In Accordance With the Dhamma

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In Jonsuwa, one would often say that when you live with a jhanman, there are two topics that a jhanman would talk about again and again and again. One was practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma, and the other was following the customs of the Noble Ones. The principle of practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma is basically what underlies everything in the forest tradition. We take the Dhamma as our guide. Instead of trying to change the Dhamma to fit our ideas, change the Vinaya to fit our ideas, we try to change ourselves to bring them up to the level of the Dhamma and the Vinaya. This is what it means to train. It’s not a question of whether we agree with these principles to begin with. We try them on. We give them our best effort to see what we can learn by following them. In particular, the texts say that practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma is to practice for the sake of disenchantment, for the sake of dispassion. We keep fabricating our lives because we’re enchanted with the process of fabrication. We’re passionate for the process of fabrication. We create experiences out of the raw material coming in from the past. And if we’re disappointed, well, we’ll try some more, and then some more, and then some more. When we get tired for a little while, we’ll rest. But then that old impulse to go back and fabricate some more just keeps going. So we have to learn how to look at our own minds, look at our lives, until we get a sense that we’re getting nothing out of this. We’re learning to make a value judgment that the things that have been fascinating us for who knows how long are not really worth the effort, and there’s something better that comes when we give up on those things. As for the customs of the Noble Ones, they start out with principles of being content, being content with your clothing, being content with your lodging, being content with your food. If it’s good enough for you to practice, then it’s good enough. You don’t have to go make any effort to make things better. You take care of what you’ve got. That’s about the energy put into things outside. At the same time, you learn how not to be proud of the fact that you are content. You realize there are other people out there in the world who are not content, other monks who are not content with what they’ve got. But that’s their business. Your business is to regard the Dhamma here as training for your diseases of your own mind. That’s where the emphasis has to be that this principle of contentment is a kind of medicine. And by holding this principle, you learn to uncover a lot of your greed, a lot of your desires that really are unskillful. That’s the first three of the requisites. And you would think from that that the principle would continue on with being content with medicine. But the Buddha says something else. He says you learn how to take delight in developing and delight in abandoning. By this means, delight in developing skillful qualities and abandoning unskillful qualities. But here the principle of contentment doesn’t extend. You don’t content yourself with whatever stress your mind is in. You see that the mind is not concentrating, it’s not mindful. You don’t just say, “Well, I’ll learn how to be equanimous about that, learn how to accept that.” You see it as a problem. There’s work to be done. And you take delight in doing the work. For most of us, we delight in our defilements and don’t find much delight in developing skillful qualities. But we have to switch our priorities. To see when we can overcome a bout of anger, or we can overcome some greed, or overcome our pride, our jealousy, whatever the defilement may be. And that’s a part of the mind. This is why you can overcome it for a little bit, but you come back anyhow, so why bother? And you learn how not to identify with that voice. You keep on finding new ways of taking delight in abandoning your unskillful qualities and developing skillful qualities like mindfulness or prudency, alertness. As I said, there is work to be done. One of the worst teachings that has made its rounds around the West is the idea that there is no such thing as a good or a bad meditation. It’s all good. That’s not the case. There are definite states of mind that we want to cultivate, in particular the state of concentration. This is where the Buddha talks about how having respect for the proper things is going to keep the Dhamma and the Vinaya alive. He goes down the list, respect for the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha. He talks about respect for the three parts of the triple training. And then he goes back and he emphasizes concentration. It’s already covered in the triple training, but he has to mention concentration again, because of the factors of the path. It’s the one that’s most often overlooked. It’s the one that’s most appreciated. But for the mind to really know what’s going on inside, we have to learn how to get it to settle down, because the process of settling it down teaches us a lot right there. Different distractions will come up. And we learn how to get past those distractions. Sleepiness comes up. We learn how to get past the sleepiness. All the hindrances come up. And as we overcome the hindrances, we learn how to get past the sleepiness. And we learn about the mind. And as the mind gets really still, then it gives us an opportunity to see deeper inside to what’s going on, what are these impulses that come up and push us around. And there are four qualities, the Buddha said, that go into a good state of concentration, or the practice of developing concentration. He calls them the itibada, the basis for success. They’re listed in the Buddha’s own list of the most important teachings he left behind. There are seven sets of dhammas in all that are called the bhuttibhagya-dhamma, the wings to awakening. And of the seven sets, at least in the West, the itibada are the ones that are most overlooked, partly because they’re associated with psychic powers. But the Buddha doesn’t limit their meaning, their range to psychic powers. One of the powers you can develop through developing these qualities is awakening. So it’s good to look at what gets overlooked. The four qualities begin with desire, chanda. We often hear that desire is a bad thing, desire is the cause of suffering. But there are desires that are part of the path to the end of suffering. To come at a right effort, you generate desire to develop skillful qualities, abandon unskillful ones. Again, that’s part of the practice. Customs are the noble ones. And you learn how to approach concentration as a skill. You think about whatever manual skills you’ve developed in terms of music, sports, carpentry, cooking. There had to be the desire to do it well. And how do you focus your desire in such a way that it doesn’t get in the way? If you’re focusing only on the results you want, that gets in the way. It’s like driving down a road to a mountain. If you keep your eyes focused on the mountain all the time, you’re going to run off the road, run into people, smash the car. But if you focus on the road and say, “What do I turn next? What do I do next?” The road takes you there. So you learn to focus your desires on the causes. And don’t listen to the voice that says, “Well, we have to be without desire and just be content with what we’ve got.” Think of that image that Ajahn Chah gave, coming back from the market. You’ve got a banana in your hand. Someone comes up and asks you, “What are you going to do? Why are you carrying the banana?” You say, “I’m going to eat it.” “Are you carrying the peel, too? Are you going to eat the peel, too?” And then Ajahn Chah asks, “With what do you answer that?” And his answer is twofold. He says, “You answer out of desire. You want to give a good answer.” And then the answer, of course, is, “The time hasn’t come to let go of the peel.” If you let go of the peel now, the banana turns to mush in your hand. So the things you do, hold on to as you practice. And desire is one of the things that keeps you motivated. So long as you learn to focus it properly. The second is persistence, where the “yah” can also be translated as energy. And here it’s not just brute energy. It’s the energy focused on developing skillful qualities and abandoning unskillful ones. This does require effort. There are some unskillful qualities in the mind that go away when you simply look at them. And there are others that just stay right there no matter how much you simply look at them. They’re going to hang on. You just have to make an effort. The Buddha calls this exerting of fabrication. You look at the way you breathe around the issue. You look at the way you talk to yourself around the issue. You look at the perceptions and feelings you have around that issue. Three kinds of bodily, verbal, mental fabrication. And then you learn how to change the way you’re breathing, change the way you’re talking to yourself. Change the images you focus on so that you can pull yourself out of that attachment to whatever that unskillful state is. The third basis for success is intent. You really focus your whole intention on doing this. You’re very, very observant. I stayed with a John Fuang. And the two words he would use most often to give meditation is intent. The instructions is one, give it your full attention. The other was use your ingenuity. Learn to be observant. And then think about the results of what you’re getting. Judge the results of what you’re doing. This is where the fourth basis for success comes in. That’s vimamsa. It can be translated lots of different ways. John Lee’s favorite translation is vimamsa, which means to be circumspect. You look at what you’re doing from all angles. And if it’s not satisfactory, you try to figure out what’s wrong. Can you go back and change about what you’re doing? It’s one of the reasons why we have a meditation technique. You’re clear about what you’re trying to do. But you don’t want a technique that simply tells you do this, do this, do this, and don’t think. Just obey. It has to be the kind of technique that encourages you to experiment. Because that’s how we learn. We’re simply copying and pasting the Buddha’s insights onto our own mind. And they’re not genuine insights that way. They’re just paste. The real insights come when you notice, OK, I do x, and y comes about as a result. And it’s not satisfactory, so I have to change what I’m doing. And you figure out different ways of doing things differently. And you find what works. We’ve got these four qualities working together. They not only lead you to a good state of concentration, but they’re useful in any activity. This is something you see throughout Thailand, even apparently in the mechanics section of the Thai Air Force, where they fix their planes and fix their helicopters. They’ve got a big sign with the four itty-bitty. That you focus your desire on doing the work well. And then you keep at it. You’re persistent in your efforts. You pay full attention to what you’re doing, full attention to the results you’re getting. And then you use all of your intelligent faculties, your circumspection, your intelligence, your ingenuity, and figure out how to do things well, figure out how to do things better. It’s through this active participation, this active involvement, that the Dhamma becomes your knowledge. It’s not just the Buddhist Dhamma. It’s your own strategies, and you get your own results. So these are the basic principles that I’ve learned personally from my teachers. And I’ve benefitted a lot from them. When I went to see with Ajahn Fung the first time, he said, “Don’t expect everything to be handed to you on a platter. You’ve got to think like a thief. You’re going to steal something from somebody’s house. You don’t go up to the front door and knock on the door and ask them, ‘When are you going to be away? Where do you keep your valuables?’ You have to case the joint. Hide out. Watch when the people come, when the people go. Where does it look like they’re particularly protective of one part of the house?” In the same way, you have to basically steal the Dhamma from the Ajahns. As Ajahn Fung also said, “When the Ajahns do something, they have their reasons.” One of the biggest mistakes that a Western monk can make in Thailand is to think, “Well, the Ajahn is doing that simply because he’s Thai. That’s the Thai way of doing things.” And the corollary to that, of course, is, “Well, when I go back, I’ll do things the Western way.” But you’ve got to stop and think, “What would be a good reason for the Ajahn to do it that way?” And not just the fact that it’s Thai culture. What? He would have a specific personal reason out of his own powers of observation. What could that reason be? You have to actively think about these things, because this is how you develop your own powers of observation. That was Ajahn Fung’s attendant for many years, and he would never tell me the right way to do things. If I did something wrong, he’d let me know. But he’d never explain exactly what the right way was. That was up to me to figure out. But as he said, you go and meditate in the forest, and you come up with a problem. You have to have this habit of trying to figure things out for yourself, with the conviction that there have been people who’ve had these problems in the past, and they were able to get past them. So there must be a way around. And if you demand that everything be taught to you, you’re never going to learn your own independent powers of observation, your own independent powers of ingenuity. And in that case, the Dhamma will never become your own. There’s a phrase they have in Thailand that we’re here to bhattibat, the Dhamma. But the word bhattibat means not only to practice, but it also means to look after somebody’s needs. In this case, we’re bhattibat, doing the bhattibat to ourselves. We’re looking after our own needs. And that way, the Dhamma will take care of our needs. But we have to be willing to give of ourselves, to be impressed, before we can gain what the Dhamma has to offer.

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