

## *Nobody's Servant*

*May 17, 2017*

That chant just now—the world is swept away, it does not endure, has nothing of its own: The word “world” here applies both to the world outside and to the world of your experience. There are a lot of things in this world that we try to hold onto but they're not really ours, and the more we try to hold onto them, the more we get harmed.

The Buddha's image is of grass by the side of a river: You're being swept along by a flood, and there's grass on the side of the river. You try to grab hold of the grass, so as not to get swept away, but some of the grass, when you hold onto it, just gets pulled away from the bank, while other grass has sharp blades that cut your skin. So if you're looking for safety in the world out there, there's not much that it has to offer.

This is why we take refuge inside: developing the qualities we need right here, right now, food for the mind, the sense of well-being that comes when you focus on the breath. Allow the breath to become comfortable, think of the sensitive parts in your body and how the breath might nourish them. Sometimes just thinking of that as a possibility changes the way you breathe, changes the way you relate to the breath. Align the sensitive spots with the breath; keep them together, and they give energy to each other. Then the mind can calm down, because a lot of our antsiness about the world outside comes from the simple fact that we feel antsy inside, but if you feel soothed inside, then the world is not so much of an issue. Of course, this is not just a matter of a physical feeling of being soothed. You have to think in ways that are soothing to the mind as well.

This evening I was talking to an old woman who has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's. She's still fairly lucid but she's starting to get worried about some investments that have gone bad, and an inheritance that looks like it's not going to come to her. And I had to tell her, using the words of Ajaan Fuang used in many similar cases, “Look if it's really yours, it'll come on its own. If it's not yours, why bother about it? Why think about it?” And she found that comforting. I kept reminding her that our internal resources are what are going to see us through, and so we've got to work on them. Because if our internal resources are in bad shape, our inside portfolio's pretty weak, then no matter how good our outside portfolio is, we're going to suffer a lot.

So you have to learn to think about what's really important in life, and realize that the quality of the mind is your real treasure. Get your priorities straight, along with the combination of having a comfortable way to be with yourself in the present moment and ways of thinking that place the emphasis on what you're doing inside—on the internal goodness you can develop right here, right now.

This is one of the good qualities of the Dhamma. It reminds you that the things you get by being dishonest outside are not worth it, and the really good things in life come from goodness inside.

The Buddha talks about internal treasures. There's virtue, not harming others; a sense of shame, in other words, being ashamed at the idea that you would do something harmful. Compunction, realizing that if anything that would cause harm, you just don't really want to have to inflict that harm on yourself or anyone else. Conviction, conviction in the principle of karma, that your actions really do make a difference; generosity; learning the Dhamma, and discernment. All these things are goodness inside, and we develop them through the meditation and also through learning the Dhamma, stocking ourselves inside with good things, so when things outside are lacking, we're not poor. We're wealthy with internal wealth. That makes us independent.

I've been reading recently a biography of Talleyrand, who was the foreign minister in France under lots of governments: the revolutionary government, Napoleon, and then the Restoration. He was a very clever man, able to maneuver his way around all kinds of difficult people and difficult situations, but he was constantly enslaved to things. There were things that he wanted, expensive things. He was able to get them, but the actions he had to do in order to get what he wanted were not all that inspiring. He had to play servant to some very, very, outrageous people. That's because he had desires for things they had, for things they could offer him. If you've got all your desires focused out in the world, then you become a servant to the world. But if your treasures are inside, you can be independent.

One of the things Ajaan Fuang would say repeatedly was, "We're nobody's servant." We're practicing the Dhamma of our own free will, and we're developing independence inside, but it comes from learning how to focus our desires: not on the treasures of the world, not on the things they can offer, but our desire to train the mind. If you're a slave to your outside desires, you're going to be a slave to people outside. And things get warped that way. Your views get warped; your character gets warped; the things you say get warped. You can't have a sense of

independence.

The way to freedom is to focus your desires on the qualities you can develop inside. In that case, whether things come or go in the world outside, they're just waves washing against the shore of really a solid rock or stone foundation. The waves wash but they don't make the foundation shake. Just as the Buddha said, everything in the world gets swept away. Even your body gets swept away.

Which is why you've got to focus on the mind, to make sure its goodness doesn't get swept away. This is your real treasure—or it's potentially your real treasure. It depends on developing these qualities inside, which is why we have to practice. Otherwise, it's like having a big trunk and when you open it all you find in it is dirty laundry and old garbage—in other words, qualities that could have been developed as something good, but you've just let them spoil.

So look at your potentials inside. We all have these potentials to be virtuous, generous, wise. And what you're doing right now as you meditate is one of the skills you need to develop those potentials. Just to stay with the breath, you have to keep reminding yourself to stay here. Otherwise the mind is going to go wander around and sniff at the flowers and look at the mountains outside. You've got to keep reminding yourself to stay here, stay here. And as you keep reminding yourself, your potential for mindfulness gets strengthened—because that's what mindfulness is: a faculty of active memory, reminding yourself of what are the important things to do right now.

Then you have to develop your alertness, in other words, being really clear about what you're doing and the results you're getting. You develop the quality of ardency, that you really want to do this well. You're willing to sacrifice a lot of things because this is important.

So simply staying with the breath, learning how to do it well, develops lots of good qualities of the mind. It develops your discernment. You learn how to read your breath, what it can do for the body. And when a sense of well-being comes up, it requires discernment, one, not to go jumping onto the sense of pleasure and leaving the breath; and two, to keep it going. And then three, once you're keeping it going, what can you do to get the most out of it? How can you spread it around so that the whole body feels saturated with pleasure? It's possible. You can do it. But it's something that each of us has to figure out for ourselves.

Ajaan Lee gives a lot of good pointers on how to think of the breath energy going through the body and bringing with it a sense of well-being, a sense of ease. But he just sketches out the broad outlines. It requires our own ingenuity and our own powers of observation to fill in the

details. And often it's the details that make all the difference.

But as you pay attention to the details, that's how your discernment develops. You begin to see subtle things in the body you never noticed before. You realize you've got potentials here inside, so that you can become independent. Because the world outside gets swept away, swept away, and as long as we're trying to hold onto things in the world, we're going to get swept away along with it. But if our treasures are inside, then the world can be swept away, but we're safe and sound.

Then in being safe and sound we can be a mainstay for other people as well. Because as you get swept away, you start leaning, and when you start leaning, other people around you will begin to lean as well. But if you can stand upright, and show people that this is what it means to be upright, some people will pick up on a sense of that and they'll appreciate that. They'll be able to find some security in the fact that you're upright. So looking after yourself in this way is not a selfish thing.

The Buddha's image is of two acrobats, one acrobat standing on the other's shoulders. Each of them has to look out after his or her own sense of balance. And in doing so, each makes it easier for the other to stay balanced. So find this balance inside; find a sense of security and solidity inside. You can actualize it from the potentials you have, and that then becomes your inner wealth, a source of independence, so that you're nobody's slave. Not the slave of your defilements, not anybody's slave outside.

Another image from the Buddha is of two different elephants. There's the elephant who, in fighting for the king, uses his forefeet, uses his hindfeet, uses everything but his trunk. He holds his trunk back. And the elephant trainer says, "Ah, this elephant hasn't given his life to the king." And then there's the other elephant who uses everything, including his trunk. And the trainer says, "Okay, this elephant has given his life to the king." And as the Buddha explains the image, the first elephant is the one he praises. The second one is the one that the king would like, of course, but the first is the one who has a sense of restraint, a sense of things it will not do, no matter how much the king wants it.

And that's the image of a person who's practicing. There are things you do for the world but you also have your principles. You have a place to stand where you're solid. There are certain things that you will simply not do, because they're not worth doing. They're harmful. No matter how much anybody tries to pay you, you're not going to do them. When you have that sense of principle inside, that sense of inner wealth, that's when you really are independent,

when you can trust yourself. You're nobody's servant, but everybody will be able to trust you.