

## *An Apprenticeship in Integrity*

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There's a term that the Buddha often yokes with the phrase "the noble ones" and that's "people of integrity." A large part of the training is learning how to develop integrity. It's not just learning a few ideas or a few protocols. It's a quality of the heart, of your behavior, of your character. And it takes more than just understanding words to develop integrity. You need a well-directed intention, and some good examples to absorb.

There's a passage where the Buddha talks about seven qualities of a person of integrity. Of the seven, two have to do with things that you can learn from books or from listening. But the other five have to do with things you can pick up only by being around people of integrity and trying to become a person of integrity yourself.

The two qualities you can learn from books or from listening are knowledge of the Dhamma and knowledge of the meaning of the Dhamma. You can learn the Dhamma by listening and by reading, and a good part of the meaning you can pick up by trying to figure things out: reading one sutta and then reading another one, comparing what they have to say, trying to get a sense of what the Buddha meant when he was talking about, say, suffering or emptiness or any of those big terms that play a major role in the way he taught. But even here, it really helps to live around a person who has practiced the Dhamma, for it helps to put your ideas about the purpose and meaning of the Dhamma into perspective. Emptiness may seem to mean one thing in the abstract, but when you sense emptiness as it's embodied in another person it can mean something else entirely.

As for the other five qualities, the first is having a sense of yourself: where your strengths are, where your weaknesses are, where you can trust yourself, where you can't trust yourself, where you need to work on yourself. You could look in a whole library of books, you could look through the entire Internet, and you would never find that kind of knowledge. You have to look at yourself in action and you also have to be around people of integrity so you get a sense of where you do and don't measure up—and how they see where you do and don't measure up. It's not just a matter of your own opinion. You have to listen to their opinions, be sensitive to their standards. You have to read not only their words, but also their behavior and their body language.

This is why the Buddha put so much emphasis on choosing a good teacher. You want a teacher who has high standards and holds to them, lives by them. That way you get to pick up high standards, too. The sense of your own strengths and weaknesses—and particularly this issue of where you can trust yourself and where you can't—takes a lot of time and sensitivity to develop. As the Buddha said, you have to be very observant and watch for a long time to gain this kind of knowledge.

Another aspect of a person of integrity's knowledge is having a sense of time and place. Again, you can learn this only by being in lots of different times and lots of different places and being around someone who is sensitive to time and place to see how that person deals with these times and places: when's the time to speak, when's the time not to speak; when's the time to act, when's the time not to act. That's something you can pick up only by being around someone who has developed that kind of sensitivity. And it requires that you be sensitive, too, that you be open to that person's influence. At the same time, you have to learn how to close yourself off to the influence of people who don't have that sense.

Another aspect of integrity is having a sense of enough: how much is enough sleep, how much is enough food, how much is enough talk, how much is too little. You can extend these questions into all the areas of

your life. And again, you can pick this up only by being around other people who have a sense of enough. It's all too easy to fall into a part of society where the values are really, really strange as to what constitutes enough. You hear about politicians who seem to be honest enough when you vote for them, but then they get into a different circle of friends or a different circle of society, and what was enough before is suddenly not enough. They stop being honest because they have to become two-faced in straddling two societies, showing one face to you and another to the society they want to inhabit, where there are different standards for what's worth competing over and what counts as success. So again, you want to find someone who has a really clear sense of what's enough and what's not enough based on the Buddha's reflections on the requisites—how much food is really enough, how much clothing, how much shelter, how much medicine.

Another aspect of integrity is having a sense of groups of people. The Buddha describes this as knowing how to behave around brahmans, how to behave around noble warriors, and so forth. For us, this would include knowing how to behave around upper class people, lower class people, people with a lot of education, people with very little education. How do you talk to people less educated than you so that they won't feel you're talking down to them? How do you talk to people above you on the social scale so they won't feel you're after their money? More importantly, how do you talk with people, how do you behave toward them in a way that you can communicate with them but not get sucked into whatever weird values they may have? Having a sense of groups like this is not just a matter of being pleasing to them. It's also a matter of holding to your standards. How do you not get sucked into their standards? How do you do that in such a way that you're not cutting off all ties with those people? This is a delicate issue. To learn this, you have to be around the sort of person who has that kind of sense and demonstrates it in action.

Finally there's a sense of how to judge people. According to the Buddha's standards, you judge people by the extent to which they're really sincere in wanting to learn the Dhamma. Once they've learned the Dhamma, to what extent are they sincere in trying to understand it? Once they understand it, to what extent do they try to apply it to their lives? Those are the areas where you judge people. You don't judge them by their race; you don't judge them by their occupation; you don't judge them by their age. The whole point of this, of course, is that the standards you use to judge other people are the ones you want to use to judge yourself. To what extent are you sincerely interested in the Dhamma, sincerely interested in putting it into practice? These are values that you pick up by being around people who exemplify them, people who are people of integrity.

This is one of the reasons why the relationship that the Buddha prescribed for a teacher and a student is one of an apprenticeship. The word *antevasika*, which they use for the student of a mentor in the monkhood, is the same word for apprentice in all kinds of occupations. The various protocols of the apprentice—how the student is supposed to behave in relationship to the preceptor, in relationship to the mentor—are very much an apprentice kind of relationship. You live together. In fact that's the word for the student who lives with a preceptor: *saddhimviharika*, one who lives together. You live with your preceptor. You spend a lot of time with the preceptor; you regard the preceptor as your father; the preceptor's supposed to regard you as his son. And you really look after each other. When the preceptor's sick, you look after him; when you're sick, the preceptor looks after you. You learn to get sensitive to the preceptor's needs because you're not just trying to pick up verbal knowledge from him. You want to gain a sense of him as a person in all sorts of situations. What did this person learn from the training when he was apprenticed? What kind of qualities did he pick up?

I don't know if I can exemplify all the qualities that Ajaan Fuang exemplified, but one quality in particular that I really felt comfortable with and I really admired him for, was his solidity in the face of antagonism. There were pressures from the local people to drop this rule, drop that rule, play favorites this way or that, and he wouldn't give in, wouldn't give in. He was solid across the board. If that meant being unpopular, that was perfectly fine with him.

Once he was going to choose the treasurer for the monastery and he finally spotted someone he felt he could trust. But just to make sure, he asked the guy a question. It was an interesting question. He said, "Which would you prefer? To be popular or to be wealthy?" And the guy said, "I'd rather be wealthy because if

you have money you can buy popularity.” Ajaan Fuang liked the answer. Take that and think about it for a while. When you’re dealing with someone who’s caring for the money at the monastery, you don’t want someone who’s concerned about being popular. That sort of person will give in to pressure one way or another to misuse the monastery funds. And sure enough I saw the treasurer have to stand up to a lot of pressure. Successfully. He was a good example to be around.

So learning the Dhamma is not just a matter of reading books and understanding the words in the books. It’s a matter of picking up good habits of observing, habits of walking, and habits of looking, talking. Everything you do is part of the training. Which is why the Dhamma’s not so much something you find in books; it’s a quality of the heart you can absorb over time by being observant.

This is something that’s lost nowadays. People think they can read the Dhamma and interpret it in whatever way they want and then set themselves up as Dhamma teachers. I was just reading recently someone saying, “Well, as we all know, meaning is a construct, meaning is something you create, so everybody has the freedom to read whatever meaning they want out of the texts and nobody can say that anyone else is wrong.” With that attitude, the Dhamma becomes just one more thing to be creative about. But that wasn’t the Buddha’s purpose in teaching. His purpose was to lay out the steps of what’s required to put an end to suffering—what works and doesn’t work. And he learned what works and doesn’t work by testing things in action. Then, when he had tested the Dhamma and tested himself, he taught the Dhamma and set up a social framework to help pass the entire body of skills along.

So the texts are there within a context. The teachings of the Dhamma, the rules of the Vinaya, are all in this context of the apprenticeship: picking up qualities of the heart, picking up a sense of values, from being around someone whose behavior is Dhamma. After all, the whole idea of putting an end to suffering is a very strong statement of values right there—that this is *the* important issue in life. When the Buddha was talking about the four noble truths, he wasn’t just telling us information about the four noble truths. He was asserting a value, that this is the most important way of looking at things to help attain the most important goal you can set for yourself: putting an end to suffering. So to understand him, you have to understand not only the words he uses to describe suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation, you have to understand why all this is important, why he gives this such high priority.

When Westerners first encountered the texts out of context, they’d say, “Oh, this is a very selfish, very narrow approach to spiritual life.” But my experience of going to Thailand and living with the ajaans was these were not selfish or narrow people at all. They really had something special and they wanted to share it. This was evident in everything they did.

So there’s the aspect of the Dhamma that you can pick up only by being around people who’ve trained in the Dhamma, who have been trained by their teachers who in turn were well-trained: people who’ve been willing to apprentice themselves, to pick up the values. In the past, this aspect of direct personal example was highly valued, not just in the area of the Dhamma but in terms of other skills as well. There are a lot of old skills that used to be practiced in Thailand that have died out because the teachers didn’t see anyone worthy of passing them on to. And the question of worthiness had to do with the character of the student.

I once became friends with a woman in Bangkok, Paa Phaa, who had been born in the palace. Her father had been the head musician of the royal orchestra composed of xylophones, gongs, and other classical Thai instruments during the time of Rama VI. So Paa Phaa was born in the palace and spent her childhood there, part of which involved learning how to cook from the palace cooks. And she learned her lessons well; she knew all kinds of clever and unusual cooking skills. Even after she had left the palace and had to make a living on her own after her husband died, she developed a really good reputation as a cook. In fact, other women came to study with her. She told me once, though, that one woman in particular—a mutual acquaintance—was really begging her to teach her how to cook, and her response was, “I don’t want to teach this woman; she’s too flighty.” You may not think that flightiness had anything to do with cooking, but her attitude was that she had something really valuable in her cooking knowledge and she didn’t want to waste her time training

someone who didn't have the character to be a good cook. As far as I know, she ended up teaching only three other people how to cook. And her highest praise for me one time was when she said, "You know, if you were a layperson, I'd teach you how to cook." I took that as a huge compliment.

So what we're learning here is not just the words. It's a quality of the heart and a quality of the character. If you're open to learning that dimension, these are the things you have to look at: gaining a sense of yourself; gaining a sense of time and place; gaining a sense of how much is enough, how much is too little, how much is too much; getting a sense of how to behave around different groups of people; and then gaining a sense of how to judge people by their character so that you start judging yourself by *your* character. You need to develop integrity in order to know what integrity is. All of these qualities go together and they play a huge part in the training.

So it's not just a meditation technique that we're learning here, and not just a few statements about the truth. We're learning how to be a true person, a person of integrity, trying to adopt and live up to the same standards the Buddha used when he defined what a person of integrity was.