

## *To be Debt Free*

*December 20, 2022*

We come to the practice indebted to others. The Thais have the concept of what they call your Dhamma debt collectors, the people you've harmed in the past. And as Ajaan Lee points out, we're in debt to all those whose flesh we've eaten and to all the farmers who've provided us with vegetarian food. We're in debt to our parents for having raised us, to our teachers for having taught us. As we come to the practice, this is one way of getting ourselves out of debt. But first we put ourselves in debt to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. We take on better debts—let's put it that way—and we practice, eventually to get out of debt even to them. As the Buddha said, the arahants are totally without debt.

He himself was without debt after his awakening. There's that story of his contemplating whether he wanted to teach or not after he gained awakening. He thought of how subtle the Dhamma was, how difficult it would be for people to see. He wondered if it'd be just a waste of time trying to teach it to them. The story goes that the Sahampati Brahma got upset at the prospect of the Buddha's not teaching. He came down, invited him, and said, "There are those with little dust in their eyes. They will benefit from the Dhamma." The Buddha checked this out with his own knowledge and saw that, yes, there would be those who would be able to practice. So he accepted the Brahma's invitation to teach.

The Commentary tries to explain this incident away, saying the Buddha was just pretending to think he might not teach so that he'd get an invitation. But I think it points to something deeper: that after he had gained his awakening, the Buddha owed nothing to anybody. Once his mind was pure, he was totally free from debt. So his teaching of the Dhamma was totally a gift, something that wasn't compulsory. It was freely chosen, a way of helping human beings who'd be happy to find a way to put an end to suffering.

Now, as we take on the teachings and follow them, we put ourselves in debt to the Buddha and to the Dhamma that he taught. But even though we're not arahants yet, there is a way that we can begin to repay that debt through the practice. Practice is called "practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma," making sure that the true Dhamma doesn't turn into what's called in Pali, *saddhamma patirupa*. It's an interesting term. *Patirupa* can mean imitation or counterfeit: to be a counterfeit or an imitation of the true Dhamma. But it can also mean improvement.

This is something we have to watch out for: the idea that we're going to improve on the Dhamma. You see this all around us, and it's nothing new. It

didn't start happening only when the Dhamma came to the West. It's been going on in the Buddhist tradition for a long time. In fact, in one place the Buddha says, "As soon as improved Dhamma appears, the genuine Dhamma disappears"—in other words, the sense that when you listen to the Dhamma, you know that it's the genuine article. You can be confident in that. It's not just one person's version of the Dhamma versus somebody else's. But once the improved versions arise, then you're never really sure simply in the act of listening.

Fortunately, you can test the Dhamma through the practice. That requires that you develop the qualities of being a good judge. In fact, the practice of the Dhamma develops those qualities: to become more mindful, more alert, more discerning in what's going on inside your own mind, more discerning in seeing what your actions actually are, seeing your intentions for what they are, and seeing the results of acting on those intentions. This is how you put the Dhamma to the test. This means that to find the truth, you have to be true. And the way we're true is to show respect.

When the Buddha was talking to Ven. Maha Kassapa about the future of the true Dhamma, he said, "It'll be maintained by those who have respect for the Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha, for the training, and for concentration." Sometimes he would add a sixth factor, but the sixth factor would change from one sutta to another. These five are constant.

So we show respect to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha by maintaining the Dhamma as it is, practicing it as it is, not trying to change it in accordance with our preferences. There's a statement made by, I think it was the third Chan patriarch: "The Great Way is easy for those with no preferences." That doesn't mean totally without preferences. We do prefer not suffering to suffering. We do prefer to be true to the path rather than to be false. But there are times when the path demands a lot out of us, more than we might be willing to give, at least at the very beginning, yet we're willing to give extra energy in response. That's how we show respect.

I've told you that story that Ajaan Fuang told about moving the cornerstone of the ordination hall. When they built the ordination hall at Wat Asokaram, the original plan was to have the Buddha image facing east, as it does in most temples throughout Thailand. So under the spot in the west side of the building where the Buddha image is going to be, they placed the cornerstone and filled it with all kinds of sacred objects. But as the building was going on, Ajaan Lee changed his mind and decided that the Buddha image should be on the east side, facing west. As soon as it was in place, someone noted that now the cornerstone was under a place where people could step over it, which you don't do in Thailand. So he told that to Ajaan Lee, and

Ajaan Lee turned to Ajaan Fuang, and told him, “Okay, tomorrow morning, move it.”

Ajaan Fuang thought to himself, “There’s no way you can move that.” But he also knew that if he had said that to Ajaan Lee, Ajaan Lee would say, “Well if you don’t have any faith in me, I’ll find somebody who does.” So the next day, Ajaan Fuang got all the able-bodied monks and novices down in the crawl space under the ordination hall, trying to move the thing, and of course it wouldn’t budge, no matter how many crowbars or ropes they used.

So that evening he came back to Ajaan Lee and said, “How about building a new cornerstone under where the Buddha image is now, opening up the old cornerstone, taking all the sacred objects out”—the relics, the passages of Dhamma, the Buddha images, and what not—“and put them under where the Buddha image is now?” Ajaan Lee shook his head yes. That’s what they did.

That, Ajaan Fuang told me, was how you show respect for your teacher. And this is how we show respect for the Dhamma. We put it into practice as it is. If things don’t work out, we try to figure out why. We don’t just go back and blame the Dhamma. We ask ourselves, “Have I misunderstood it? What other way could I understand that passage of Dhamma?”

You try to use your ingenuity. Like the study in intellectual history, when you study old texts, there’s a way of looking at the texts where you try to find fault with them, to see how they don’t make sense. But there’s another way, in which you actually try to make sense out of them, to see, “How does this make sense?” When you do that, you get to see more clearly how an author thinks, how an author puts things together, and how things can make sense in lots of different ways. When I was studying intellectual history, I found that the second approach made me grow more as a person.

So we take the same approach to the Dhamma, that there must be some way in which this makes sense, some way in which putting this into practice will give good results. And as we try to figure it out, we grow.

I know all too many Western monks who went over to Thailand and they’d see the ajaans do things they didn’t expect or they didn’t understand, and they’d write them off, saying, “That’s just the Thai way of doing things,” the implication being that as Westerners, if you go back to a Western country, you don’t have to do it that way. But as Ajaan Fuang said, when a teacher does something or says something, he has a reason. And often it’s up to the student to figure out what that reason is. If you put in the effort, you find that you learn. Your concept of what’s skillful and what’s not skillful will grow. When you take that attitude, that’s an attitude of respect. And that’s how you learn. So in respecting the Dhamma, you help keep it alive by putting it into practice. And you also benefit from that respect. So it’s in this way that you begin to repay your debts.

Then there's the issue of respect for the Triple Training and respect for concentration. It's worth noting that concentration is actually part of the Triple Training. The Triple Training is training in heightened virtue, what's called heightened mind, which is basically the mind in right concentration, and then heightened discernment. Then the Buddha goes back and emphasizes again, "and respect for concentration."

There may be several reasons why he emphasizes concentration. One is that there is the tendency to write it off. Everybody says, "Well, the real work is with insight, so let's go straight to insight." But insight doesn't happen in a really deep way until the mind has been stilled through mindfulness, concentration, and right effort, which are the three concentration factors of the path.

There are times when getting the mind into concentration seems kind of dumb. There's nothing new happening in the mind: no intelligent thoughts, no insights. But you have to realize that you're learning the skills to maintain that state of mind, attain it first, and then maintain it, in spite of all the other criticisms that the mind may make against it, the desire to move on to the next stage, the thought that this is boring, the thought that this is not intelligent. Your ability to resist those thoughts is part of this skill. After all, why is this skill going to be required? You need a sense of goodwill, a sense of stability for the mind to accept its insights into why it's been creating suffering for itself. It's all too easy to blame your sufferings on the situation around you. There are people saying that the Buddha didn't really appreciate the suffering that comes from the way society is structured. But society was pretty badly structured in his time, and he knew it. Yet he realized that that's not the problem.

Of course, the other problems are our tendencies just to blame other people, to blame the physical location. This is why one of the customs of the noble ones is to learn contentment. You find a place that's good enough to practice, then you hang on. You realize that the desire to move on someplace else is not going to solve the problem. You have to learn how to look at that desire and take it apart, as you do with all your other defilements, because there's this tendency that as soon as the mind gets closer and closer to the real reason why you're suffering, it tends to veer off. It's almost like putting the north poles of two different magnets closer and closer together. They push each other away.

So you've got to watch out for whatever excuse comes up for not looking directly in the mind. After all, what you're going to be seeing is your own stupidity. You're doing something that you should've known better not to do but you're doing it anyway. This is why those who are truly awakened don't come out of the experience with any pride. They come out realizing how

stupid they were. So we have to fight our pride so that the mind can look at its own stupidity and admit that, yes, the Buddha was right.

This is also why those who've gained awakening respect the Buddha more than other people do, because they've seen how genuinely good the goal is. As one of the Thai ajaans said to his students, "If you really understood what the Buddha was getting at, you'd have tears in your eyes every time you bowed down to him."

So the more you practice the Dhamma, the more you respect the Dhamma, the more you see that it is worthy of respect and that that's the best way to repay your debt, so that you can reach the state where, as the Buddha said, you can eat the alms food of the country without incurring any debt at all. He said the merit that comes from supporting those who've gained awakening is way many more times than supporting those who haven't. And it increases exponentially when you go from one level of awakening up to the next, which is one of the reasons why the accusation that arahants are selfish has no ground in reality at all. One of the motivations for trying to put an end to your own suffering is that those who've been supporting you will benefit greatly.

So we start out indebted in one way. We take on a better set of debts that'll get us to the point where we can be totally free of any kind of debt at all. That's just one aspect of the freedom that lies at the end of this path.