask yourself, “What is it that I desire that keeps pulling me into this world?” Sometimes it’s the fact that you desire the approval of the people around you, or you want their respect. Or you feel you deserve their respect. Learn how to let that go. Think about the Jhans in Thailand. Nowadays the forest tradition is receiving a lot of respect. But it wasn’t always that way. People look down on the forest monks as being dirty, unreliable, not fulfilling their job in society. The monks in particular were criticized by the senior monks in Bangkok for this. They themselves had been commandeered into helping set up an education system in Thailand, and they wanted all the other monks to do that. So the Jhan Mun had to keep leaving, leaving, leaving areas where this was being imposed. And he and his followers were criticized a lot for that. But we’re lucky that they did leave. The Loura, of course, was coming into being accepted by society. They had to say no to that Loura. That’s what freed them. So you look and see what it is that pulls you into a particular world of values that are opposed to the practice. And remind yourself, “Well, you don’t need that.” I went to stay with the Jhan Fung. This is one of the most refreshing parts of it. He was obviously Thai in a lot of his attitudes, but he also had a tendency to stand outside Thai society, look at it from the outside. He wasn’t popular in the neighborhood. He learned not to let that bother him, because he had more important work to do. That’s the attitude you should have. You have more important work to do as well. Work inside. And that involves different priorities. Different values. And so learn how to keep those values in mind. This is an important part of mindfulness that gets forgotten. It’s the values. The value of the state of your mind is the most important thing. The state of your virtue is something you really want to protect. So in a world where people are engaging in wrong actions and wrong speech, there are times when you’re put at a disadvantage. But those things are only temporary. The fact that you’re holding to the precepts means you have something of solid worth that gives you a good future. So carry the values with you. Keep reminding yourself of what’s important in life, so you don’t get sucked into other people’s ideas of what’s important. You have your own inner culture. And you’ve learned it. We’ve learned it from the Noble Ones. And when the ways of the world change, situations in the world fall away. But you’re still holding to those values. They’re not going to let you down. you

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2025/250220_Values_of_the_Noble_Ones.mp3>