

## *Remembering Ajaan Suwat*

*April 5, 2011*

Tonight marks the ninth anniversary of Ajaan Suwat's passing. And although it's good to think of your teachers and their teachings every day, it's also appropriate on special occasions like this to stop and recollect: What did they teach? And how did they teach? Because it's not just the "what," it's the way they acted, the way they imparted their knowledge and gave instructions that was very important. After all, a lot of the teachings are about action and the principle of action, and so people's actions should show that they're informed by right view and all the other right factors of the path. And from them, we should be able to learn what it means to act in line with those factors.

One of Ajaan Suwat's favorite teachings was the customs of the noble ones. He said that this was also one of Ajaan Mun's two favorite topics. The other was the related one of practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. They're essentially the same teaching. In other words, you don't practice in line with your own defilements, or in line with the defilements of the people around you. You practice in line with the way the noble ones practiced the Dhamma. You look at what the Dhamma teaches, what it asks of you, and if there's any conflict between what you like and what the Dhamma teaches, well, you put your likes aside for the time being and give the Dharma a fair try.

For example, the Dhamma says to develop your virtue, so you develop your virtue in all the detail that it requires. When you take the five precepts, you're basically making a promise, you're making a determination, that you're not going to harm anybody or anything in any of those five ways. Then you really stick with them. And, of course, you're going find out that there are times when you feel tempted to snuff out little animals, take a little something, or tell a little white lie and try to justify it to yourself. And you've got to say no, no, no all the way down the line. You're not going to give in to those temptations because you're really going to test: When the Buddha says to take a precept and make it a precept without limitations, without exceptions, what does that do to the mind? What does that require of you? In other words, you don't follow it only when it's convenient. You follow it even when it's very inconvenient.

That's when the precept really does become a training rule. It trains you in new ways. It forces you to make choices, make sacrifices for the purpose of seeing: What does this do to the mind? Does it lead to the end of suffering, as the Buddha promised? The Buddha made virtue—in the factors of right action, right speech,

and right livelihood—an essential part of the path. Why is it essential? The only way to know is through practice.

The same with concentration. The Buddha sets out the pattern for right concentration, and it's amazing that, of the factors of the path, this is the one that's most often cut out. People say, well, we really don't want jhana. Or maybe, we can do with just the first seven factors of the path. Yet this was the factor of the path that the Buddha found first. Remember the story of how he had gone through six years of austerities and found, ultimately, that they didn't work. He had the good sense and the humility to say, "There must be another way." He remembered a time, when he was younger, that he'd entered the first jhana. He asked himself, "Could this be the path?" And the answer came up in his mind, "Yes."

So that was the first factor of the path that the Buddha discovered. There's another point in the Canon where he describes the seven other factors of the path as requisites or helpers for right concentration. That makes right concentration central. So when the Buddha says you seclude the mind from sensual thoughts, sensual plans, you do that. You seclude it from unskillful qualities and you direct your thoughts to evaluate one object. It could be the breath; it could be goodwill; it could be the unattractiveness of the body. What happens when you really do this?—when you really do get the mind centered to the point where there's a sense of ease, pleasure, rapture, fullness, refreshment, and then you work that pleasure and refreshment through the body.

That's what the directed thought and evaluation are for, to bring the mind to a state of ease with the object, to figure out how to adjust the object, how to adjust the mind so that they're at ease with each other. Then, how do you take that ease and work it through the body? The same with the rapture. You really do this, really do work on concentration to see what it does.

The same with the discernment: You want to see how stress arises and passes away in the mind. You want to see how its causes arise and pass away in the mind. You want to bring the framework of the four noble truths to your thoughts, your words, your deeds. What's going on in the mind? What's going on in your actions? Take the Buddha seriously. This is a training, and you have to submit yourself to the training if you're going to know whether this kind of discernment works or not.

This is the example that Ajaan Suwat set. He didn't just talk about these things. He was very strict about the precepts, he worked at concentration, he worked at discernment. And you could pick this up in his words and his deeds, in

addition to his teachings. This is what gave weight to his words and deeds, gave weight to his teachings as well, that they all informed one another.

And so it's up to each of us to decide: To what extent are we going to submit to the training, to follow the customs of the noble ones? Which are: to be content with whatever food, clothing, shelter you get, and not to exalt yourself over the fact that you're content with these things. Because you realize that you're doing this not to make yourself better than other people, but simply because you've got these diseases of greed, aversion, and delusion in the mind. You need to cure them.

Then there's the fourth custom of the noble ones, which is to delight in abandoning and to delight in developing. In other words, you abandon unskillful actions, and you take delight in it, you're happy to do it; you're happy to develop skillful qualities. You take pride in your work. Look at this as a skill that you're working on. Take joy in being able to master it. Because the pleasure that comes from working on the skill is much greater than the pleasure that comes from enjoying nice sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations, or enjoying the praise of other people.

That was one of the things that we noticed about Ajaan Suwat, was that he wasn't concerned with the praise of other people, what other people would think or not think about him. He had a very strong sense that he was here to train his mind, and he said the attitude we should have here is that we're not here to get other people, i.e., that we're not here to attract other people to the practice. We're here to get ourselves, i.e., to bring ourselves to the practice, to master the steps. If other people are inspired by our example, and want to join us, that's fine. But if not, we just want to make sure that what we're doing really does fall in accordance with the Dhamma and really does put an end to defilement, really does put an end to suffering.

This is another aspect of the traditions of the noble ones. The story that comes in the commentary is from the first time the Buddha returned home. The day after he arrived he went out for alms. His father was very upset. Here was his son, a member of the noble warrior class, going out begging for food. And he reprimanded him. He said, "Nobody in our family has ever done this. This is not one of the traditions of our family, to go out for alms like this." And the Buddha told him, "I no longer belong to the traditions of that family. I belong to the traditions of the noble ones. This is one of their traditions: to go for alms."

This is good to think about when you think about practicing the Dhamma here in America. It's not a matter of bringing Thai customs or Asian customs and forcing them on Americans. At the same time, it's not a matter of giving in to the

American way of doing things. There's a certain American approach to spiritual life that takes over almost everything that's come to this country. Certain beliefs that are tied with the Transcendentalists, tied to the Romantics, have worked their way into spiritual life in America, and practically every version of religion that comes here gets remade in their image.

Well, that's not what Ajaan Suwat was here for. As he said when he went back to Thailand, there was nothing in America that struck him as lying above and beyond the Dhamma, what the Buddha taught. And he had in mind the tradition of Ajaan Mun, who had been often criticized about not doing things the traditional Thai way, the traditional Laotian way. He had said, those traditions, like the traditions of every country, are the traditions of people with defilements. If you follow those traditions, you're not going to gain awakening. To gain awakening, you have to follow the traditions of the noble ones.

So it's good that we look for those traditions in our own practice and try to follow them, and not be concerned with the praise or the blame that's offered by people at large. Again, we're not here for them. As Ajaan Fuang often said, nobody hired us to come here and practice. We're here of our own free will. So the praise and blame of other people is irrelevant, unless we see that their comments really are in line with the Dharma.

So it's good to keep these principles in mind, because they help keep us on course. Because as we follow the traditions of the noble ones, there's a good chance—at least it opens up the chance—that we can become noble ones ourselves. And that's a gift. Just as Ajaan Suwat's teachings were a gift, his example was a gift, we want our example of our behavior to be a gift to others as well. This is how we keep his teachings alive, how we keep his example alive.

When I went back to Thailand after his death, right before his funeral, I was asked to give a Dhamma talk. I talked about some of the experiences of living with Ajaan Suwat here in America. And that was the point I stressed as the main theme of the talk: the traditions of the noble ones. As he once said, he came here to America, and what did he see? All the amazing things of American progress were still subject to being inconstant, stressful, not-self. There was nothing that lay beyond the Buddha's teachings. And as you looked at the example of his words and his deeds, it bore out the fact that he really did take the traditions of the noble ones seriously. He practiced the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma, not in line with his defilements. Wherever there was a conflict between his wants and the Dhamma, he allowed the Dhamma to take precedence. In that way, he was able to get the most out of the practice.

So try to keep his example in mind.

