

Preserving the Dhamma

Before I came to Norway I had the great privilege of talking to the head of our Monastic Order, Luang Por Liem. He is a monk for whom I have huge respect. Although I cannot remember verbatim much of what was said I still thought to take the risk of misquoting him in order to recount some of the conversation. I see it as more important now than I realised at that time. When we met I had been travelling and teaching a lot, and many of the places I had visited had been showing an interest in setting up monasteries.

He was concerned that I was trying to do too much, helping all these people take forward their visions. It also transpired that there was a developing shortage of monks within the Order in Thailand and a growing concern that we would try to spread ourselves too far. He was advising caution, saying we needed to look after ourselves and our meditation practice to preserve the strength of the Monastic Order. Luang Por Liem himself has the reputation of being somewhat invincible, showing no sign of stress even with over 300 monasteries under his direction so it was interesting to hear him talk like this. I realised that these clear priorities were no sign of weakness but part of this strength. Talking about the possibility of developing new monasteries he said very firmly, “slow is good”.

All this can seem to go in the other direction than the aspiration of spreading the Dhamma far and wide for the sake of all beings, and yet perhaps his next comment was the solution, “Always try to encourage the lay people to come to you rather than you going to them.” Then he talked about the importance of pulling people out of their situation into the most conducive environment for the teaching of Dhamma. The impression I was left with was more than this, however. He often talks about the Dhamma as going in the opposite direction to the ways of the world. There was an overall sense that the whole job of teaching was to pull people in this direction rather than trying to apply the teaching to people's worldly lives and situations.

The second form is very much the one the teaching is taking these days. It seems to me that there is the danger that the hugely precious essence of it all gets lost. Either that or people are given the impossible task of trying to go in two different directions in life by teachers who tell them they can have the best of both worlds, when in fact they cannot.

But what about the situation where people cannot change their situation so much? Even then their hearts can still shift, they might be stuck in the office but their hearts can be in the forest. That makes all the difference...

I offer this for your reflection.

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