

A Classic Buddhist Story: The Karmic Retribution of Selling Oneself in Exchange for Making Offering to the Three Jewels

Once upon a time, there was a couple living in extreme poverty. One day, the man, Jiyiluo, saw his master go to a temple to make offerings to the Three Jewels [triratna] and he was touched by his master. After he came home, he sighed with emotion and burst into tears. His wife asked him what happened.

“I saw my master make offerings to the Three Jewels today,” replied Jiyiluo. “He is already equipped with immense merits and virtues, yet he continues to expand his merits and virtues by making offerings to the Three Jewels. His future merits and virtues can be foreseen to be enormous and vast! We are so poor because we didn’t accumulate and cultivate merits and virtues in our past lives, and now we finally have the opportunity to make offerings to the Three Jewels (i.e., the Buddha, the Dharma, and saṅgha) in this life but we cannot afford to do so. It is not hard to imagine that our future lives will be even poorer. Thinking about that makes me shed tears.”

His wife understood and said, “Darling, don’t feel sad. You can trade me to get some money to make offerings to the Three Jewels.”

“If I sell you off, I will be alone by myself being friendless and helpless,” said Jiyiluo. “To live alone like this is meaningless!”

“How about trading both of us in exchange for the money to make the offerings to the Three Jewels? Both of us can be slaves of another family. The problem can then be solved!” suggested his wife.

“That is a good idea. My wife is so smart!” thought Jiyiluo.

The next day, the couple found a household to borrow some money from with a condition that if they could not repay the money in seven days, they would come back and work as their slaves. They took the money, went to

to the temple and reserved a date to make offerings to the Three Jewels. After they returned home, they started preparation for the offerings. They encouraged each other by saying, “We now understand the importance of accumulating merits and virtues. Although we will lose our freedom in the days to come in this life, we can at least make the offerings to the Three Jewels with our own will and be freed from the hardships of this world in the future.”

Something happened, however, on the sixth day—the king was thinking of going to the temple the following day to make offerings to the Three Jewels. He sent his entourage to inform the receptionist of the temple of his arrival on the following day.

“I am sorry! A couple has already reserved the date for making offerings to the Three Jewels,” replied the receptionist.

The entourage tried very hard to convince the receptionist and stressed the fact that this was the king’s wish but to no avail so he had no choice but to report back to the king.

The king was very unhappy and thought, “I am the king of this country. How dare the couple compete with me for the day of making the offering!” The king ordered the entourage to find the couple and asked them to reschedule their date of offering.

“As much as we would like to, but there is really no way for us to change the date of offering!” the couple replied. They would not compromise even after the entourage attempted to negotiate back and forth three times.

The king was very angry and thought, “How dare my own countrymen compete with me!” He decided to visit this couple in person. The queen, by the king’s side, also found it unbelievable so she wanted to go along and find out who would dare to oppose the king’s order.

The king and his mighty contingent headed for the house of Jiyiluo. Jiyiluo was at home preparing the offerings to the Three Jewels so he did not go to work. As soon as the king saw Jiyiluo, he immediately yelled and reprimanded him, “How dare you reserve the same day for making offerings to the Three Jewels as I do! Do you know your life is in my hand?”

“Your Majesty, I dare not! But I have no choices as I do have unspeakable difficulties. Tomorrow is the only time left for us to make the offerings to the Three Jewels and we are afraid that we will have no other opportunities after tomorrow,” answered Jiyiluo.

“What do you mean? Speak up!” asked the king.

“Both of us are very poor in this life because we did not accumulate and cultivate merits and virtues in our past lives. In order to put an end to our poverty, we want to take this opportunity to accumulate merits and virtues, and the best way of accumulating enormous merits and virtues in this world is to make offerings to the Three Jewels. Therefore, we decided to borrow money from another family to make such offerings. Since we are unable to pay back the loan, we have to work as slaves for them as a collateral. We will be their slaves after tomorrow because tomorrow is the last day for repayment.

“Since we didn’t know Your Majesty wanted to offer to the Three Jewels on the same day, we could not help but fight with utmost efforts and our life for our only chance. I sincerely hope that Your Majesty can understand,” replied Jiyiluo.

After listening to Jiyiluo, the king felt sorry for them and felt sad that there was such a big difference of merits and virtues among sentient beings. At the same time, he praised Jiyiluo that it was very rare and precious that they traded themselves in exchange for offerings to the Three Jewels under such hardship.

“Both of you are really wise! You know the suffering of poverty and its cause, and understand how to replace the impermanent physical body and wealth with the permanent body and wealth as taught by the Buddha. You are people who really understand the Buddha’s teachings!” praised the king. The king and the queen took off their robes and ornaments and rewarded the couple. The king also granted the couple lands measured to ten villages so that they could have their source of income without having to work.

This story tells us that if one cultivates and accumulates merits and virtues wholeheartedly with utmost sincerity, the karmic reward [vipaka] of the present and future lives will be inconceivable.