

Dhamma Opportunism

April 15, 2020

My third year as a monk, we started the construction of the chedi, the spired monument, at Wat Dhammasathit. I must admit, I wasn't looking forward to having all that construction at the monastery. A month or two after the construction began, an old monk who'd been staying at the monastery for a couple years announced that he was going to leave to find a quieter place. He didn't want to be around with all the noise and activity of the construction. At first I sympathised with him, but then Ajaan Fuang said something that stopped me in my tracks. He said, "Well, I still have to work on my perfections." I thought to myself, "If he has to work on his perfections, what about me?"

So that changed my attitude. Fortunately, I didn't have to get too involved in the construction. But it was hard for there not to be a lot of activity that infringed on my peace and quiet. I ended up having to do a lot of jobs around the monastery that other people had taken care of before, but with the construction sucking all the labor out of the monastery, I had to pick up the slack. So I learned a lot.

This is an important lesson: that sometimes there are hardships that come, difficulties that come, restrictions that come when they're not wanted. But they're there. So you have to learn how to take advantage of them, to see what good Dhamma qualities can you develop in those circumstances.

As Ajaan Fuang got sick toward the end of his life, I became his attendant, and again, it impinged a lot on my time to meditate. As I learned to see it as an opportunity to develop the Dhamma, to develop in the practice, rather than as an imposition, that change in attitude actually helped me benefit from the experience. I learned a lot about patience, a lot about endurance, a lot about doing good things and not asking for immediate rewards.

So it's a good time to take stock, now that we have these impositions and restrictions placed on us. Some people are extremely busy; other people have lots of time on their hands. And if, given your situation, you can look to see where the opportunities are for developing the mind, developing the heart in the practice, then the situation becomes an opportunity.

We see a lot of opportunism around us, and it's very disheartening. People who've had long-term political agendas are now advancing them. That's sad, to see this is what human beings are like. But there's a different kind of opportunism—Dhamma opportunism, you might call it—where you look at each situation and ask yourself, "What kind of Dhamma can I develop here?" It might be the Dhamma of contentment, realizing that the situation may not

be ideal but they're good enough to practice. Many Thai ajaans are told by their lay students, "I don't have the time to practice," and the ajaans' response is always the same: "Do you have time to breathe?" Well, yes. "Okay, you can practice with the breath." You may not be able to give your full attention to the breath, but it is possible, as you go through your activities, to stay with your breath energy in the body, trying to keep it as open and clear as possible. And when you have a few spare moments, go there. Don't go to the mind's incessant chatter. Try to create some break in the chatter. Tell yourself you have better things to do, things that are better for you right now.

In terms of material things, this is going to be lacking and that's going to be lacking, and it looks like this lack is going to go on for quite a long time. This is where you have to learn how to be frugal. Some things we need day-to-day in order to survive. This is why we have that reflection on the requisites: How much do we really need to survive? How much food, clothing, shelter do we need just to stay healthy enough to practice? Anything beyond that is a waste, and we may feel the pinch further down the line. So, think about the future a little bit. This doesn't mean that you have to starve yourself to the point where you're weak. Know your body's needs, maintain them as best you can. But remember that anything beyond that is a waste. And it's a burden.

When the Buddha taught his aunt the principles of what counts as Dhamma and what doesn't count as Dhamma, two of them are that you're content and that you're unburdensome. The two go together. Contentment is the inner attitude. You don't let your mind get inflamed by the fact that you don't have this, don't have that. Look around: Is it good enough to practice? Every situation is good enough to practice. Now, it may place some constrictions on what you can do, and what kind of practice you'll be able to do, but just tell yourself, "Okay, this is the hand my kamma has dealt me, so I might as well learn how to play it well."

So even though the situation may be not what you want, you can still find some way to see it as an opportunity. You may be forced to develop virtues you had ignored before, you didn't feel that you had to practice before, but now suddenly you find that you really have to practice them. It's a good sign that you've learned this. When things are easy, it's easy to coast through life and think that everything is okay. Certain weaknesses inside seem to not matter.

So it's good to be brought up short, to realize, "Ah yes, this is a weakness I've got. I'm not content. I am burdensome. I lack gratitude." If you find that these things are really true about you, stop and take advantage of the situation to master them. See this as an advantage of the situation, as an opportunity to compensate for your weaknesses, to build on your strengths so that the situation is not an imposition. It opens some new doors. And even though

these may be virtues you don't want to develop, they're still virtues, and there's a good lesson in learning how not to give in to your wants.

So look around. Look for the opportunities. After all, if people can be opportunistic about wanting to do evil, why can't we be opportunistic about wanting to do good, to create goodness in ourselves and leave some goodness around the world around us?

That's one of the paradoxes of the practice. There was a reflection in Ven. Ratthapala's teachings to the king. "The things you have, the wealth you have now, is it really yours?" This was what was meant by the Dhamma summary that the world has nothing of its own.

The king said, "Well, I have lots of wealth of my own," and Ratthapala responded, "But can you take it with you when you go?" Well, no. But with goodness, you take it with you by leaving some goodness behind—in your relationship with other people and the way you deal with your mind. The inner and the outer goodness are connected. Any goodness you leave behind by being unburdensome, by being content, also goes with you as a strength in the mind.

So it's not a matter of just taking care of ourselves and leaving the rest of the world behind. We look after ourselves by helping the world; we help the world by looking after ourselves. Right now, you may be forced into having to develop some virtues that are hard. But they're still virtues, and they're good to have mastered. Learn to see this as an opportunity. That way you can make the most of it.