

Wealth & Strength

April 4, 2020

There's a story in the Canon where the Buddha goes to stay in the haunt of a yakkha spirit, the Alavaka spirit, and the spirit comes to him and says, "Get out!" So the Buddha says, "Okay," and he gets out. Then the spirit says, "Come back in again!" So the Buddha comes back in again. This happens three times. Then when the Buddha's come back in the third time, the spirit says, "Okay, for the fourth time, get out!" And the Buddha says, "No. You do what you want, but I'm not getting out."

This is a story that Ajaan Suwat often liked to tell. As he explained it, being strong, being firm doesn't necessarily mean being stubborn. You need to have the good sense of when you have to draw the line and when you don't, when you have to be amenable to what other people want, comply with what they say, and when it's important to draw the line. A lot of people don't know where to draw the line. Either they're pushovers in everything, or they stay stubbornly in ways that are not really to their best interest. So strength requires discernment: when you show your steadfastness, when you're willing to be compliant.

The story of the Buddha image here in the sala is one instance of Ajaan Suwat's being compliant. When they were planning to build the ordination hall at Wat Bhuridhat, a committee was set up to be in charge of getting the Buddha image made. They dragged their feet, and as it turned out, the chairman of the committee was dragging his feet on purpose, hoping that Ajaan Suwat would get frustrated with the whole project, leave, and then this person was planning to invite another monk in to take his place.

One of the women among Ajaan Suwat's supporters saw that things were not progressing at all, so she went to Thailand, bought a Buddha image, arranged for it to be shipped here to the States, and arranged for the monks to come and consecrate it, all without telling anyone what she was doing. The image just showed up at the docks. She was hoping to get away with nobody knowing.

Well, it turns out that the store from which she had bought the image had put her name on the back of the image. So the image was brought to Wat Bhu, the monks were brought from Thailand, they chanted the consecration, and that was when Ajaan Suwat was invited to Massachusetts to lead a retreat. I came along just at the end of the consecration and went with him to Massachusetts.

During the retreat, we discovered that there had been a meeting of the temple committee deciding they were not going to accept the image, that it had

been done without consulting anybody and was in violation of what the temple committee had decided, which was that everybody should have a chance to make merit with the image. Now, the woman herself had said that that was no problem. She'd be happy to accept other people's help in sponsoring the image. But the committee was stubborn.

It was while we were in Massachusetts that the land was offered here for Wat Metta. So Ajaan Suwat went back and came up with a compromise. The image would be brought here. As he told me afterwards, if this had been Thailand and the temple committee over there had acted in that way, he would have left the monastery and never come back. But here he had to think about keeping the place together. So that was a time when he bent.

There were other times when he stood firm. There was a monk up in Los Angeles who was charged with having sex with two women. The monk tried everything he could to make sure that the case was never brought to any kind of adjudication. Ajaan Suwat decided to have nothing to do with the guy. Soon after we set up the monastery here, this monk came one evening with a group of lay people to give a donation, thinking that he would be able to worm his way back into Ajaan Suwat's graces and at the very least, if Ajaan Suwat accepted him as a monk, everybody would see that Ajaan Suwat thought he was innocent. He also thought that Ajaan Suwat wouldn't say anything in front of all the lay people.

The monk came and bowed down, and the first thing Ajaan Suwat asked him was, "When are you going to get your case settled?" The monk started to say, "Well, I've been trying to..." and Ajaan Suwat cut him off, saying, "If you'd really been trying, this sort of thing would have been settled a long time ago. In my eyes, you're not a monk."

So there were times when Ajaan Suwat could be compliant, other times when he could be firm, and he had the discernment to see the proper time for each. Strength doesn't mean stubbornness. True strength in the practice means sticking to whatever course of action is appropriate. This is a lesson we should all learn.

The story about the yakkha spirit goes on. The spirit says, "Okay, now I'm going to ask you a question. And if you can't answer the question, I'll hurl you across the Ganges and split your head into seven pieces!" The Buddha, of course, is not fazed. He says, "I don't see anyone who can hurl me across the Ganges or split my head in seven pieces. Go ahead and ask your question." Actually, the yakkha ended up asking several questions.

The first one was, "What is a person's wealth?" And the Buddha's answer was "Conviction." Think about the forest ajaans. Many of them came from poor backgrounds, but they were wealthy in conviction: that there was a way out of poverty, there was a way out of the dead end of being in the low end of

the Thai social scale, and that way was the practice. So they gave themselves fully to the practice. Whatever the practice demanded, they were willing to give it. Whatever things inside themselves they had to change, they were willing to change. That's how they became the ajaans to whom we all bow down. They started out poor in worldly wealth, but they had wealth in the form of conviction—and, through being willing to change and grow, they were able to parlay that wealth to great attainments. This, too, is a lesson we should take to heart.

We tend to be really stubborn about our habits. “This is the way I am, this is the way I'm just going to be. You have to accept that”: That's the attitude a lot of people have. I've actually had someone come to me and say, “Well, don't expect me to change too quickly.” That's an admission of weakness, but it's also an admission of stubbornness: being stubborn about the wrong things, being firm in the wrong things, being firm in our adherence to our defilements, being compliant with them, which has everything backwards.

We have the potential to change our ways. If we didn't, the Buddha said, there would have been no point in his teaching. He said it's because people can develop skillful qualities and abandon unskillful qualities that he saw that it would be useful to teach. If he hadn't seen that people could change their ways, there would have been no reason to bother. But we *can* change. And anywhere where we see where we're unskillful, we should quickly change our ways and not just go through with the force of inertia, because that's not really strength. The force of inertia is a kind of weakness.

Real strength is when we see that we have the qualities inside ourselves that we can build on. We can exercise restraint where we didn't exercise restraint before. We can be generous in areas where we weren't generous before. We have this potential. It's our wealth. If we're convinced that, Yes, we can do it, that takes the potential and turns it into a genuine wealth. It's like people who have gold buried someplace in their property: It's potentially they're wealth, but it's not really their wealth until they dig it up. In the same way, we have this potential to change our ways. It's a potential form of wealth. But if we don't actually use it, if we lack the conviction to use it, then we're poor.

So think of the example of the ajaans. Tonight we're coming on 18 years since Ajaan Suwat passed away. And we're still living here, practicing here. It was because of his generosity of spirit that he thought that Wat Metta would be a good place to start. He already had the temple there in Ontario. But he felt that a place where people could really practice—and not just Thai people, but people of all backgrounds—would be of genuine use for the world at large. We now have this place because of his generosity of spirit, the wealth he had, the conviction that people would use this opportunity well. That's why the opportunity is here. So make the most of it—and do it as quickly as you can.

We don't know how much time we have, but we do have right now. So see what wealth you can develop right now. And the more you take of this wealth, it's not called being greedy. It's wise.