Dependence

August 6, 2022

In the forest tradition, as in all of Theravada, there’s a lot of emphasis placed on what you have to do in your practice. After all, the Dhamma is pacchattan veditambo, when you eat, to be seen by the observant for themselves. Your Dhamma team will have to depend on your actions. You can’t give it to anybody else. You can give advice. But as the Buddha said, he’s just the one who points out the way. Other people have to follow the instructions. He was challenged one time by a man who asked him, “Why is it that some people, when you give them instructions, get awakened and other people don’t?” The implication was that the Buddha was giving different teachings to different people. But he asked the man, “Do you know the way to arajagah?” The Buddha said, “When you describe it to someone, do they all follow the path that you told them?” The man said, “No, they don’t all. Some of them take a wrong turn here, a wrong turn there. But what can I do? I give them correct instructions.” The Buddha said the same with him. He gives the instructions if it’s up to that individual to follow them. But given the emphasis, you can’t place it on what each of us has to do for him or herself. It’s good to remember every now and then how much we have to depend on one another. We’ll see this especially tomorrow with the ordination. The people have come to give encouragement and support for the new novice and the monks who receive them into the community. There’s a lot of mutual dependence there. When you practice, and everybody practicing here is really dependent on the generosity of a lot of people—the saw that we’re sitting in, the land we’re sitting on, the food we eat, almost everything we have except the air we breathe we owe to the generosity of somebody. It’s good to think about that. So you want to practice with a sense of gratitude. They didn’t have to give this place. Nobody was forced. Nobody felt a sense of obligation. It was just out of their pure generosity of their heart. So you want to be grateful for that. It’s one of the first virtues that’s taught in Thailand—gratitude. Here in the West, we miss it a lot. So many people grew up with a sense of entitlement, that things are owed to them. We forget the basic principle in the Buddhist teachings that if you want to receive, you have to give first. When someone else goes out of their way to give for you and they’ve made that choice and they took on that burden, the proper response is kathanyu, which literally means a sense of what was done, a sense of the choices people made. It means gratitude. You share your gratitude in two ways. One is by dedicating yourself to the practice. Because, as the Buddha said, the higher your attainment, the more merit goes to the people who supported you. And they themselves get inspired that the generosity they’ve given, the gifts they’ve given, have been put to good use. At the same time, you want to be as unburdensome as possible. We’re not here to have all of our needs met. We have to pare down our needs. This is one of the reasons why we meditate. Working with the breath is medicine for the body, food for the body, nourishment for the body. It provides a sense of ease and well-being. You can live in simple circumstances and not feel deprived. You want to have gratitude and express your gratitude through being persistent in the practice, being content with what you’ve got in terms of material things, and being unburdensome in the requests you make. You’re in line with the Buddha’s definition of what counts as dhamma. As he said, you test the different things you’ve learned by whether they make you content or discontent, burdensome or unburdensome, persistent or lazy. So you want to choose the teachings that make you persistent, putting in effort, that make you content, that make you unburdensome, that way you don’t abuse other people’s generosity. You actually provide them with a sense of satisfaction that what they gave has been well used. The other way in which you take on dependence as you practice is in your relationship to the teachers. In fact, that’s what the word nissaya means. When the ordinate asks to take dependence on the preceptor, it means he will have to depend on the preceptor for his instruction in all kinds of ways. Because the Dhamma is not just a matter of the words. There are people who are clever at reading the words. They’re good at listening and arguing. But those aren’t the people who maintain the Dhamma. The people who maintain the Dhamma maintain it in their actions, body, speech, mind. And that kind of lesson isn’t going to be just in words. It’s interesting that in Thai the word for habit, nissaya, is taken directly from the Pali word nissaya, dependence. The connection being that you’re trying to pick up your teacher’s habits. Well, not all his habits. You may have some bad habits here and there. But look for what’s good. And not just with the teacher. Look all around you. Because you’re here to change the way you eat, to change the way you walk, to change the way you wear your clothing. You want to bring things in line with the Dhamma. And as Ajaan Fuang said, you can’t expect the teacher to hand everything to you on the platter. This is not a public education system where the teacher is obliged to give you everything in words and assume that you’re not really interested in learning things. And so he has to go out of his way to make things interesting. Here you’re expected to show some interest of your own. In Ajaan Fuang’s analogy, he said, it’s like learning to be a thief. You want to steal something from the people down the road. You don’t go up to the door and ask them, “Where do you keep your valuables? What time of the day are you away so I can come and pick them up easily? Oh, and by the way, tell me the combination to the lock.” You’ve got to observe. If they’re at home and they’re not home, what part of the house seems to be the area where they’re most protective? Look. Observe. Put yourself out, and then you gain. So wherever you see somebody doing something well, speaking well, acting well, expressing things well, take that as a lesson. And you’re here to pick up as many lessons as you can. When you have that attitude, then you learn a lot. Because there’s always something to be learned every day, not just in the Dhamma talks or in what you read, but when you learn about how to behave in a way that’s in line with the Dhamma. So as we practice, we’re dependent in two ways. We’re dependent on the people who support or give material support, and we’re dependent on the people who’ve been passing this tradition down for centuries. It’s been a lived apprenticeship. It’s not a correspondence course or an internet chat room. It’s people living with one another, supporting one another, learning from one another in all aspects of life. That’s how the Dhamma gets maintained. And that’s how we get the most out of it. Because it is up to us to get the most out of it. The Dhamma is there. It’s complete. The question is, how much of it are you going to absorb? If you just have the attitude, “Well, I’ll just do enough to get by,” you’re missing a lot. And it’s not helpful to the people who come after you. You want to keep this as a lived tradition so that not only you benefit from it, but people who come after you will benefit from it as well. (crickets chirping)

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