



The False Duality Between "Job" And "Service", by Zilong Wang

Around the time when I set off for Asia in July, two of my dearest friends/teachers both went from full-time volunteer work to taking full-time jobs. Their decision to return to the "system" really shook me up, and made me review my assumptions around work and service.

Until then, I was not even aware that I have been holding the following assumptions: "to serve fully, one has to quit his job"; "to be the change, one has to disconnect from the dominant system"; "the more distant and opposed to the dominant system, the more virtuous one is." In my mind, I had created an unnecessary duality between "holding a job" and "living to serve".

Perhaps by being around some hard-core activists, I have been influenced by some sort of "service fundamentalism": in order to truly grow in service, you must quit your job, lose your visa, burn your passport, give away all your money and possessions, move to an impoverished and violent neighborhood, become a strict organic vegan localvore -- and maybe grow a beard; anything short of that would be pointless.

Little did I noticed the subtle ego and the "arms race of purism" embedded in these assumptions; nor was I aware of the violence in my monopolizing "what service should look like".

In the past nine months of the pilgrimage, almost everywhere I go, I am supported by the charity of householders to provide for my worldly needs. Who am I to say that my way is more virtuous and pure? Am I outsourcing my "dirty work" to others, while wearing my "detachment" as a badge of honor?

As I open my eyes to the "thousand ways to kneel and kiss the ground", the following has become clear.

First, it is impossible to sever all ties with the dominant system, unless we withdraw entirely from society. It would be hypocritical to measure one's virtue by one's degree of disconnection with the System.

Second, it requires more humility and skillfulness to serve from within the system. Humility, because there is no instant moral high ground to claim, no subtle affirmation derived from austerity. Skillfulness, because one is forced to learn to hold paradoxes, to listen to the different voices, to develop expedient means, and find the nooks and crannies to "sneak in" seeds of change.

I used to flatter myself by thinking that I quit my job because the industry was not addressing the root cause -- "how righteous of me!", said the ego. But now, I am realizing that it was me who was not capable to "serve from wherever I am". If it is possible for a butcher to abide by the Dao as he carves up oxen, then we might be expected to at least make an attempt to cultivate in nice offices :)

Third, there are great benefits to "have a foot in both worlds". The conventional work (paid work in public/private/NGO sectors) helps to keep us grounded in reality, and develop "efficiency tools". The service/volunteer work helps us remember the ultimate purpose of life, and develop "heart tools". They complement each other.

Ultimately, the practice is to serve from wherever we are. No one form of service is superior and holier than another. We are all placed in the grand scheme for a reason.