

A Culture of Self Reliance

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When you practice the Dhamma, you're taking on a new culture. And it's not Asian culture, it's what the Buddha called the customs of the noble ones. Because even in Asia, when people are practicing, if they are really serious about the practice, they have to go against a lot of the customs that they grew up with. We tend to think of the Forest Tradition as embedded in Thai culture, and to some extent it is, but it's good to remember that when Ajaan Mun was starting out he was often attacked, criticized for not following Thai customs. He didn't live the way most Thai monks lived. He didn't eat, he didn't dress the way most Thai monks ate or dressed. And when people would criticize him to his face, he'd say, "I'm not interested in Thai customs or Lao customs or the customs of any country, because those are the customs of people with defilements. They're not the customs that lead to awakening." He wanted to find the customs of the noble ones and live by those customs so that he could become a noble one as well.

This is a tradition that goes way back. One of the traditional stories in the commentaries is of the Buddha returning to his home after his awakening. The very first day after he got there, early in the morning, he went out for alms. His father, a noble warrior, was very upset because nobody in their family lineage had ever done anything like this. So he went out to criticize the Buddha. And the Buddha said, "I'm not a member of that lineage any more. I'm a member of the lineage of the noble ones, and this is one of the customs of the noble ones: to go for alms."

It's important that we think about this as we practice, because a very large part of our mind, a very large factor in our habits, comes from the customs we grew up with. And we live in a society where the customs are based on defilement. So much of the mass media, so many of the books and magazines, TV shows, movies, are aimed at increasing our defilements. And so much of our conversation with other people falls in line with those influences. Our interactions with other people are colored by these views, by these values.

So there comes a point, when you're practicing the Dhamma, that you realize that your values have become different. You've stepped out of society. You've stepped out of the dominant culture. And there's the question of how to still live in that culture, how to negotiate the relationship. And the basic motto is, as they say on those Christian decals, Not of This World. You live *in* the world but you're not *of* the world. In other words, your values for yourself, your attitudes about

what you're going to do and what you are going to say, have to stay in line with the customs of the noble ones. And you have to protect that part of your mind, protect that part of your practice. Don't allow anybody to make inroads on it.

There are basically four values. The first three have to do with contentment: contentment with whatever food comes your way, contentment with whatever clothing comes your way, contentment with whatever shelter comes your way, learning to have a sense of enough that you don't need all that much in order to be happy. The fourth principle has to do with discontent: that you take delight in developing, you take delight in abandoning. Here of course it means developing skillful qualities of mind and abandoning unskillful ones; developing skillful words and deeds, and abandoning unskillful ones; being discontent in the sense of seeing that there's always room for improvement, or at the very least, making sure that you don't lose whatever qualities you already have.

It's not just that you follow these values. The Buddha adds that you have to see the dangers of being proud about them. We're not doing this to make ourselves better than other people. We're doing these things because we see that our minds are suffering, and the dominant values of the culture are not helping. They're increasing our suffering.

So you need to develop a sense of independence. You need to have a sense of self-reliance as you maintain these values, keeping in mind the fact that you're doing it because the mind has its illnesses, the mind has its diseases, and you need to treat them. So you don't make a show of your practice. It would be like making a show of the medicine you have to take because you're sick. You do the practice quietly. And you have to internalize as much of the Dhamma as you can.

This is where the concept of refuge comes in. On the one hand, we're taught to take the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha as our refuge. You always try to keep them in mind. The word *sarana*, refuge, also means something you remember, something you hold in mind. For instance, we hold in mind the life of the Buddha. As we live our lives, there is always a narrative that we're patterning our lives on—someone we may have admired when we were younger, or something from the typical narrative of the culture. But it's good to keep the Buddha's narrative in mind as well: someone who could have spent his life immersed in sensual pleasures, but he didn't. He could have spent his life in self-torment, extreme asceticism, but he didn't. Instead, he found the middle way that led to true happiness inside, a deathless happiness, a happiness that doesn't depend on any conditions at all. And he was able to do it not because he was some special divine being, but because he took the issue of happiness really seriously and

he developed whatever qualities of mind were needed. So you want to keep that fact in mind to keep the narrative of your life in perspective.

Similarly with the Dhamma and the Sangha: There is a path of practice, and the Sangha, the noble Sangha, shows that it yields results. And that noble Sangha is not just composed of monks and nuns. There are a lot of lay men and lay women who have followed the Dhamma and found that what the Buddha said is true.

So when taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, you're trying to keep these things in mind so as to keep the issues of your life in perspective: what's important, what's not important; where you can make compromises, where you can't. But the refuge becomes true only when you can internalize it.

This is why those customs of the noble ones are really helpful. The more self-reliant you are in terms of being able to make do with whatever food, clothing, and shelter come your way, the less you're worried about how people think about you, how you look in the eyes of others. That way, you're free to focus more of your attention on developing your inner refuge. The freedom that comes from contentment with external things also gives you perspective on what work to take on to make your living. You just need enough in order to be able to practice. Most of the jobs that go beyond that also take a lot of time and a lot of energy, making it harder to practice. So there is a trade-off. You look for your sustenance in terms of the qualities of mind you can develop. You learn how to feed, as the Buddha says, on rapture, like the radiant gods. Develop good strong concentration, which he compared to rice, beans, honey, butter: good food for the mind.

The more you can feed your mind on these qualities, the easier it is to live with less and less outside, which makes you have a smaller footprint, you're a lot more self-reliant. There is a greater and greater sense of independence.

Once I was helping to teach a group retreat, and one evening after giving a talk, one of the retreatants went back to his room and, as he told me the next morning, he realized that he was really angry with me. He told me about it the next morning. I said, "Oh, what made you angry?" He said, "All the time you've been here, I've never been able to figure out where your buttons are." And I said, "That's why we wear robes." I meant that in two ways. One, you can't see my buttons because they're all covered by the robes. But two, by wearing robes, I have fewer needs in terms of clothing. Because I have fewer needs, I have fewer buttons that people can see that they can push.

But this principle doesn't apply just to monks. It applies to lay people as well. You keep your needs to a minimum, you're less tied to what other people think about you, or want out of you—because you want less out of them.

So the customs of the noble ones are customs of self-reliance, customs of independence. Because after all, we are looking for freedom, and it doesn't come only at the end of the path. We try to find what freedom we can on the path as well. Because freedom means responsibility; it entails the need to be self-reliant. And fortunately, we don't have to keep reinventing the Dhamma wheel every day. We do have the example of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha to give us guidance, to give us support, as we internalize their example, so that the mind really can become its own refuge. *Atta hi attano natho*: The self is its own mainstay. It becomes its mainstay when it's well trained.

So as long as you need outside help, keep looking to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha for your inspiration, for your support, for your nourishment. This will provide you with the environment you need in order to keep your values straight, keep your priorities straight, so that the customs of defilement don't overwhelm you, don't eat away at your practice. It's bad enough that you've got defilements in your own mind, but you want to be able to resist as much as possible the influence of defilements from outside, the things that feed defilement from outside, regardless of what the dominant culture says.