

A Slave to the Dhamma

November 4, 2007

Ajaan Lee makes a comparison. He says there are basically two ways you can live your life: One is to be a slave to your defilements and the other is to be a slave to the Dhamma. Actually, there are three ways, because when you're a slave to the Dhamma, ultimately you get so that you don't have to be a slave to anything. But as long as there's still work to be done in the mind, it's a choice between the two different kinds of slavery. There's hard work in both sides, but the difference, though, is that the work of the Dhamma frees you. It can be heavy work sometimes, but it's good work. After all, what do the defilements ask us to do? Anything for the sake of greed, anything for the sake of anger, anything for the sake of delusion. You look at the ways of the world, the way people cheat, lie, mistreat each other, mistreat themselves: That's what the slavery to defilements is like. You do horrible things, things you're ashamed to do, and the results you get, really aren't satisfying. They actually make you suffer.

Whereas if you're a slave to the Dhamma, the things it asks you do are good things: to be virtuous, to be generous, to develop good qualities in the mind.

"Generous" here means being generous not only with money, but also with your time, your energy. Like today's kathina: It's taken a lot out of everybody, but being tired in this way is a good tired. You look back at what you're done, you can think of all the good things you did in the course of the day, and although there may have been problems, there may have been conflicts, they were really not important in comparison to the fact that this was all done as an expression of generosity.

And we developed other good qualities as well, the perfections that are built in activities of this sort: the perfections of endurance, tolerance, truthfulness, in the sense of making up your mind you're going to do something good and you stick with it all the way through, no matter how hard it gets. Persistence, determination: all the Capricorn virtues.

It's important to realize that this is a part of training the mind. If training the mind were simply a matter of closing your eyes and sitting very still, it'd be a lot easier, but it wouldn't really challenge you in the way that the full training of the heart and mind does. One of the things I've always liked about the Dhamma is that it's big enough that you can give your whole life to it. Giving your whole life sometimes means exhausting yourself physically, wearing yourself out, but you

find that the body can take it. It's only when you really push yourself like this that you grow.

If you stay in a monastery in Thailand, you'll find that occasionally there are very heavy work days when a project needs to be done. Everything gets dropped and everyone focuses on that one project. Ajaan Fuang's style was to work on a project until it was done no matter how late in the day it kept you up: sometimes 4 a.m., sometimes dawn, all night long working on something, because, as he said, he didn't like to have projects hanging over your head. So you just kept doing, doing, doing, until either you dropped out or the project was done. If you happened to drop, you dropped for a few hours, took a rest, came back. If work was still being done, you kept at it.

Then things would go back to normal. The monastery here, in a day or two, will be back to normal, except for the persimmons. But there will be an end to the persimmons as well.

So it's good to be up for whatever is required. And that's a good attitude to have as you go through the practice. You can't make up your mind you're going to sit two or three hours every day and be guaranteed awakening at the end of a certain amount of time, that just having put in your regular two or three hours, things will open up and you'll meet up with the deathless. There are going to be times when you have to push yourself harder, harder than you want to. Or things will come up in the life in the monastery. Living with Ajaan Fuang, sometimes he would suddenly get sick, while meant I had to drop everything else, look after him while he was sick. Or else, as we saw a little while back, fire comes in, and you have to evacuate.

In other words, as a meditator, you want to be up for whatever is required. Sometimes it looks like huge things are being required of you, but ask yourself, "What would life be like if you went back to be a slave to defilements again?" At least here with the Dhamma, you're not being asked to do anything shameful or dishonest or harmful. So even though it requires a lot of energy, a lot of stamina, and a lot of endurance, still it's all good work.

I had a friend at one time who was doing Army training. He told me about one time they were told they had to run for a mile. But at the very end of the mile, the trainer said, "No, you're going to run for another half mile." Of course you couldn't complain that the promise was only for a mile, because after all, as a soldier, you're practicing how to go out into battlefield. When there's a battle going on, you can't decide that you're going to stop at four in the afternoon and have a little tea or whatever, or have everything over at a reasonable hour. When things get crazy like that, you have to be up for whatever there is. You have to be

able to dig down and find whatever reserves of strength you might have that you never expected. And you find that when you're pushed beyond your limits that way, sometimes you do have more reserves than you expect.

So as you're doing battle with the defilements, you have to be ready to do whatever is required, to make whatever sacrifices are required, whether you feel they're fair or not, whether at that particular moment you feel up for it or not. If that's what required, that's what you do.

That's one of the best attitudes to have in the practice. You do what's needed because it's good work to do. After all, this is the work that leads to the end of work. It leads to real freedom. The alternative is go back to be a slave to your defilements. If you say, "I don't like this, I don't like that," that's just your defilements talking. And who knows where they're going to lead you? There's no freedom, there's no end to the defilements, unless you decide to put an end to them, in which case you have to become a slave to the Dharma.

This is the kind of slavery where you can pay your way out of slavery by working hard enough. The work is fair. It may not meet with your original ideas of fairness, but it's a good trade. You develop good qualities of mind, honorable qualities of mind, a sense of integrity. You stretch your generosity, you stretch the limits of your compassion, farther than you might have done before, but these are all good things to stretch, good things to grow. And all these things yield freedom, so that ultimately you reach the point where you don't have to be anybody's slave at all.

So as long as you're on the path, take heart in the fact that it's a good path. It's a good path to walk on and it leads to a good goal. As we say in the chant, it's admirable in the beginning, admirable in the middle, admirable in the end. Sometimes it's hard, sometimes it's easy, but it's admirable all the way.