The Mistreated Me

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Once I was reading up on life in the American frontier, back in the 19th century, and there’s one document, it was a series of instructions that was left by one woman for her daughter on how to run a house out on the frontier. The labor sounded pretty back-breaking, just washing clothes and recording the story that you had to fetch water from the well, make a wood fire, boil the water in a big basin, wash the clothes, get them hung out, wait until the water cooled down, use it to water the flowers around the house, and then the final part of the instructions was sit down on the porch and count your blessings. It should be pretty easy. In the course of that labor, you feel really put upon, that day after day after day worked like this, and you had to know how to put yourself in the right mood, so your mind didn’t get pulled down. And this is an important lesson. The Buddha calls it glanding the mind. It’s one of the important steps of breath meditation. And it’s good to focus particularly on the sense of the wounded “me,” of all of our internal senses, of the “I,” the one that’s strongest, the one that’s tenacious, and also the ugliest, is the one who focuses on things that have happened to you that were really not fair, and the sense you’d like to get back. We see this played out large in our politics. It happens in the mind all the time. And it’s one of the big enemies of the path. There are people who come to Buddhism and they wanted to deal with what they feel is the way they were wounded by society. They talk about changing the cause of suffering from something inside to something outside, what the outside problem to be dealt with first, and then maybe talk about the inside problem. But the outside problems are always going to be there. You read about it. John Lee complaining about his communities. He said the communities he’s taught never really satisfy him. Those were monasteries, forest monasteries in Thailand, where people come to meditate, people come to practice. And even those left him dissatisfied. So he focused on why he was dissatisfied. It would have made himself miserable. So he also knew how to focus on the good things, the fact that you do have an opportunity to practice, you do have an opportunity to look into your mind. You have hours and hours and hours in the day where you’re free. And then you complain. So count your blessings. Look at all the opportunities you have. For the monks, we’ve got the rules. And sometimes the rules seem to bind. But remember, it’s because of the rules that people are inspired to support us, to give us this freedom to practice. That’s why the term for the rules is the body moka. Moka means release. Liberation. These are the rules that provide for our liberation. So appreciate the fact that we have them. Try to maintain them. If they get worn away, in other words, this one is inconvenient, so we throw that one away. That one’s inconvenient, we throw it away. Then people come along and have to revive the things that were thrown away. It’s not easy. There was that time when Jon Suwat was going to the meetings for the abbots. And most of the senior monks who came from Bangkok were not forest monks. They would eat their meals on plates, on tables, sitting in chairs. And so some of the monks who were arranging the meetings asked Jon Suwat, for the duration of the meeting, if he wouldn’t eat his meals off of a plate. Sitting at a table on a chair. He said, “It’s not that I’m showing off, but I just think about Ajahn Mun and all the hardship he went through to revive these practices. And what do we do if we throw them away?” And he said, “Well, my eating out of my bowl is causing trouble for the sangha. I just won’t come to the meetings. I wouldn’t do.” So they made arrangements that he could eat out of his bowl and all the other forest monks could eat out of their bowls. But it’s very easy to see how bit by bit by bit things can get worn away. So we appreciate the rules, we appreciate the Vinaya. Think about the fact that when the Buddha talked about his name for what he taught, it wasn’t Buddhism, and it wasn’t just Dhamma. It was the Dhamma Vinaya. The Dhamma and the Vinaya together. As he said, both of those are our teachers in his place. So we treat them with respect. And that’s not a grudging respect. We should be happy to have them to respect. He himself pointed out, after his awakening, if you live without respect for something, it’s pretty miserable. We look at the society around us and there’s so few things that people really respect anymore. And it’s a miserable society. But we’ve got a tradition here that’s lasted for 2,600 years. It’s produced lots of Arhants and other noble disciples. So we should be happy that we have contact with that tradition, are able to practice within that tradition, and can maintain it. And the proper response is gratitude and generosity. So much has been given to you. You should be willing to give in return. So when you find that small voice inside, that complaining “I”, feeling put upon, feeling unjustly treated, count your blessings. Think of all the good things you’ve got here. The monastery is not perfect, but it’s good enough to practice. That’s what contentment is for. Just remind yourself that things may not be comfortable in terms of food, clothing, shelter. The Buddha doesn’t mention the weather, but that’s also a problem sometimes. Like the heat wave that’s about to hit. But you can still practice. You can still have a breath. You can still have your awareness. And you’ve got the time and the environment. So you’ve obviously got some merit. So whatever is required to give, to increase the merit that you’ve got, be happy to give that. As you work in the kitchen, remember the instructions for working in the kitchen should say at the end, sit down and count your blessings. As you work in the orchard, when the work is done, sit down and count your blessings. And the nasty little “I” inside, that’s complaining all the time, can have different “I’s” as well, and say, look, you’re doing well. You’ve got the merit to be here. You’ve got the merit to practice. And then let live the quality of your heart.

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