

Ask wisely

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Once there was farmer who worked hard every day to provide the bare necessities for his family. He was a very simple person who asked nothing from anyone, even when they were in hard times, but worked harder and tried to help others instead. He had a wife and two children; the eldest was a son and the youngest, a daughter.

The farmer also served a monk who lived just on the outskirts of the village. Though this monk never asked for help, the farmer thought it was a good thing to be allowed to help and at the end of each day's work, he would stop by the monk's cottage and take care of his little garden where he grew some vegetables to eat. The farmer never attended any of the monk's talks or asked him for anything—he just served quietly, cleaned up a little and went home to his family after that. He served the monk with the same, if not more, dedication he had to his own little plot and never missed his work there, even when he was a little sick.

This went on for years and the monk would just smile at him and offer him some of the vegetables though very little grew in his garden anyways. They never spoke much but one could see a wonderful feeling for each other in both.

Hard times came upon the area's farmers as less rains came upon the area for the second year. The farmer changed his crops to adjust to the weather and started working in another farmer's larger field to make ends meet—all this without stopping to diligently serve the monk each day. He would get home quite late after all his work and still delight in spending time with his family, comforting them that better times would surely come soon and to keep faith.

But, things got worse and now, it was the third year that they had less rain than needed for the fields and the ground was starting to dry up in patches here and there. The neighboring farmer could not afford to pay him for his extra work there and he and his wife started skipping meals so the children could eat. This got a little too much for his wife and she pushed him each day to ask help from the monk who he was still serving 'without pay' each day. He told her that was not right and being allowed to serve was the already his 'pay and reward' and that one should never even entertain a thought of expectation as the spirit of service would be lost.

So this went on and things did not improve. His wife was getting more and more boisterous each day and pushing him to ask the monk for help, telling him that she had heard the monk had some powers to help and change their dire situation—at least for the children's sake. Since they lived in a small one room hut, she would point to the children who were getting thinner and ask him what father would allow that to happen when there was still a way. The good farmer told her that other families had it worse and they were at least able to eat once a day and to be patient—but his emboldened wife would have none of it. Her mind was set on “this monk can do something” to which she added “that monk must do something or he is a thief—taking your labor for years and sitting silently, knowing that we are suffering”. Her tone changed each day as she ratcheted up the rhetoric and then one day, she gave him the ultimatum: “Either you go and ask that thief of a monk to do something or I will leave with the children and...”.

This weighed heavily on the farmer as he looked at his children, and he left the hut, saddened at what he had just heard. He could not take himself to the monk as he knew that the monk barely had enough since he gave most of what was available to the other villagers. The farmer wondered what he could ask of a person who slept on the floor of a hut with just enough floor space for one grass mat and slept with his arm as a pillow, and wore a patched robe as his only clothes. Besides, the monk knew of everyone's pitiful condition, and some had it even worse, and would offer prayers for all. All this weighed heavily on the farmer but somehow, his feet started walking towards the monk's hut.

The monk greeted him warmly and asked him why he had come early that day, and if everything was okay. The farmer just smiled and said that he wanted to work a little more in the monk's garden. Sensing something was quite wrong, the monk asked him to share what was on his mind. The farmer was very embarrassed and after prostrating, narrated the situation, using the most respectful and humble words. “My wife has given me an ultimatum and told me to ask your kind help or she would leave with the children today,” said the farmer.

The monk thought hard and deep and told the farmer, “Yes, it is true that I have a way to help but though it may seem to alleviate your situation temporarily—it will cause interminable trouble and this is why I have never even thought to use it. I think these hard times are a karmic purging, as you are all good people, and we need to find a way to pull through this without losing faith in God and goodness,” said the monk.

The farmer just kept repeating his wife's ultimatum. When one starts thinking of something or repeating something—one starts believing in it more and more and gets caught up in it. Till now, the farmer was repeating 'his wife's words' but this changed and he soon began asking for the help the monk spoke about, as temporary help was better than no help and he would not overuse it. The monk cautioned him that this was not possible as it was a genie who, when once unleashed, must be kept very busy doing things or he would turn upon the farmer and his family and it would be almost impossible to reverse it.

Hearing about a genie, the farmer started thinking about all the work he could get done, including drilling a well and, "I know so many ways to keep a genie quite busy. There is so much to be done—I will keep him so busy, this 'turning on me' would not even be possible." The farmer was getting all caught up in his thinking and now brought up his years of service as leverage and asked, "Am I not entitled to this genie, monk?" The monk smiled as he knew how the simple farmer was caught up in his own frenzy, and this had gained momentum to the point of insistence.

"Okay, if you insist; but I must warn you that this genie, once unleashed from the lamp, must constantly be kept busy—and I mean constantly or he will turn on you and your family and destroy you. Please rethink this, as I do not know a way to reverse the genie back into the lamp and know the havoc that can come upon your family. Ask wisely," said the monk.

"I have thought about things for a while and I must have this genie—I feel sure I can keep him quite busy and can see my fortune changing already. Please do what is necessary to unleash the genie. I am certain about this and will not have it any other way," said the farmer.

"Since you are set on it, I will release the genie to you. You have to keep him as busy as he wants to be or he will turn on you and your family and destroy you. There is no way to put the genie back in the lamp once released. Do you understand this very clearly?" asked the monk.

"Yes, I have more than enough to keep an army of the most energetic genies busy for a millennia," said the farmer.

"Okay. Also, I will not need your services here anymore—you will have your hands very full with what you have asked for. Now, sit here by me and repeat the prayers I am reciting—slowly but clearly," said the monk.

After prayers were offered, the monk looked at the brass lamp and invoked the genie who appeared at once and bowed to the monk reverently and asked for orders.

“Genie, thank you for honoring my request and appearing. Now, please go with this farmer and do his bidding. I have informed him of the terms and he is well aware that he is to keep you as busy as you would like, and he knows the consequences of not doing so,” said the monk.

The farmer, prostrated to the monk and thanked him. Then, turning to the genie he asked him to follow him home. The genie offered to fly him on his back to save time and so they both reached the farmer's hut in an instant. His whole family came out to see this marvel and the farmer briefed them about the genie who would end all their suffering, but implored them not to make mention to others as misuse could create a disaster.

His wife at once took charge of the genie and had him prepare a banquet for the family. Next, the farmer took charge: “Now please fix the hut and make it perfect. Kindly drill a well so deep that we always have the best water year round even if there is a drought.”

In this manner, the farmer, his wife and even the children made all kinds of requests which the genie fulfilled quickly. Soon, the requests changed to orders and ‘please’ and ‘kindly’ fell away, as familiarity breeds contempt in all relationships. What was amazing was that each time the genie received an order similar to the earlier one, it was fulfilled in half the time, as he had already mastered the skill. On some of the routine tasks, like cooking a meal or tilling the field, these were fulfilled just moments after they were ordered.

Within a month, the genie started demanding something to do, reminding them that he would devour them if not kept busy. The farmer and his family were feeling the strain and made a timetable of who would keep him busy at what hours and this was to go on 24 hours a day, as the genie said that he would rather be active than sleep—activity was his relaxation and something he found very enjoyable. The farmer and his family recoiled at the genie's words and tried to implore him to take it easy—first as an order, which did not work because the genie reminded them that the terms were ‘to be kept as busy as he would like’ and then they begged him, but nothing worked.

The genie was adamant and now it seemed that the farmer's family was working for the genie, doing everything they could to keep him busy. They could

not even eat without fear of hearing his words, “What is the next order, I must be active or I will devour you all.” The genie had mechanized every task they could think of and worked at warp speed, so fast that things got done before another request was made. Yes, the farmer’s family, sensing the danger, started requesting again very politely—using as many words as possible to buy time till they could think of a new task, and this was no fun at all. Peace was a thing of the past. They were barely eating and had stopped sleeping altogether as the genie demanded activity in all the hours of night, too.

The farmer’s family reminisced each day about days gone by when they had nothing, but at least had peace and no fear. They now had everything they could desire except peace, and they lived in utter fear of being devoured by this genie who meant business. His children had long since stopped going to school as every hand was needed to keep the genie busy. They were all haggard and worn down by this genie that demanded incessant activity and delivered results at astonishing speeds. The genie’s wife implored the farmer to seek the monk’s help and reverse the genie back into the brass lamp but the farmer reminded them of the monk’s warning that it was not possible at all. The genie heard this whispered meeting and laughed at them—reminding them that he was too fond of activity and it was not possible to return to the lamp again and that they would make a fine meal soon.

The farmer’s desperation meter was in the red—his family could only talk in whispers when the genie was very busy and they were running out of ideas to keep him busy. They could not ask anyone’s help as all orders had to come from the farmer’s family. If they asked the genie to work for someone else and they could not keep him busy—it would still be the farmer’s life on the line along with his family. His wife was in the worst shape and longed for the poor and simple days when they had nothing but poverty, and she told the farmer to please go and beg of the ‘good monk’ who had ‘endless compassion for all’ to have mercy on them and find a way out.

With his family keeping the genie busy, the farmer went to see the monk. “Oh, it’s you—what brings you here today?” asked the monk. The farmer prostrated and tears poured out of his eyes onto the monk’s feet which he would not let go of. The monk understood, and standing the farmer up warmly, reminded him that he had warned him not to ask for the genie and that there was no way to get him back in the lamp. The farmer just kept sobbing and promised that he would never ever ask for anything again—except for wisdom—so that he could know better and do better.

Nodding, the monk said that there was *one way*—but before he would proceed, there were a few terms: “You and your family will return to the same conditions of poverty, your simple hut and parched field—everything will return to just as it was before all the new improvements, and you will all have to endure any and all conditions that come upon you with courage—all the while helping others as you did before, with all your hearts. You will never again ask me for anything, and you may or may not continue to serve here—as you prefer—but I do not need your service. Is all this very clear, my dear farmer?”

“Master, you are most merciful and I consider this the greatest act of mercy. Forgive me for such foolishness and all the disrespect. I will listen to your every word and do thy bidding from now on. I should have known that you were already helping me by your earlier reminders about hardship being karmic purging and that conditions were only hard if one suffered internally. Your sagacious counsel fell upon deaf ears once I started ruminating on what others said—and all that petty talk soon became my own and I lost all sense of goodness once I befriended selfishness. I see how only goodness can protect you as it is partners with wisdom, and selfishness brings ruin as it is partners with delusion and conceit. I've seen that less is more and more is less. When we had very little, we had goodness, but once desires entered our hearts, we had restlessness and fear. Desires increase when one tries to appease them and they destroy the senses, mind, energy, health and one's being. I became rude to the genie and ordered him around, forgetting to let him rest or eat himself—treating him worse than anyone could be treated. Oh, master, I do not know where to end as I see nothing but a trail of shame. Please forgive me, have mercy on my family and please show me the way from here.”

The monk heard the farmer's words and once again flashed a smile of reassurance that at once uplifted the farmer. Then, motioning the farmer close, he whispered something into his ear and bid the farmer home to the genie. The farmer ran home and saw the genie pushing his family around demanding to be kept busy or else... at which point the farmer respectfully and politely greeted the genie, much to the genie's astonishment. The genie at once knew something was up, as the farmer was wearing his rags again but was humble and confident once more. The farmer then asked if the genie could kindly help him with one request for which he would be eternally grateful. The genie knew his time was up—everything had already started changing back to the time before he arrived: the hut, field, family in rags and their sense of goodness. He bowed to the farmer and asked for an order.

“Please build a pole that reaches very high but is strong enough for a person with great strength and speed to climb. Once built, please help me by going up and down this pole till I tell you to stop please,” implored the farmer with utter humility. The genie knew that this was the end game, as each time he would do something, he would be twice as fast the next time and he would give out quite soon, leaving for his abode far, far away.

The genie bowed to the farmer and smiled as he saw goodness return and humility in full blossom. His job was done, he also bowed in the direction of the monk and at once built a tall and sturdy pole which he started climbing and descending till ... thunderstorms burst upon the area and ... the genie was gone with the first bolt of lightning as if ascending with them. The storms gave way to sunshine and everything at once returned to just as it was, as though it have traveled through a time warp.

The farmer and his family were overjoyed at poverty's return, as with it returned their simplicity, peace, love and concern for others. Their hut once again leaked and there was much work to be done, but they knew that work and hardship are not suffering, one's disposition to conditions is.

Closing thoughts...

You can find any meaning in this story but I would like to talk about the monk's solution, as the good monk's counsel can help us in our lives today. The genie was the mind with its passions which, once fired up, is very difficult to reverse.

Children: Parents, be cautious about trying to indulge children when they are young as it prematurely activates the like and dislike currents which turn to desires, passion and anger when not fulfilled. We each come with some good qualities and some areas that need to be worked on. It is important to find the way to cultivate children's innate natural goodness as that is where they will look at all things from, and this goodness is their best protection.

Young minds: Conditions are neither difficult nor easy, one's disposition makes it appear to be so. Challenging times are the season to sow the seeds of goodness, as times will change just like the seasons do and you will bear a rich harvest of what is really important. Balance is when all things are weighed against what is really important. What good is even the good if it does not support the important? To thoroughly purify the mind is one's duty and if what we think as good agitates the mind, it can be dispensed with without hesitation.

Seekers: The genie was the mind and as you know, just like the genie, the mind too automates anything learnt, making things mechanical, and then becomes restless. We too soon enough find ways to distract or entertain the mind as it goes here, there and everywhere and makes you face all kinds of thoughts once unleashed. Neglect not the yama and niyama limbs of yoga. Yama is intelligent self-restraint: avoiding what is not good. Niyama is the discipline by which one makes better choices instead. Saucha or purity comes under the niyamas and purifying the mind must be the focus.

The pillar the farmer asked the genie to construct was the pillar of sadhana or spiritual practice. Practice will result in real success only if done with a full heart. Practice must not be a filler of time or even a means to an end, but the end will always be more important than the practice and one will always be looking for something to come. Practice must be wholehearted as it must cross the threshold of mastery of mind.

Asking the genie to go up and down was an order of sadhana or spiritual practice to the unruly mind—not to do something mechanically but to do something fresh, again and again, till we first learn to separate the mind from activity by using the inner intelligence that is aware or that watches instead while the mind's grip is loosened. The going up and down in this story was: japa and meditation—the silent mantra repetition which introverts the attention so one can observe and extricate oneself from the genie or mind infused with energy.

Finally: There are many other lessons here and there in this story; take out of it what you feel most important but get it into practice. Do not be an ATNA person—*all talk no action!* Avoid indulgence in tall talk at the consciousness café and instead *do*—be change and an agent of change. Have focus and determination to unbind the mind. Good health, peace and joy are always there for those who persevere. Above all, train hard with diligence and wholeheartedness without putting anything ahead of training—real training is its own reward.

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