

## *Honoring the Noble Ones*

*May 17, 2023*

We think of the Thai forest tradition as being such an integral part of Thai society that we forget that it was very controversial when it started out. Ajaan Mun and Ajaan Sao were accused of not following Thai traditions, Thai customs as they were eating out of the bowl, living in the forest, being very strict about the Vinaya. But as Ajaan Mun would say, he wasn't interested in following Thai customs or Lao customs or the customs of any country, any society, because those are the customs of people with defilements. If you want to join the noble ones, he said, you have to learn how to live by their customs.

So, it's the noble ones whom we honor. I remember when Ajaan Suwat was setting up the monastery here, he kept saying, "We're not trying to import Thai customs, and we're certainly not going to be following American customs. We hold to the customs of the noble ones. We have the example of our teachers, we have the example of the Vinaya and the Dhamma, and we follow that for our own sake. Now, if there are other people who like and admire this practice and want to follow along with us, that's fine. We're happy to have them. But we're not going to go out of our way to draw people in—to change things to please people—because after all, when we do that, we're giving in to our own defilements."

So, what are the customs of the noble ones? There are four listed in the Canon, and one given in the commentaries. The one in the commentaries is the practice of going for alms. The story goes that when the Buddha went back to his home, the very first morning he went out for alms. Now, members of the noble warrior caste did *not* go out for alms. The Buddha's father saw him doing this and reprimanded him. He said, "Nobody in our tradition has ever done that," and the Buddha said, "I no longer belong to the tradition of my family. I belong to the traditions of the noble ones, and this is one of their traditions—going for alms."

In the Canon's discussion of the customs of the noble ones they talk about three types of contentment, and one way of finding delight. The contentment is with food, clothing, and shelter. But it's not simply contentment. As the Buddha said, you see that there's danger even in being content. An element of pride is possible, so you have to watch out for that. You don't exalt yourself, you don't disparage others over the fact that they're less content than you are.

And you realize that each of the requisites has its proper uses. We chant them every night: We don't eat for play; we don't eat to put on bulk. We eat to keep this body going so that we can practice. We wear just enough clothing to keep the body covered and protected from the elements. We have enough shelter to keep ourselves protected from the elements, and enough medicine to ward off disease. That's it. That's plenty.

The customs of the noble ones, though, don't mention medicine. The fourth custom is learning to delight in abandoning and delight in developing.

The Buddha talks about delight as being one of the causes for suffering, but in order to follow the path, you've got to learn how to delight in doing what the path requires. It's one of the elements of right effort—that you generate desire.

Like right now: Generate desire to get the mind into concentration. How do you do that? The instructions are given in the description of right mindfulness: Focus on the body in and of itself—ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.

So right now you're focusing on the breath. As for any thoughts that have to do with the world, you put them aside. And you bring three qualities to this exercise: The first is *ardency*. Of the three qualities, this is what makes our practice skillful. The ardency is the desire to do things really well. *Alertness* is watching what you're doing, and *mindfulness* is keeping things in mind.

Now, alertness can be alert to anything you're doing at all, skillful or not. The same with mindfulness: You can be mindful of all kinds of things. But when you're ardent, you're trying to do this practice well. You're trying to be mindful—for the sake of concentration. And through the ardency, you try to be alert—for the sake of concentration.

This is probably why, when Ajaan Lee was talking about these three qualities in his description of the establishing of mindfulness, ardency was the quality that embodied discernment. Because there is a wisdom in realizing that the Buddha's teachings are not just to listen to or to think about or to argue about. They're here to put into practice—to train the mind.

And in training the mind, you have to move it in directions it might not normally want to move. This is why it's good to learn how to delight in abandoning unskillful qualities and to delight in developing skillful ones—which is basically what ardency is all about. That's how the customs of the noble ones get brought in to the practice.

You don't just sit here watching things coming and going, whatever's going to come and go. When there's something unskillful in the mind you don't say, "Well, I've just got to learn how to accept that, that's the way things are. If I try to put an end to it, that's a defilement, that's a desire." There *is* skillful desire on the path—that's what the ardency is all about, and it's there with a purpose.

So, work on this and you find, as your mindfulness gets more solid, that you settle in. You learn how to breathe in a way that feels really comfortable. Breathe aware of the whole body, so that the whole body feels nourished by the breath, refreshed by the breath. The mindfulness then turns into concentration.

Now, there are people who are afraid of concentration. I don't know how many books on meditation start their discussion of concentration with a warning: "You've got to watch out, or you're going to get stuck on concentration." The Buddha never taught that. After all, he taught *right* concentration, and as he said, you need to have right concentration if you're

going to be able to pull yourself away from your other defilements. So it's okay to get stuck on concentration for the time being, because if you don't have this to hold on to, you're going to go back to your old ways.

Nobody ever killed anybody based on attachment to concentration. They do kill one another based on their attachment to sensual pleasures, their attachment to *any* of the hindrances. So attachment to concentration is a safe attachment.

Think of the Buddha's image of the path as being like a series of relay chariots: When you're riding in a relay chariot, you've got to hold on, so hold on to the breath. When the breath gets comfortable, hold on to that, but don't *just* hold on, though. Be wise in how you use that sense of comfort.

Ajaan Lee talks about this. He says that if you get a coconut and break it open to eat it, that's it: You get full of one coconut, but that doesn't keep you full for very long. But if you take the coconut and plant it, then after a while you get a coconut tree, and that'll give you more coconuts. You plant those coconuts and eventually you become a coconut-orchard millionaire. In other words, you take the sense of ease that comes with the breath and you develop it.

You talk to yourself: "How do I maintain this? How do I let it spread around the body?" Then you reach a point where talking to yourself becomes a disturbance because the breath feels full throughout the body, so you can stop that.

You make good use of the comfort as a place for the mind to settle in and be really solidly here: alert, watchful, ready to see any disturbance, any distraction that may come up, and not get waylaid by it. It's in this way that you can use the concentration to watch your own mind.

This is the pattern that the Buddha set in his own quest for awakening. When he talked about it, he described it as *the quest for what is skillful*. When he left home, he left in quest of what is skillful. When he was disappointed with the teachings that he received at that time, he left the teachers in quest of what is skillful. When he gave up on his austerities, he continued in his quest of what is skillful. He sat down finally under the Bodhi tree, got the mind into concentration, and then *used* that concentration for a skillful purpose.

This is where his teachings deviated from what he had learned from other people. Other people said that you get the mind into concentration, and that's as good as it gets. His question is, what can you use it for? What's the best thing to use it for? What's the most skillful way to use it?

So he investigated the question of birth and death, and he saw that death is followed by more birth—again and again and again. The births go up; the births go down.

Now, there were people in his time who had attained that knowledge and set themselves up as teachers, but he realized that wasn't the most skillful use of that knowledge. The question was, *why* do people go up and down like that?

He saw that all beings, once they die, are reborn in line with their karma: the intentions they acted on, along with the views they held that informed those intentions. And again, there were people who had gained knowledge like this who had set themselves up as teachers, but he realized that this knowledge, too, didn't put an end to suffering. How could he use this knowledge to put an end to suffering?

So he focused on the intentions. He focused on the views. What intentions, what views *now* would help put an end to suffering, help put an end to this cycle of birth and death? That's how he discovered the four noble truths.

He followed the duties with regard to those truths and gained awakening. That was the point where he didn't have to use his awakening for anything further. But up to that point, everything he found in his practice, he didn't just rest content with it. He asked himself, "What is the most skillful use of this?" It's that question that helps develop your discernment in all its aspects: in other words, understanding things but also being wise in how you use what you've got—not mistaking means for ends.

So, right now we're focused on the breath, not because we want to *get* the breath—although by focusing on the breath you find that you can breathe in ways that are really satisfying for the body, settling for the mind—but because you want to *get* the mind, and once you've got the mind then you want to put it to work.

And you want to learn how to delight in all of this. That's what keeps this practice noble. Delight in developing what's good, what's skillful, delight in abandoning what's unskillful.

We go around, as the Buddha said, with craving as our companion. We've got to realize that we've been hanging out with false friends. It's time that we ended those friendships and took the noble ones as our friends, as our examples.

So, we follow their customs, we honor them—and in doing that, we do honor to ourselves, to our own desire for true happiness. As they like to say in the forest tradition, "When you're practicing the Dhamma, you're also looking after yourself." In the Thai language it's a pun: The word for *practice* and the word for *looking after* are the same word.

When the Buddha taught the Dhamma, it wasn't because it was *his* Dhamma, it was because it was *the* Dhamma. He made it his own, for the sake of his own practice, and then he offers it to us, so we can make it ours, for the sake of our practice.

But we have to train ourselves so that we're worthy of it—to lift ourselves to the Dhamma. There are people who want to change the Dhamma to fit in with their personal ideas of what they like or what they claim our culture teaches us has to be true. But if you base everything on your sense of who you are and what you like, or your sense of the world out there, you're basing everything on becoming. And as the Buddha said, craving for becoming is what leads to more and more suffering.

So, give the Dhamma a chance: See if you can ennoble yourself by following the customs of the noble ones, because they're there for everyone to follow.