

A True Person

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There's a term in the Pali, *sappurisa*, that can be translated in a lot of different ways: a person of integrity, a mature person. Literally, it means a *true* person. The Buddha often pairs it with a noble person. It's the kind of person you want to associate with; the kind of person whose habits you want to pick up, the kind of person you want to become. As he said, this sort of person has seven qualities.

The first is one you can learn from books, which is what the Dhamma is. But of course, back in the time of the Buddha, when there were no Dhamma books, you had to learn the Dhamma from someone who'd memorized the Dhamma—which meant that you had to have respect for that sort of person, because nobody's going to teach you anything things if you don't show respect. The attitude of respect is also born of just being around the person. It makes you more open to that person's influences: the person's ways of thinking, ways of dealing with other people. The more open you are, the more you pick up whatever good things there are in that person's behavior. So back in the time of the Buddha, even that first quality of a true person—knowing the Dhamma—was something you had to pick up by being with a person.

Nowadays, of course, there are books, there's stuff out on the Internet. So it's pretty easy to learn what the Dhamma *is*. But then you come to the next quality, which is knowing the *meaning* of the Dhamma, you come to realize more and more: You don't really know the meaning of the Dhamma until you've been with a person who embodies the Dhamma. Look at all the Buddhist scholars who've read books for years and years, and know all the languages. They can come up with pretty crazy interpretations. One recently came up with the idea that the Brahmaviharas are an alternative path, a complete path to awakening: All you have to do was just sit there and think good thoughts or goodwill, and that would take you all the way to Nibbana. This was from a scholar who'd studied Buddhism for many years, but who was more interested in reading between the lines than in taking seriously what the lines had to say. So just being with the books doesn't mean you're going to understand them. But if you live with someone who embodies the

teaching, embodies the practice, you get a sense of, “Oh, this is what’s meant by *this* quality; this is what’s meant by *that* quality.” It’s an intuitive sense that you pick up by being around a person who embodies it.

So what are some of the things you want to look for? Begin with the next quality, *mattaññuta*: gaining a sense of what’s enough—enough conversation, enough food, enough sleep. You see the other person—and it’s not just seeing the other person. You listen to the person’s ways of working things out for him or her self. The right amount of food and sleep for one person may not be the right amount for another person. Or the right amount for you this week may not be the right amount next week. So you want to get a sense of how that person reads things in him or herself, so that you can read them in *yourself*.

As the Buddha said, there are times when you can indulge in sensual pleasures of certain sorts and they don’t have any impact on your practice. They don’t pull you back, so they’re perfectly okay. As he said, he doesn’t criticize pleasure that is in accord with the Dhamma. But if you find, by indulging in sensual pleasures—though they may seem innocent enough—that over time you’re beginning to get lazy and heedless, you’ve got to realize, “Okay, put those pleasures aside. I’ll have to practice with some pain.”

For the Buddha, practicing with pain meant both physical pain and the practice of contemplating the foulness of the body, which is an unpleasant topic. It’s not one that’s easy to keep at. But there are times when you’ve got to do it. Otherwise your mind’s going to go running wild with its desire for pleasure. So you have to learn a sense of what’s right for you at a particular time. You have to learn how to read your own behavior. And you can develop a sense of this by being around someone who’s learn to read his own behavior. It’s an intuitive sort of thing.

This fits in with the next quality, *attaññutta*, which means knowing yourself: where your strengths are, where your weaknesses are, what you’ve got to work on. If you know you have a tendency toward extreme behavior, you’ve got to calm it down. If you know you have a tendency to lie to yourself—you’ve lied to yourself in the past—you’ve got to be extra on-top of things. Wherever you know your weaknesses, learn how to compensate. And living with a good person helps with this, because you get a sense of where balance is, and how to recognize a weakness as a

weakness.

Kālaññutta: knowing the right time and place for things, when to speak, when not to speak. Staying with Ajaan Fuang, I knew that he had some pretty sharp opinions. But he didn't talk about them all the time. There were times when I was waiting for him to give somebody a good blast, and he didn't. There were other times when it came out of leftfield: I didn't expect it at all. So I had to learn how to notice, "Okay, what would make him make a critical remark, or be very frank about something at some times? And other times, why would he not be so open with his opinions?" This was just one of many things that had to do with the right time and the right place. There was also the issue of the time to be familiar with him, as opposed to the time when he was going to be distant.

It took a while to learn how to read these things. But then I found it was very useful: I learned how to read other people a lot better, too. I found that my dealings with senior monks in Thailand in general got a lot smoother because I had that experience with Ajaan Fuang. When he was sharp with me when I tried to be too familiar, it was only at the right time. Having a sense of time and place: this is a really important part of the practice. It's not something that can be taught in books, but you can pick it up by being around good people.

This connects with the next quality, which is having a sense of how to behave in different groups of people. In India, of course, there were very clear social divisions. There were brahmans, there were noble warriors, there were householders, and people of the lower caste. Each caste had a particular way of behavior that was appropriate for it. Ajaan Lee makes a lot of this point. He says that when the Buddha was with old people, he would make himself old—in other words, he'd think about the kind of things they were thinking about, talk in terms of their language. When he was with younger people, he would adjust his language and his manner to be right with younger people. And even though we don't have castes in our modern society, we do have lots of different groups of people with whom you have to learn how to speak and behave in the right way. Especially as monks, we want to learn how not to be offensive.

Think about the story of Sāriputta's seeing of Assaji. It was simply Assaji's manners that impressed Sāriputta. It made him want to ask him questions. So you want to learn the proper manners for dealing with

different people of different sorts. And if you've got a good teacher—I can't say that I'm 100% skilled in this particular area, but I'm learning—these are important skills to master. We tend to forget that there's a social dimension to the practice. All the time we think of the practice as sitting here with our eyes closed, or doing walking meditation. But there is the practice of how to get along with one another; you have to learn how to get along with all kinds of people. In my life as a monk I've met lots of people from different social strata that I never would've met otherwise: both on the high end of the scale and on the lower end. But you have to learn how not to think of them as higher or lower, simply, "This type of person requires this kind of behavior." You want to speak to their hearts. You don't want your manners to get in the way.

Finally, there's a sense of how to judge people. All too often we hear that as Buddhists we should try not to judge anybody. But you have to judge who you can take as a good example. The sutta on the qualities of a true person says that people who are willing to listen to the Dhamma are a good example. The people who pay careful attention, who try to think the Dhamma through: They're a good example. The people who put it into practice: They're a good example. So you look for people whose behavior is exemplary. They pull you up and make you a better person because you want to be like them.

All of these things are qualities you can't learn from a book. You can't learn from the written word. You want to be sensitive to what's going on inside you, what's going on outside you, because this kind of sensitivity helps you read subtle things in your own mind as well. You learn to be observant, you learn to have a sense of the right time and the right place, and how much is enough in the area of the practice: how much is the right amount of time to sit and meditate, how much is the right amount to walk, how much pain should you sit with so that you can learn from it, when you're ready for that kind of pain; how much pleasure can you indulge in without its being detrimental to your practice.

These are all important questions you have to learn how to ask yourself. You want to be around good people so that you can get a sensitivity to what would be a good answer.

If you want to be a true person, a mature person, these are the qualities you want to work on. They permeate everything in the practice.