A Slave to the Dhamma

November 4, 2007

Chan-li makes a comparison. He says there are basically two ways you can live your life. One is to be a slave of your defilements, and the other is to be a slave of the Dhamma. Actually, there are three ways of being 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 is that choice between the two different kinds of slavery. And there’s hard work on both sides. The difference, though, is that the work of the Dhamma frees you. And it can be heavy work sometimes. But it’s good work. Because 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. And you look at the ways of the world, the way people cheat and lie, mistreat each other, mistreat themselves. That’s what slavery is. That’s what slavery to the defilements is like. You do horrible things, things you’re ashamed to do, and then the results you get are really not satisfying. Whereas if you’re a slave to the Dhamma, the things you’re asked to do are good things—to be virtuous, to be generous, to develop good qualities in the mind. “Generous” here means not only being generous with money, but also being generous with time, generous with your energy. Like today’s ketin, it takes a lot out of everybody. But being tired in this way is a good tired. If you look back at what you’ve done, you can think of all the good things you did in the course of the day. There may have been problems, there may have been conflicts, but they’re really not important in comparison with the fact that this was all done as an expression of generosity. We developed other good qualities as well. The perfections are built in this way—the perfection of endurance, tolerance, truthfulness, in the sense of making up your mind that you’re going to do something and you stick with it all the way through, no matter how hard it gets. Persistence, determination—the Capricorn virtues. It’s important to realize that this is a part of training the mind. If it were just simply a matter of closing your eyes and sitting very still, you’d be a lot easier, but it wouldn’t really challenge you in the way that the full training of the 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. And in giving your whole life, sometimes it 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. You go stay in a monastery in Thailand, and you 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. The Jan Phuong style was to work on the project until it was done, no matter how late in the day it happened. Sometimes 4 a.m., sometimes dawn. All night long, working on something. Because, as you said, you didn’t like to have projects hanging over your head. So you just kept doing, doing, doing them until either you dropped or the project was done. And if you happened to drop, well, you dropped for a few hours, took a rest, came back, and work was still being done, and you kept at it. And then things would go back to normal. And they, too, would go back to normal, except for the persimmons. But there would 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 that you’re going to sit two or three hours every day, and you’ll be guaranteed that 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 a 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 of the monastery. Living with the Jhana Fung, sometimes he would get sick, and that meant I had to drop everything else and look after him while he was sick. Or, as we saw a little while back, when a fire comes in, 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’s life like when you go back to be a slave to the defilements again? At least here with the Dhamma, you’re not being asked to do anything that’s shameful or dishonest or harmful. Even though sometimes it requires a lot of energy and a lot of stamina, a lot of endurance, still, it’s all good work. I had a friend one time who was getting army training, and he was telling me about how he was told that he had to run for a mile. And so at the very end of the mile, they would say, “No, you’ve got 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 a battlefield. And again, 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 didn’t expect. And you find that when you’re pushed beyond your limits that way, sometimes you do have more 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 that they’re fair or not, whether at that particular moment you feel up for it or not, if that’s what’s required, that’s what you do. And that’s one of the best attitudes to have in the practice. You do what’s needed, because it’s good work to do. Because after all, this is the work that leads to the end of work. It leads to real freedom. The alternative is to go back to be a slave to your defilements and 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. And there’s no freedom, there’s no end to the defilements, unless you decide to put an end to them, in which case you become a slave to the Dhamma. This is the kind of slavery where you can work your way out of slavery by working hard enough. The work is fair. It may not meet up 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 your limits of compassion farther than you might have before. But it’s all good things to stretch, all good things to grow. And all of these things yield freedom, so that at some point 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. It’s a good path. It’s a good path to walk on, and it’s a good path that leads to a good goal. As we say in that 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.

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