

## *On Your Own*

*November 12, 2012*

Ajaan Fuang was often fond of saying that nobody hired us to practice. He'd usually say that when people coming into the monastery would try to order us around, saying that this should be that way, that should be this way. He wouldn't say it directly to them, but after they'd leave he'd say, "Nobody hired us to practice, these people certainly didn't hire us to practice. So they're not the boss."

We're all here because we want to be here. This is a voluntary practice. We're all volunteers. The only thing that's really ordering us around is the fact that there is suffering and stress in our lives, and we've recognized that we really want to get rid of it, want to get beyond it. That's the only thing that's really forcing us.

But what this also means is that when we're out on our own outside of the monastery – and this is the time of year when people at the end of the rains retreat would traditionally go their separate ways – there's not going to be anyone riding herd on you to tell you that you have to do this, you have to do that. You have to ride herd on yourself. Especially when you're in environments where the prevailing values have nothing to do with practice at all, or very little to do with the practice, you've got to provide your own internal motivation.

There's a very useful teaching on this topic. It's called the governing principles, three ways of thinking that help keep you on the path. There's your self as a governing principle, the Dhamma as a governing principle, and the world as a governing principle.

Now, usually in Thailand you hear these explained as if the self is a governing principle, it's not a good thing. If the world is a governing principle, it's not a good thing. Only if the Dhamma is your governing principle is it a good thing—taking "self as a governing principle" to mean that you just do what you want, or taking "the world a governing principle" to mean that you allow yourself to get swayed by the opinions of the world. But that's not what the Buddha meant by those terms.

When you take your self as a governing principle, you remind yourself that you started this practice because you recognized that you were suffering and there was something you could do about it. And you gave up an awful lot to get on this path. Would you really be showing love for yourself if you abandoned the path? In other words, you take your regard for your true happiness as a guide. So you want to keep reminding yourself of that when you start getting lazy, when the practice seems too demanding. Ask yourself, "Exactly what path or whose path are you following when you lie down?"

There's a story that Ajaan Maha Boowa tells of when he first went to see Ajaan Mun. He went to pay his respects and then, because he'd been tired from the trip, lay down to take a nap. He had a dream where Ajaan Mun came to him and said, "This is not a place for pigs. We're not following the path of pigs here, just lying around and wallowing in comfort."

So you can ask yourself when you're feeling the impulse just to let the mind wander as it

likes and let yourself relax as you'd like, "Whose path are you following here?" The Buddha's path is the path you would follow if you really felt genuine goodwill for yourself, genuine concern for your own true happiness. So that's taking the self as a governing principle.

Taking the world as a governing principle doesn't mean that you're interested in the opinions of the people around you, your social world, of the world of your family, your friends. Instead, the Buddha reminds you that there are people in the world who can read minds, there are devas who can read minds, and they might be reading yours. What would they think? "See, look at this person who said that he or she was going to practice the Dhamma. Look what they're doing, look at what they're thinking, look at what they're saying." What would you like them to be noticing about you? That's a different world, that's a part of the world out there too, not just the world of your family or the world of your friends. So keep that in mind when you start feeling lazy or you start feeling your practice is beginning to unravel.

And then the third principle, of course, is the Dhamma, reflecting on the fact that this is really an excellent Dhamma that we've found here, an excellent opportunity. It's not the case that the Dhamma is always available. They talk about long periods between the teachings of one Buddha and the arising of the next Buddha when nobody knows what the Dhamma is, nobody knows how to practice. There may be a few people who practice on their own but it's very, very difficult. Here we have the Dhamma all laid out and it's an excellent Dhamma. The people who taught it taught it out of pure motives. The qualities that it develops in our minds as we practice it are good qualities, noble qualities, qualities we can be proud of.

When you look at the qualities that are developed by the world, the sorts of things that people in the world are enamored of, you realize that the Dhamma and the world go separate ways. The practice of the Dhamma always is countercultural, even in cultures that have had Buddhism for a long time. The normal values of every human culture are to gain wealth and keep reproducing more people. There's gain, status, praise, sensual pleasures: Those are the ways of the world. Those are the things that people go running after. But the problem is that there also is loss of wealth, loss of status, criticism, and pain that go along with the other ways of the world. They can't be separated. They just go around and around and around, trading places with each other, really going nowhere at all. Whereas the Dhamma goes someplace. It's a path with a goal. But again, it's a path that nobody gets paid to follow. And the values of the culture don't encourage people to follow this path.

So you have to make yourself strong, realize that this Dhamma we have here is the Dhamma of the noble ones. It's going to require sacrifices, it's going to go against your grain, and it's going to go against the grain of a lot of people around you. So you need the ammunition, the tools, the ways of thinking that help keep you on the path even when everybody else around you is falling off the path. This is true sometimes in monasteries, to say nothing of the world outside.

So an important part of the practice is learning how to keep yourself on course, to have

these governing principles in you and make sure they govern your activity and your thinking. And that reflection on having the world as a governing principle: Remember there are people in the world – who may not be immediately around you – but there are people practicing someplace in the world. That's the group you want to identify with so that you can show true love for yourself at the same time you find the excellence of the Dhamma in yourself and become an example to others. In this way, all three governing principles come together.

So try to keep these three governing principles in mind, because there's nobody else out there who will keep them in mind for you. You have to see their value and you have to see the truth of what they're saying.

There are times when the practice is lonely, but the rewards are great. The Dhamma really is excellent. But to know that for sure, you really have to practice it. And that's when you have your proof.