

The Buddha's Last Word

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There's a phrase in Thai, *then song baat*, and the story behind it is this. There was a monk who, every day when he went out for alms round, would pick up his bowl, look at it and then take it down and carry it as he normally would. And there was an old man who was hoping to be ordained. He noticed this and so when he ordained, every morning he'd pick up his bowl, look at it, put it down, carry it normally. And someone asked him one day why he did that. He said, "I don't know. That's what the monk did." Well, it turned out the monk was looking in the bowl to see whether there was a hole in it. He held it up to the sky, so that if any light came in, he'd know. But the old man had never stopped to think, "What was the reason for that?" And so the phrase *then song baat* is for someone who goes through the motions but has no idea why he's doing it.

One of the basic lessons you have to learn, when you go to Thailand, is that not everything is going to be explained. A lot of the teaching is meant for you to exercise your own discernment and try to figure it out. And as a result, of course, different people will exercise their discernment in different ways to come up with different conclusions. But in many cases, if the student is well intentioned and has some integrity, whatever the solution he or she comes up with is going to be useful. It's going to be good.

You listen to the teachings of Ajaan Maha Boowa. Some of the details in his explanation of how things work, especially among the aggregates, go one way. You listen to Ajaan Lee, it goes another way. But they're both very useful. Ajaan Lee talks about how you start out with the perception, a *sañña*, and then you fabricate something out of it. Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about there being a little stirring in the mind which is the beginning of a *saṅkhāra* or fabrication, and you slap a *sañña* on it to give it some meaning. And they're both right. Their analysis in each case is a very useful one, something they had to figure out for themselves.

So one of the basic lessons you've got to keep in mind is that when a good teacher does something, there's a reason. And the reason may not be explained. You don't just write it off as, "Well, this is the way Thai people do it." If you do, then you'll go along with it as long as you're in Thailand, but then you'll drop it when you come back. I've seen too many Western monks doing just that. They didn't put the energy into learning that was required. Because you're learning a skill over there, and a lot of skill means you're not just memorizing texts or trying to get the words right. You're learning how to figure out the problems in your

own mind. And as many of the teachers would say, if you get used to having things handed to you on a platter, you get lazy. So that's why some of the teachings are a little cryptic or unexplained. It's for you to try to figure out.

Ajaan Maha Boowa has a nice talk about studying with Ajaan Mun. He'd listen to a Dhamma talk by Ajaan Mun and he'd trip over a couple of phrases—couldn't make heads or tails of them—and so he'd go and think about them for three days. Then he'd go and ask Ajaan Mun, “This point you made the other night in the Dhamma talk. I've been thinking about it for three days and can't make heads or tails of it.” Ajaan Mun would smile a little bit and say, “Oh, so there's someone actually thinking about what I say?” And Ajaan Maha Boowa would say, “Yes, not with any intelligence, but doing my best.” And then he'd tell Ajaan Mun what he thought the meaning was. Ajaan Mun would smile a little bit and say, “Well, we don't come into the world with everything all figured out.” He never would explain whether what Ajaan Maha Boowa was right or wrong—which is interesting—but the whole purpose was to encourage the student to try to figure things out for themselves.

So as you're practicing the Dhamma, you want to notice, because not everything is going to be explained. One of Ajaan Fuang's comments was that as a student, you have to think like a thief. If you're going to steal something from a house, you don't go up and knock on the door and ask them, “When are you going to be away?” and “Where do you keep your valuables?” You have to observe the people. Watch the house. Hide yourself so that you're not too obvious, and then see: When do they come? When do they go every day? Sometimes you can figure out, from where they are in the house, where the valuables might be. You've got to figure it out on your own.

You know that famous story of Ajaan Lee not being able to arrange Ajaan Mun's room properly. Ajaan Mun would always say, “The things are in the wrong places.” But he wouldn't say where the right places were. So Ajaan Lee had to find another way to learn this. What he did was, because it was a banana leaf hut, he was able to poke a hole in the banana leaves of the wall. He'd arrange the room, then leave. Ajaan Mun would go in, while Ajaan Lee had gone around to watch through the hole in the wall. He'd notice where Ajaan Mun would change things—where he would place them right where he wanted them. Ajaan Lee took note and the next day, he'd try to arrange things just that way. Then he went out and looked through the hole in the wall again. Sure enough, Ajaan Mun came in, look left and right, didn't change anything—didn't even turn over his sitting cloth. He just bowed down to the Buddha and said his chants. And Ajaan Lee felt really satisfied that he'd figured out that problem.

So a large part of the practice is learning how to figure things out for yourself, with the conviction there is a reason. It's not just cultural. One of the things I appreciated most about the Thai forest tradition when I went over there, was that it stood a little bit on the outside of Thai society. Of course, all the people there were Thai or Lao, but they had to learn how to step outside the attitudes that they'd grown up with and the values of society at large. And the way things were run was with a set of reasons.

So as you're practicing, keep reminding yourself: There are reasons for this. There are reasons why the rules are this way; there are reasons why there are these customs and protocols we have around the monastery. And it's all there for you to figure out. Because after all, when you sit down with your own mind, there are a lot of things you're going to have to figure out. We're not here just to accept the way things are and be okay with that and leave it there.

The thing about the Buddha's last word—and I mean that last word, not so much his last words. It's a peculiarity of English and Thai syntax that when the Buddha's last phrase is translated, the word "heedfulness" comes at the end. In English, it's "achieve completion or achieve consummation through heedfulness." And in Thai, it's *hai samret prayot ton prayot than duay khrawwm mai pramaad*. In both cases, heedfulness is the last word. But in Pali, the last word is, "achieve completion, achieve consummation": *sampādettha*. The basic message there is that there are things you've got to master. We're not just here to accept things.

Acceptance is the beginning. In other words, you accept where you are and that you are there, but you also have to accept that there's work that needs to be done and that you do have the abilities to do it. Part of the reason why you're stuck where you are is because of some actions on your own part. That's something you also have to accept. But you're not stuck there. The whole point of the practice is to make you change and grow. Sometimes you grow by listening, and sometimes you grow by thinking, and sometimes you grow by developing qualities in the mind. Those are the three ways in which discernment is developed. But the "completion" there is that you want to complete all the factors of the path. You want to complete all the good qualities of the mind. The heedfulness is the motivation that puts you in that direction, because you realize that if you don't act in a skillful way, there's going to be trouble. If you act in skillful way, you're going to be able to get past that trouble, but there is work to be done.

So you look at yourself where you are. What needs to be brought to consummation? What's still lacking: the opposite of *sampādettha*. The adjective for *sampādettha* is *sampanna*; the opposite of that is *vipanna*, which is a defect. Where are your defects? In Pali, they talk about having a defect in virtue, a defect

in conduct, a defect in your views. Which parts need to be worked on? If you're still suffering, that means there's something that needs to be done. There's a defect in your behaviour, so look for that. Sometimes you can see the defects, and sometimes you can't.

Someone once made the comment that our defilements are kind of like ghosts. One of the old ways of checking if someone was a ghost or not was to look in a mirror. If they didn't appear in the mirror, you could be sure they were a ghost. In the same way, when you look at yourself, it's hard to see your defilements—another reason why we all need teachers, because they can look at our defilements and see them very clearly. But they want to train us to learn how to see them for ourselves. Sometimes they'll point them out directly, and other times they'll put us in a situation where the only way we're going to get out of the situation is if we learn how to admit that, yes, we approach things in an unskillful way. We've got to figure out some other way of doing it.

So again, this is why they try to teach you to develop your ingenuity in figuring out problems. Ajaan Fuang's two main words, as I've said many times, were, one, be observant and, two, use your ingenuity. Look at what you're doing, look at the results and, if the results aren't good enough, try to figure out what's wrong with what you're doing. That's how the Buddha gained awakening to begin with. You look at his autobiography. He'd come across a particular problem and he'd ask himself, "Well, why am I acting in this way? When I do this, the results aren't good. Is there another way?" There was a willingness to accept the fact that the problem was with his behavior, and his behavior was not up to snuff. It was not yet consummate, not yet skillful enough, so he tried to figure out some other way of acting. These are the habits that are developed by developing skills.

One of our big drawbacks here in the West is that we're not a society of skills. We're a society of consumers: part of this huge social experiment where they put a box in our house. It keeps telling us that "You're miserable, you're lacking this, you're lacking that, but if you buy our stuff, then you'll be happy." And of course, it creates miserable people: people who, as consumers, expect to be able to say, "I want this this way, and I want that, that way," and the corporations are all too happy to comply. It all comes out of the sense of low self-esteem and not much ingenuity on our part. Simply, we want a quick fix for our low self-esteem.

But that doesn't work in the practice. Try to think of whatever skills you've developed: manual skills, a sport, music, carpentry or whatever. Try to bring the attitude that got you skillful in that way to the meditation. Now, if you don't have any skills like that, you've got a problem. You have to consciously remind yourself, "Okay, I'm here to learn something. I'm here to look at my actions, to learn how

to read the results of my actions so that I can figure out what's wrong and I can change them." This is why so much of the training is self-training, because you're the only one who knows that you're suffering, how much you're suffering, where you're suffering, how it is.

The hard part is learning to look at your actions and see the connection between cause and effect. But if you keep reminding yourself that that's where the problem is, and that your ingenuity is where the solution is going to lie, then you understand again why the teachers in the forest tradition keep setting up problems and not explaining them.

Sometimes you don't even know you're being tested. So watch carefully. Remember: We're here to develop skills, to become consummate, to become masters of the skills. Always keep the Buddha's last word in mind.