

A Quality of the Character

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For most of us, our first encounter with the Dhamma is not through a person. It's through Dhamma books or Dhamma talks, ideas you can read or listen to, and techniques you can try. And we can come up with all kinds of misunderstandings as a result. You have to remember that back in the days of the Buddha, when you first met the Dhamma, you met it through a person.

The Buddha was, of course, the first example, and then there were the people he trained. We have to remember that the Dhamma is primarily a quality of the heart. You see this in the first meditation instructions the Buddha gave to his son, Rahula. He starts out with the principle of truthfulness. That's a virtue. It's not a technique; it's a virtue. Then he had Rahula reflect on his actions before, during, and after the actions were done in a way that embodied being responsible, being compassionate, and having integrity.

Those are the qualities that form the context of the Dhamma, and it's within those qualities that you then learn about specific instructions: how to analyze things, how to focus on the breath, how to develop concentration. But it always has to be within that context of virtues. And these are best picked up by being around people who are virtuous.

Part of those instructions to Rahula was that if you saw you'd made a mistake, you talk it over with someone who's more advanced on the path. This is one of the functions of admirable friendship. This is why the Buddha set up a monastic order to begin with, where people would be trained by being with other people—people you could talk to, people who would watch you—because it wasn't just up to you to decide if your behavior was right or wrong. If they saw you doing something that was out of line, they could tell you right away. This is something that a book or a recorded Dhamma talk can't do.

And you notice that the monks get together every two weeks. They have a meeting. What do they talk about? Someone chants the precepts to remind them of the virtue that holds the community together and that the Buddha saw as the most important thing to pass on.

So always remember that if you read about the Dhamma, you're getting only a shadow of it. Admirable friendship, being with people who've practiced, as the Buddha said, is the whole of the Dhamma. It's through them that you learn about the Dhamma. Of course, nowadays, as I said, you learn about it through impersonal means. But the Dhamma you learn through impersonal means is

impersonal. It's its shadow, like a photograph when you want somebody who's flesh and blood—three dimensions, four dimensions—and to see them acting in time. That's how the Dhamma is really passed on. As you stay with people like that, you learn to pick up a lot of their attitudes, a lot of their habits. A lot of this is by osmosis.

I think of being with Ajaan Fuang and Ajaan Suwat. A lot of the lessons I learned from them weren't during the Dhamma talks. It was seeing them, being with them as they went through the day and dealt with different situations: being with Ajaan Fuang when he was sick, day in and day out; and here with Ajaan Suwat, as he dealt with all the strange things that can happen in America and happened to come up in the monastery.

So if you don't have contact with somebody like that, you have to remember that you've got to be doubly sure to try to be as virtuous as you can. A lot of these virtues are nothing really foreign or exotic, but they're things that people have tended to overlook. A lot of people say, "Well, now that we've got the Internet, the world has changed. And the old way of doing things doesn't apply anymore." That doesn't apply to the Dhamma. To know the Dhamma, you have to be virtuous. You have to be a good person.

The Dhamma is that precious: so precious that only virtuous people can really know it. You can't storm it with a technique or with your reading and thinking skills. It's something that has to be approached with virtue, with truthfulness, with circumspection because, as the Buddha's instructions to Rahula show, you can't just go in with an attitude that, "Well, I know what the books say about this," or "I know what I think about this, so I'm just going to act on that, come what may."

There are times when you act on your best intentions, with best understanding, and if you're sensitive, you realize, "Whoops! There was a mistake." You have to go back and reconsider. When you learn something, you don't put your stamp of approval or disapproval on it right away. You watch. You test it.

You test yourself, too. That's the part of the testing that people often forget. They test what they see in the books, or understand from the books, or hear from a Dhamma talk or technique. The technique on its own doesn't do it for them, so they throw it away. And the fault may be with the technique, but it may be with them. Maybe they're really not up to the technique, not up to the test.

So you have to be doubly strict with yourself—not strict in a grim sense, but just really, really honest. After all, the two prerequisites that the Buddha asked for in a student were: 1) that the student be truthful; and 2) that the student be

observant—in other words, precisely the two main qualities he was training Rahula how to develop. He set an example for us by developing the himself. The Buddha was a very truthful person. He was very observant.

It's always amazing to see throughout the Vinaya, when someone has misbehaved and they get called into the Buddha's presence, the Buddha asks them, "Did you say this? Did you do this?" And there was something about being in the Buddha's presence that people who may have been devious at other times weren't devious with him. They admitted, yes, that's what they did.

There's a story about the monks studying with Ajaan Mun. He would send them off to a cave or a forest someplace, where he sensed that their practice would go well. Occasionally, they would come back with the idea that they were awakened, and he could see that they weren't. But he wouldn't say much. He'd just say, "Well, stay here for a while." Ajaan Fuang was telling me about this. He said it would usually take about three days, and they'd realize, nope, they weren't awakened. It was a mistake. Just being in his presence was enough; he didn't have to say anything.

So remember, the Dhamma is personal quality. If you can find someone who embodies those qualities, you want to stay with that person and let that person criticize you. Let that person observe you. And you, of course, observe that person. Try to be as observant as possible. See what good qualities you can pick up.

Again, with Ajaan Fuang and Ajaan Suwat: Their personalities were very different, and neither of them encouraged me to try and clone their personalities. But I noticed that one thing they had in common was a real solidity, a real honesty, and a genuine determination to do things as skillfully as possible. That's something you want to pick up. If you don't have it in the people around you, you've got to be doubly sure that you learn how to strengthen it within yourself.

As I said, you can talk about the Dhamma, you can sit and meditate, but you can't really approach the Dhamma unless you have these qualities of truthfulness, compassion, and integrity. That way, when you meet up with difficulties, you're not waylaid by them. If you meet with criticism, you don't just chalk it off to the other person's anger. Sometimes people criticize out of compassion, like the image the Buddha gave of the small child who's got a sharp object in its mouth. You've got to do what you can to get the object out, even if it means drawing a little blood. Otherwise, if the child swallows the object, it could die. Upāsikā Kee talks about this a lot. People who are unwilling to listen to criticism are never going to make any progress in the practice.

So all of these things come down to qualities of the character, which is why admirable friendship, as the Buddha said, is the whole of the practice, or the

whole of the holy life. Not that your admirable friend can do it for you, but that you learn an awful lot from that person which you couldn't learn any other way.