

Modest, Unentangled, Unburdensome

November 22, 2020

In the principles that the Buddha taught to his stepmother, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, on how to distinguish what is Dhamma and Vinaya and what is not, there are three that have to do with how your practice affects other people.

The first is that genuine Dhamma leads to modesty. In other words, you don't go bragging about your attainments or about how much you know. After all, the Dhamma has nothing to do with what other people think of you. They don't need to know what you're doing, because, after all, the big problem is *your* problem—the way you're causing suffering for yourself.

If you're able to make progress in that area, fine. If you have something to share with others, you share it in a way where you're not bragging. You try to stay modest. But as a general rule, especially in the Forest tradition, you don't go around talking about your attainments.

Ajaan Fuang got scolded by Ajaan Mun one time. He'd gone to stay with Ajaan Mun and he was able to check out the devas in the different hills around there, and apparently he'd mentioned something about this to one of the other monks.

And as Ajaan Mun said, "What you see in your visions is your business. It's meant for you, not for anybody else. What you learn in your practice, what comes up in your practice, if you want to talk about it to someone, talk about it to your teacher, because your teacher's there to help you."

But if you talk about it with others, you run into several problems. One is that you have to ask yourself: What is your motivation for telling those other people? You have to look into that. The other is that they may give you some misinformation. They may have their ideas about what you're doing, and their advice may or may not be reliable. And if it turns out that you have a psychic power of some kind, if the word gets out, you don't have much peace.

There's that story of Ajaan Lee visiting that woman up in the northern part of Thailand. He was on his way through, and a monk had come earlier and checked her out. She had been paralyzed for many years, and the monk told her, "Well, I can't help you, but another Forest monk is going to come and he'll be able to help."

Ajaan Lee was the next Forest monk who came through the area. So the woman's children went to see him and asked if he could come and check out the situation, to see if he might be

of some help to their mother. As he tells the story, he walked in the house and already she was able to get up, move a little bit, enough to wait for him, and then within a day or two she was totally cured.

Immediately the word got out, and people were bringing jars and jars of water for him to bless, and he realized he had to get out of there.

There's a similar story in the Canon. Citta the householder invited a number of monks to his house for a meal. On the way back, it was a hot day. The Pali says that they walked along as if they were melting. The junior-most monk asked the senior-most monk, "Wouldn't it be nice to have a rain storm right now, with a bit of breeze, and a few drops of water, to cool us down?" And the senior monk said, "Yes, that would be very nice."

All of a sudden, a storm came up, with a cooling breeze and just a few drops of water. They got back to the monastery, and the junior monk said, "Is that enough?" And the senior monk said, "Yes, that was very nice of you." They went back to their huts.

Well, Citta had been following them, and he saw this. So after the monks had gone back to their huts, he went to the junior monk, Mahaka, and said, "I saw what you did. Can you do anything else?"

Mahaka looked at him and said, "Okay, take your upper robe off, put it on the porch here, and put a pile of grass on top of it." So Citta, did as he was told. Then Mahaka went into the hut, and all of a sudden a flame came out through the cracks around the door, consumed all the grass, but left the cloth. Then the flames died down.

Mahaka came out. Citta was shaking in his robe and his hair was standing on end. Mahaka said, "Is that enough?" And Citta said, "That's plenty. And if you need any food, clothing, shelter, or medicine, just let me know. You can stay on here as long as you like." Mahaka said, "That's very nice of you to say that."

But as soon as Citta leaves, Mahaka packs up his stuff and leaves—because he knows there's going to be trouble. Either there would be jealousy from the other monks, or the word would get out to the laypeople, and other people would want to come and see his powers.

So if you have something special like that, keep it under wraps. Our problem here is people have nothing nearly that special, yet they like to show off whatever they know, especially if they've been online and have read a lot of things and have lots of ideas.

We've had many quote-unquote ajaans come through. And you have to realize that the reason we read the Dhamma, the reason we study the Dhamma, is to cure our own

defilements. It's an internal job. Other people don't have to know.

As Ajaan Lee once said, "The things that other people do know about are not safe." But the noble attainments are totally internal. So they're ultra-safe. As we chant every day, they're *paccattam veditabbo viññuhi*, to be known individually by the observant for themselves. To be quiet about what's going on in your practice is a good thing.

There's that story in the Theragatha about a novice. The Buddha sees the novice, points him out to Sariputta, and says, "See that novice over there?" Sariputta says "Yes." "He's a novice studying under Anurudda. Every day he levitates to the Himalayan mountains and washes his teacher's bowl in a lake there. His predominant thought is, 'Let nobody find out about me.'" That's the kind of attitude you should have as a practitioner. People don't have to know.

This is directly related to one of the internal qualities that we develop in the practice, which is shedding: shedding your pride, shedding the need to look good in the eyes of others.

If you have something really good inside, it's good enough in and of itself: Awakening is its own reward. The skills you develop in terms of concentration, insight: They're their own reward. Nobody else has to know.

The second quality that affects other people is not getting entangled. If you've spent a lot of your time involved in the issues of other people, you don't have much time to practice.

This is directly related to the internal quality of persistence, because you've got a lot of unskillful qualities in your mind that you have to sort out. The more you get entangled with other people, the less time you have for your real work. Even when you do have duties that involve other people, you learn how to have a sense of *just right*.

The Buddha had some nice praise for Ānanda one time, saying that when Ānanda would teach laypeople, they would delight in listening to what he had to say. He never spoke so much that they got tired of listening to him; in fact, he'd always stop before they felt they'd had enough. He wouldn't drone on and on and on.

This principle applies to conversations. If you have conversations with others, deal with what has to be dealt with. Then stop there.

Our problem is that we start talking, and one topic leads to another, leads to another. It's like a chain. We keep forging new links, new links—and then of course, who gets bound up by the chain? We do.

So if you want to have time to do your practice, you've got to learn how to deal with people in such a way that you take care of what needs to be taken care of: Speak enough so that people

are on good terms and then just drop the topic. Cut things off.

Ajaan Fuang was very good at this. You always wanted to hear more from him. But he had a very clear sense of how much was enough, which usually is a lot less than the “enough” of people who are not practicing. One of his rules of thumb was, if something isn’t necessary, why say it?

So that should be one of your questions. We have the questions from the Buddha: “Is it true, is it beneficial, is it the right time and place?” And you could add Ajaan Fuang’s, “Is it necessary?” That cuts through a lot of idle chatter right there.

And finally there’s the principle of being unburdensome. As monks, we do have to depend on laypeople. After all, we can’t handle money, and there’s a reason for that. As the Buddha said, anyone for whom money is okay, the five strings of sensuality are also okay.

If you’re out there handling money, buying things on your own, there’s no control over what’s appropriate and what’s not appropriate. You can get anything.

We do have to depend on laypeople, so you want to make sure that you place as little a burden on them as possible. This relates directly to the internal quality of contentment. If you have enough food, clothing, shelter, and medicine, okay, you’ve got enough. Don’t sit around thinking about what more you’d like to have.

I’ve heard some people complain, “I think that the fact that monks don’t handle money is a burden on the laypeople.” But again, think about not only the appropriateness of this, given our practice, but also about the fact that people who handle money sometimes start amassing funds. They’re very much in control of the funds, and issues in communities where people are holding onto the money can drive the community apart.

So it’s good that we have these rules around money. As for what little burden they place on people, we have to make sure we’re not asking for money from anyone.

It’s interesting: When the Buddha talked about placing burdens on people—say, when you’re building a hut—it’s always the burden of things they would have to buy, or the burden of too many requests. But requesting a little bit of assistance: That’s part of being a human being, so that doesn’t come under being burdensome. It’s only when you make a lot of requests of people that it becomes a burden. Or when they have to shell out extra money: That’s a burden.

So you have to be very careful. Try to develop as much contentment as you can. And it’s in this way that your practice is in line with the Dhamma, because these external qualities, as I said, relate to internal ones.

Modesty relates to shedding; unentanglement relates to putting an effort into the practice; being unburdensome relates to contentment. All of these qualities that we're developing are for the sake of freedom.

Some people think their freedom lies in showing off as you like to other people, that freedom lies in having as many friends as possible, as many activities with their friends as possible, freedom in being able to impose on others. That's freedom in the world and it's a very immature freedom.

The Buddha's looking for a different kind of freedom, a freedom that comes from inside. It's going to involve developing qualities outside that place some restraint on us, but that simply focuses our attention where it should be focused: If there's restraint on how you behave outside, you have to turn your eyes around. If you're going to find true happiness, you've got to look inside.

So these restraints are for the sake of freedom. The more you appreciate that, and the more you act in line with that, the more freedom you'll find.