The Nobility of the Path

November 24, 2019

And John Sawat would often begin his meditation instructions by saying, “Put your mind in the right mood to meditate.” Remember, this is noble work that we’re doing here. We’re trying to clean the mind of its greed, aversion, and delusion. All the things that cause trouble in the world, the things by which people try to get ahead in the world, but then end up causing trouble for themselves and for others. We’re looking for happiness that’s blameless, that requires that we train the mind. And we have respect for the Buddhist teachings because they have us respect something that is worthy of respect within ourselves, which is this desire for a harmless happiness. So have a sense of inspiration as you do this. This is a noble path we’re following. The world outside may not appreciate it, but then we’re calling into question the values of the world. There’s a story in the commentaries of the Buddha returning home. On the very first day he was back in his hometown, he went out for alms. His father, the king, was upset. Nobody in their family had ever gone for alms before. He thought it was disgraceful, so he went down and told his son. And the Buddha said, “I’m no longer following the traditions of my family. I’m following the traditions of the noble ones.” And this is what the traditions of the noble ones require. The traditions of the noble ones are, one, finding contentment in whatever food you have. Two, finding contentment in what you eat. Three, finding contentment in whatever clothing you have. Four, finding delight in developing skillful qualities and abandoning unskillful qualities in the mind. These are the values of the noble ones. And then you take those and you compare them with the values of the world. Because the values of the noble ones focus on being discontent, basically, with the state of your mind. Realizing that as long as there’s greed, aversion, and delusion in there, there’s work that needs to be done. You can’t rest content there. And so you content yourself with other things outside so you can focus on where the real issue is. The values of the world are the other way around. They want you to be discontent, and they’re all too happy to take advantage of your unskillful qualities, your greed, your aversion, your delusion. There was a time back in the ’50s when the American government was afraid that Thailand would fall. They had the domino theory back in those days that if Vietnam fell, then Thailand would fall, and that would be it for Southeast Asia. So they sent some advisors over, and they sent some sociologists and anthropologists to study Thai culture. And part of their studies were about the role of Buddhism in the culture. And one of the conclusions they came to was that Buddhism is really bad for a capitalist system because it teaches contentment. So they counseled the government to send out the word to monks in Thailand to stop teaching contentment. Everybody laughed. Back in those days, they had the good sense to laugh at that. Nowadays, I don’t know if they’d laugh. But it just goes to show how the culture of the noble ones goes very much against the cultures of the world. Wherever the cultures may be—domestic culture everywhere. But it doesn’t mean to simply drop out or be rebellious. It’s got a higher goal in mind. Instead of looking for happiness just any old way, you can manage it. You’re trying to look for happiness in a way that doesn’t take anything away from anyone else, doesn’t harm anybody. In other words, you’re being responsible. You’re being responsible and honorable in the way you look for your happiness. And that’s what makes this path noble. So we do what needs to be done. Ajahn Suwat would often say that when Ajahn Mun gave dhamma talks, there would be two themes that would come up together. The customs of the noble ones and then practicing the dhamma in line with the dhamma. In other words, you do whatever the dhamma requires. You take this on as a training, in the same way that, say, an athlete would take on a training. And whatever the training requires, you submit yourself to it. There’s that Zen saying that the great way is not difficult for those with no preferences. And the only way that makes sense is to interpret it in this way, that you do what has to be done. Of course, you prefer a noble happiness to an ignoble happiness, or you prefer true happiness to suffering. There’s got to be that preference. That’s what motivates the path. But then you look at whatever the path requires, everything from right view all the way down to right concentration, and you measure yourself against it. It’s interesting that when the Buddha talks about people learning the dhamma to begin with, they find some of it seems to be trustworthy. They listen to that person’s dhamma, they think about it to the point where it makes sense, and then it gives rise to a desire to want to practice the dhamma. Once you have that desire, then you weigh yourself. In other words, you take the standards of the dhamma and you look at your own behavior. Where is it lacking? You focus on making up for that lack. One of the problems we have in America right now is that everyone seems to want to bring the dhamma down to where they are, or to impose their ideas on the dhamma. But their ideas usually have very little to do with the customs of the noble ones, have very little to do with the idea that this is already a noble path. It’s more simply imposing their preferences on what they want to do. What they would like the dhamma to be. And as a result, they don’t grow. It’s by submitting yourself to the training that you grow, having respect for the training that you grow. So as you’re sitting here meditating, you could spend the whole hour thinking about whatever, but you realize that’s not part of the path. So no matter how attractive a particular thought may be, or how interesting or potentially entertaining, you say, “Nope, not right now. I’ve got more important work to do.” And as the Buddha said, you learn how to delight in doing the more important work. Find ways to make sure that your desire goes in this direction. You notice a thought comes into the mind that you could follow, but you don’t. And it’s okay to feel a certain amount of satisfaction that you don’t do that. It’s the satisfaction of mastering a skill. Threatens to go out again? Nope, you don’t follow it again. Take satisfaction in that, that you’re on the path. As the Buddha said, the secret to his awakening was that he didn’t rest satisfied, but at least he continued. I tell people that when you’re teaching, when you notice that you’ve done something and you realize you haven’t harmed anybody through your actions, take joy in the fact and continue with the training. When Ajahn Suwat was young, he first went to stay with Ajahn Mun. It was one day when he found himself alone with Ajahn Mun. And Ajahn Mun asked him, “How’s your meditation going?” And Ajahn Suwat was embarrassed, but he had to say, “I’m fine.” He had to say, “Okay, my mind is all over the place.” And Ajahn Mun said, “Well, at least that’s part of mindfulness practice, seeing where your mind is, knowing that your mind is all over the place.” And Ajahn Suwat took that very well. As he said, he realized that Ajahn Mun wasn’t saying that where you are is good enough. He was giving him encouragement, “At least you’re heading in the right direction.” Learning how to bring the mind to settle down. And it can be done. But it’s done through realizing that this is noble work and you’re capable of doing it. You’ve already shown signs that you can do it, so you keep it up. And that way, as you follow this path, you begin to realize why the Buddha called it noble. Not only because the actions themselves are noble, but it leads to a noble goal. The happiness that really does not harm anybody at all. You’re pulling yourself out of the feeding frenzy that is samsara. In other words, the way the world keeps wandering on and on and on and on. Or people are following that old Sprite commercial that says, “Obey your thirst.” You’re learning how to pull out and say no to your thirst. You’re raising the standard of your mind. You’re bringing it in line with the standards of the noble ones. And the reward, of course, is that you find a happiness that really is satisfying. One with no harm in any direction. Causing no harm in any direction. That’s where the path finds its completion. It’s the only kind of completion that can be found in the world. Because it takes you out of the world. It’s only in that dimension that completion can be found.

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