

## *Sensitive in Seven Ways*

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There are seven qualities that the Buddha said make you a true person. The Pali term here, *sappurisa*, can mean a person of integrity, or just an all-around well-trained person—a full human being. And most of the qualities deal with things you have to observe for yourself. The seven qualities start with having a sense of the Dhamma and then having a sense of meaning. The word for “meaning,” *attha*, can mean at least three things: the meaning of the words, the goal to which they’re directed, and the benefits of working toward that goal. The other qualities are: having a sense of yourself, having a sense of how much is enough, having a sense of the right time and place for things, having a sense of how to approach different groups of people, and then having a sense of how to judge people as to whether they’re worthwhile hanging around with.

The one quality you can actually learn just through words is the first one, having a sense of the Dhamma. You read up on the Dhamma, you learn what the Buddha has to say. But from that point on you have to use your powers of observation. The other qualities you develop partly through living with people who already have those qualities. In other words, you observe them, see how they handle different situations. But even then, it comes down to your being observant. As the Buddha said, some people are like the tongue that tastes the soup, and others are like the spoon that sits in the soup. The spoon can sit in there for years and have no idea of what the soup tastes like. It’s possible to be around people who have a lot of sensitivity, but you may not be as sensitive as they are, so you miss a lot of things.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha said that, when he was looking for a student, there were two qualities he was interested in. One was that the person be truthful, and the other was that the person be observant. This means being observant of your own actions and also of the actions of the people around you.

These qualities apply both outside and inside. For example, having a sense of the meaning: Some of this you can pick up by asking other people, “What does this passage mean?” But other times you have to practice for yourself. When the Buddha says “concentration,” what is concentration like? It’s not just a word, and the meaning is not just in its definition. It’s in the actual quality of the mind.

When the Buddha talks about being generous, when he talks about having goodwill, it’s not just in the words. You want to see what those words are for—the

quality inside your own mind that they're pointing at. They're giving you pointers in where and how you can develop yourself.

Having a sense of yourself means having a sense of where your strengths and weaknesses are: what kind of things you need to work on, what strengths you have inside that you can rely on to help you with your weak points.

Having a sense of enough: The Buddha illustrates this with having a sense of what's enough food to eat, but it can also be explained in a lot of other ways: how much talking is enough, how much meditating is enough, how much money is enough, how many material objects do you need in order to live a happy life in which you can also practice the Dhamma?

Basically what this comes down to is having a sense of balance. You have to balance many different needs. There's the need for your income, but there's also a need to have time to practice. So you have to look around at the things you own: At what point are they enough? When you have a true sense of enough, you realize that you need less money than you thought you did. This means that you can work less at your job and devote more time to the Dhamma instead. But this point of enough is something each of us has to find for him or herself. You have to be observant.

Having a sense of the right time and place means knowing when to approach people, when to leave them alone, when you can talk to them. Especially when you're going to be critical, when is the right time? You have to learn how to observe people carefully. Look into their eyes, look into the situation around them, and figure out what indicates whether they're going to be receptive or not, and what kind of words you can use that would be helpful.

Years back, I was talking to a therapist. We got onto this issue of when to be critical with people and the things to look for before making critical comments: Is the person in a good mood? Is the person rested and well fed? And the therapist said that it never occurred to him to think about those things. Of course, my thought (I didn't express it to him) was, "How can you be a therapist if you're not sensitive to this?"

But even if you're not a therapist, you have to be sensitive to the people around you. People you have to live with, people who have power over you, people who you have power over: What's the right time and place to say pleasant things? What's the right time and place to say unpleasant things that would be helpful for the work or helpful for the relationship? You've got to learn how to observe these things for yourself.

As for knowing groups of people, this is a matter of having had some experience with different types of people in different situations. When you're with

this group of people, what kind of language do you use? What kind of body language do you use? There are rules you can read about. Miss Manners has books and books and books on manners. But still, a lot of it has to do with just noticing how people around you act.

There's a great story from the book *Ishi*, the last wild native American, in other words, the last one to be brought into white civilization. The rest of his family, the rest of his tribe, had died off. He decided to just let the white men kill him, so he walked onto a ranch, sat down by a fence, thought that they would shoot him, and that would be the end of it—but they didn't. They actually found an anthropologist from Berkeley who knew his language and was able to talk with him. When he was done, the anthropologist said, "Okay, which Indian tribe would you like to live with?" And Ishi said, "I'd like to live with you."

So the anthropologist brought him back to Berkeley and got him a job as a caretaker in the anthropology museum at the university. The anthropologist's wife wrote the book about Ishi, and one of the things she noticed was that, even the very first day they invited Ishi to their house to eat, he had impeccable table manners. He didn't do anything until he saw what other people were doing. And after Ishi left, she gave her husband a lecture on his manners, saying, "You could learn from Ishi."

This is the kind of person you want to be. When you go into a group of people, you should be sensitive to how they do things: how to talk to them, how to act with them. When you look in the Buddha's rules for the monks, you see that there are a lot of rules dealing with etiquette, little tiny things. But they're there because people often get upset by little tiny things. There are actually some laws that you can break and people don't get upset. You can drive faster than the speed limit and people usually don't get too upset. But if you say the wrong thing in the wrong company, even though it's not illegal, that's a problem. So you want to be very careful and observant of these things. It's part of your training, being sensitive and being observant.

Because that moves into the next factor, which is learning how to judge people as to who are the best people to associate with. You want to look for people who have a respect for the Dhamma, people who don't just listen to the Dhamma, but who actually try to understand it. They don't just try to understand it, they try to practice it. And they encourage others to practice as well. A lot of your personality, your character, is going to be determined by the people you hang around with. You pick up their attitudes, you pick up their ideas.

We live in different worlds of what the Buddha calls *sammatti*, which means agreements. It also means conventions and supposings: in other words, our

conventions for how we do things. That group has this set of conventions; this group has these suppositions about what's important and what's not. And when you hang around people, you begin to pick up those attitudes and they seep into your mind. So you want to have a good sense of who the best people are to associate with. Of course, there are a lot of people in the world that you're going to have to associate with willy-nilly, but what the Buddha's talking about here are the people you go to for advice—the people you try to emulate. Be very careful in how you choose those people and be very observant.

So the training of the Dhamma is not just a matter of sitting here with your eyes closed. There are times—most of the time, really—when you need to have your eyes really wide open, to observe what's going on both inside and out. That's because these seven principles apply inside as well. If you're practicing meditation: One, you want to know what the Dhamma has to say about what goes on in the mind, what to look out for. Two, as you're sitting and practicing, you have to figure out how to apply it, to get the most benefit out of it: "When this comes up in my mind, how does it get classed in the way the Buddha describes mental events? Is it something positive or something negative? And what should I do with it?" When the Buddha's talking about rapture, for instance: That word can actually create a lot of false images in our minds. We tend to think of Saint Theresa going through ecstasies. In some cases, people do really have very intense rapture. But at other times, it's just a sense of refreshment—you sit here and every part of the body feels totally satisfied. The energy is just right. That sense of fullness and just-rightness also counts as *pīti*, which is translated as rapture.

So you have to learn how to recognize these things. After all, only when you recognize them can you know what to do with them. The Buddha's instructions always have that dimension. He gives us working hypotheses. And they have the two dimensions: On the one hand, they're not just there as theory for us to think about and talk about, they're actually maps to help us know what to do. And on the other hand, they're not just instructions, saying *do this, do that*. They give us reasons for *why* we should do this or do that—what the benefits will be. Those lists of dhammas in the Buddha's teaching on mindfulness, for example: They're there to help us figure out, when something comes up in the mind, what the most beneficial thing is to do with it. If you recognize that something is a hindrance, it's to be abandoned. If you recognize that something is a factor for awakening, it's to be developed.

So the instructions come with imperatives. Of course, the Buddha's not imposing these imperatives on us. He wasn't posing as a god who could claim, "Well, I created you and therefore you have to do what I say." He's a fellow human

being, but he's an expert fellow human being. He says, "If you want to put an end to suffering, this is what you have to do." He doesn't force these things on us, but if you decide, "Okay, I'm suffering enough," then listen to his Dhamma and try to figure out what it's getting at. That's what the word *attha* means, what it's getting at, both in the sense of what it means and in the sense of the beneficial place where it's trying to get you to go. Then your practice will be a lot more on course.

Another type of sensitivity the Buddha recommends developing inside is having a sense of yourself: What are your weaknesses when you sit down to meditate? Where are the places your mind tends to go that it shouldn't go? Are you lacking in mindfulness? Are you lacking in alertness? Is the problem with the mind, or more with the body and the breath? Learn how to read yourself. Then try to compensate for your weaknesses by taking advantage of your strengths. After all, nobody's going to sit in your mind and tell you what to do. You're basically on a course of self-training. So if you're going to train yourself, you have to learn how to read yourself.

Then the other qualities come in on this inner level as well. For instance, having a sense of how much is enough and having a sense of the right time. Right now, how much concentration is enough? How much pressure should you put on your breath? If you don't put any pressure at all, the mind is going to slip away. If you put too much, it gets restrictive.

How much desire should you have, and where should you focus it? If you don't have enough desire, you sit here and daydream. If you have so much desire, that you're not paying attention to what you're doing, that becomes a problem, too. You have to learn how to modulate that, and again, how do you know? Well, with practice.

What's the right time? When you get to the question of having a sense of the time and place, what's the right time to focus more on concentration, what's the right time to figure things out? One good rule of thumb is that if a problem comes up—you try to get the mind in concentration, you say, "Not now," but if it keeps coming back—you may tell yourself, "Maybe I do have to deal with this." And you deal with it as best you can, given the level of concentration and discernment you have. But if you find that you're just chopping, chopping, chopping away at the problem and nothing cuts through, it's a sign you're not ready for that yet. That's when you need to put up a wall with a sign that says, "Not now! We'll come back to this later." And you get back to the breath.

As for groups of people, remember the committee in your mind. When greed, aversion, and delusion come in, with their tender, sweet voices—how do you deal with them? When they come with their harsh voices—they're yelling at you, and

as the Thais say, they're squeezing your nerves: What do you do? You need to have techniques for recognizing different groups of defilements and dealing with them effectively.

And then finally, which voices in your mind should you be listening to right now? You notice as you're sitting here, some of the voices seem like you, some of them seem like other people—or maybe they've taken on your voice, but they're actually coming from somebody else with who-knows-what assumptions. How do you learn how to recognize when the assumptions behind some of the things being said in your mind are really not worth following at all, and which ones are more worth listening to? In other words, who are your true friends inside? That's something you've got to learn through using your powers of observation.

Sometimes it seems as if the really strict voice in your mind is the Dhamma, but actually it's trying to push you off the path. It's trying to push you so hard that you can't stay on the path and you're going to leave. That's an especially tricky one. But there's also the voice that says, "Well, you know the middle way says not to push things too hard." Watch out for that one, too. Because as Ajaan Maha Boowa says, our defilements have their middle way as well. It's right in the middle of the pillow. The Buddha's middle way means that you approach pain and pleasure in the appropriate way. You put up with some pains because you know that if you give in to the corresponding pleasures, it's going to be bad for the mind. You look at pains and pleasures as part of a causal fabric—and not in terms of whether you like them or not. You say, "If I indulge in this pleasure, where does it lead? If I indulge in that pain, where does it lead? Or if I inflict this pain on myself, where does it lead?"

These are the things you have to learn through practice. It's by finding the middle way in observing all these dimensions that you develop your discernment. The Buddha doesn't leave you totally adrift in learning these lessons. He points out areas where you have to pay attention and gives you appropriate questions to ask—questions that help you learn the middle way for yourself. That's what the Dhamma is for.

But when you know the Dhamma, knowing its meaning doesn't come automatically. I've been reading recently a number of writers who have picked up a little Pali, and they claim that they have discovered new meanings in the texts that totally overturn what everybody thought the Buddha said. And you really have to know the texts to know that they're squeezing the meaning in a strange way.

So it's not automatic that once you read the texts, you're going to understand them. Sometimes you come to them with who-knows-what agenda. This is why

it's good to have training from somebody who's practiced, somebody who's trained. Then use your powers of observation to see what inside you needs to be developed, what needs to be abandoned, what's the right time and place, and how much is enough of a particular practice. How do you deal with the different committee members in your mind? Figure out which ones you should associate with and which ones you shouldn't.

All this you have to learn by trial and error—but you don't want it to be just repeated trial and error. You want it to be trial and sometimes success, success because you're observant. Remember those two qualities I mentioned at the beginning: As the Buddha said, "Let someone come who's observant and truthful, no deceiver, and I'll teach that person the Dhamma." This is how you teach yourself the Dhamma, too, by being observant and truthful, and keeping these dimensions or these facets of what it means to be an all-around human being in mind. When you can do that, you can learn how to look after yourself.

When they talk about carrying the practice into your life, this is how you do it. It's not just a matter of figuring out, "How am I going to meditate all the time?" It involves learning to look at these dimensions in your life, or looking at your life from the perspective of these dimensions, and keeping up the determination that you want to be as skillful as possible in all these aspects of becoming a true person.