Jobs With No Competition

July 13, 2023

When you come to the practice, and especially when you ordain, there are many things that you picked up from your family life, your family values, that you’re going to have to put aside. This connects with that old question that was presented to Ajahn Mun when he was challenged for not following Thai customs or Lao customs. As he said, Thai customs, Lao customs, like the customs of any country, are the customs of people of defilement. If you want to be a noble one, you have to take on the customs of the noble ones. But this doesn’t mean that the goodness of lay life or the goodness of lay values is totally negated in a monastic life. It’s good to think about what particularly good habits, good values, you pick up from your family, that do apply to as your practice. I was thinking about this today, because today, July 13th, is my father’s birthday. If he were still alive, he’d be 107 years old, almost completing the ninth of his twelve-year cycles. And reflecting on the fact that I learned from him, one of the main lessons I learned is that there are a lot of jobs in the world that need to be done, but nobody wants to do them. And so you have free reign right there. You get the goodness from having done the job. And whether other people appreciate it or not, you know that you did a job that was necessary. And there was no conflict. You weren’t fighting anyone off. Think about that image. The image that the Buddha had that inspired him to go forth when he saw the world as a dwindling stream with lots of fish fighting one another over the little bit of water in the stream. And they’re all going to die anyhow. As he looked around, there was nothing to which no one had laid claim. That’s why he went forth to look inside, between the new one and the old one, and even outside. There are some areas where no one lays claim, where there are jobs that need to be done, but nobody wants to do them. I remember very vividly one time my father had to dig a new cesspool in the farm. He made a mistake and he dug it too close to the old cesspool. So as he was down over his head in the depth of the new cesspool, the wall between the new one and the old one broke. The contents of the old one came and filled up the new one up to his waist. Picture my father in waist-deep cesspool, stuck with me for a long time. But he shrugged it off. And I really didn’t realize that I’d picked up that message until I found myself in Thailand, getting ready to ordain. I was staying with Ajahn Phuong in Bangkok, and I noticed nobody was cleaning his platoons. So I picked them up and cleaned them. And as he mentioned to someone else afterward, that was the point where he knew that he could teach me. I was willing to do work like that. I didn’t shrink from it. There was a time when I came back to the States. My father was going in for an operation. There were other people who took my place. And the people who took my place in cleaning his platoons got rubber gloves and brushes. And Ajahn Phuong said, “Tenchev never needed rubber gloves or brushes. He just used his bare hands. What’s wrong with you all?” And I found that there was a niche. It wasn’t just the platoons. He didn’t have an attendant. So I started attending to him. And I discovered why he didn’t have an attendant. He was quite sharp with people who stayed near him. He demanded a very high level of quietness and alertness. Other people would come and try to help, and they would go away very quickly. I didn’t chase them away. They just went away on their own. And I learned a lot being his attendant, seeing him in all kinds of situations. Especially seeing how he handled his illnesses. And I learned how to be quiet in all kinds of situations. When he was really ill, I would have to sleep on the porch of his hut. But he didn’t want anybody sleeping on the porch of his hut if they moved around when they slept. So I had to make a vow, “When I fall asleep, I don’t want to move.” And somehow I was able to carry that through. So there’s a lot in terms of alertness, persistence, endurance, determination. Just intuitiveness that I learned as his attendant. So that lesson from my father really paid off in the end. Just as you practice, it’s good to think of the goodness that you learn from your family. The good qualities are going to apply in the practice. The basic principles of decency, the basic principles of going out of your way for other people, being considerate of other people, putting in extra effort when you don’t feel like it—these are all going to stand you in good stead. One big job that nobody else can do, and that’s cleaning out your own mind. The problem of suffering is totally inside. It’s in the part of your awareness that nobody else can experience. The solution is in that part of your awareness as well. So this is work you have to do. We talk about how admirable friendship is, the whole of the whole of your life. It doesn’t mean it does all the work. You find admirable friends, and you have to emulate them. It’s the emulating that does the work. The admirable friends simply give you an idea of what’s possible. Of course, we have the Buddha as our ultimate admirable friend, telling us that total freedom from suffering is possible. He tells us how it can be done. But we have to do it. We look at his example. We look at the example of the famous disciples of the Buddha, the famous Ajahns. We try to emulate them as much as we can. A comment that Ajahn Mun’s students would make of him was that he converted himself into totally Dhamma. So be willing to turn yourself into total Dhamma. That’s the way in which admirable friendship, when it becomes the process of emulation, does take care of the entire path. And you do the job that needs to be done, the cleaning of your mind that nobody else can do. And there’s real satisfaction as you see progress in that direction.

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