

Intelligent Respect

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When I was studying intellectual history, I learned that there are basically two ways to approach a text. One is when you have no respect for the author—you feel that he’s dumb or that he hasn’t thought things through or that he’s trying to pull a fast one. He’s got an agenda, and you’re trying to see through the agenda, trying to point out what’s wrong with the text. That’s not hard. But there’s another way you can read a text, which is to have respect for the author, to assume that there must be some way in which this text makes sense, and then to figure out what it is. See what the author’s assumptions are, and how things build from those assumptions. It’s like detective work. I found that in taking the second approach, I always learned more. It expanded my ideas of how things can make sense.

When I went to Thailand and studied with Ajaan Fuang, one day he said, “Respect is a sign of intelligence.” Part of me was surprised, but part of me understood. The part that was surprised, of course, was the teenager in me. I’d always thought that the smart kid in the class was the one who could see what was wrong with what the teacher was saying. But then there was a part of me that realized, “Okay, when I show respect to a text, I learn from it. I should do the same with people.” It expanded me as a person.

In the same way, when you come to the Dhamma, if you show some respect for it, you’re going to a lot of new things. Now, this doesn’t mean that you come totally unquestioning. After all, the Buddha did encourage cross-questioning when people didn’t understand what he was teaching. He encouraged a culture in which the teacher was open to cross-questioning all the way to the end of his life. The next to the last thing he said before he died was, basically, “Are there any questions?”

But there is a way to ask questions that shows respect. Ajaan Fuang’s explanation was that you take a teaching and you try to put it into practice, and if it doesn’t seem to work out, you try to figure out why. If you’re still not sure, then you go and you ask the teacher. This, of course, is in line with the Buddha’s statement that we learn the Dhamma through commitment and reflection. You hear a teaching and you don’t just say, “Well, I don’t like that teaching. It doesn’t make sense to me, so I’m not going to do it.” You’re not going to learn anything that way because, after all, you come to the Dhamma untrained and you’re here to get a training. A lot of times you don’t understand the training until you’ve submitted to it and you see that it actually has a good impact on you. If it doesn’t seem to have a good impact, try to figure out why.

That's the second part of showing respect. Maybe you've misunderstood the instructions. Maybe you didn't put them into practice well. If you have respect, you try to figure out what other meaning could those words have. This is when you begin to grow. You don't just go with your first knee-jerk reactions. You begin to wonder: Is there another way?

It's like that time when Ajaan Fuang told me to use my *pañña*. Up to that point, I'd always translated *pañña* in my mind as "wisdom." I was at a point where I was feeling very unwise, so I said, "I have no *pañña*." He said, "Of course you have *pañña*. Everybody has some *pañña*. It's just a matter of learning how to use it." So, I had to go back and think, "What did he mean?" I began to realize that the word *pañña* in Pali and Thai is not quite wisdom. It could also mean discernment. So I thought of the various ways in which Ajaan Fuang used the word, and the more I listened, the more I noticed that that was the actual meaning. So, I learned.

When we come to the Dhamma, we have to remember that we come from a different culture with a different way of training. We feel that we already are well trained, we've all had schooling. But we have to realize that, in lot of ways, our schooling has left large gaps. The Dhamma is going to train part of us that hasn't been trained. Western schooling trains the intellect, but not so much the character. And a lot of the values of Western training go against the values of the Dhamma. So, if we have any intelligence, we say, "Well, let's give it a try." Otherwise, you erect obstacles for yourself. Some of them come from the fact that we're operating by Western values. Others come from the fact that we've learned a bit about the Dhamma, and it doesn't seem logical. This is where you have to realize there's a difference between being logical and being reasonable.

Being logical, you start out with certain basic assumptions and then you reason from those assumptions. But sometimes the basic assumptions are wrong. Just because something makes a nice logical structure doesn't mean it's right. Think about the definition of a farce: an illogical proposition carried to its logical conclusion. A lot of people's logic is like that.

Being reasonable, you check the results of your thoughts in practice, to see what kind of actions they lead to and what results from the actions. If the results are bad, you go back and adjust your thoughts so that the results are good. There are some aspects of the Dhamma that may not be logical, but they're always reasonable.

At the same time, there are some simple Western ideas that just don't fit in with the Dhamma. Like the idea that you should be independent, self-reliant: Here we have a community of people who are totally dependent on others for their food, clothing, and shelter. But you think about it, you live in this community, and after a while you begin to realize this is a good community for

practicing the Dhamma because we don't have to go out there and sell it to make a living. We live totally off of people's voluntary generosity. We learn how to keep our needs small so that we don't burden them. And we find that by living off gifts, we can give the Dhamma as a gift, which creates a special environment for learning the Dhamma, teaching the Dhamma.

You may not notice that immediately when you hear about how things are arranged. I know some lay Dhamma teachers who complain about the fact that monks don't handle money. They claim that this makes the monks burdensome. But you have to remember the set of standards the Buddha taught his stepmother about how we can know what's Dhamma and Vinaya. One of them is that it leads to dispassion; another is that it leads to being unburdensome. This is a case where dispassion trumps unburdensomeness. We do burden people sometimes by the fact that we can't buy things. They have to buy them for us. If we go someplace; somebody else has to carry the money. But as Buddha said, if the monks could carry money, then all the pleasures of the senses would be available to them. So, this rule against handling money keeps things in check: There's somebody else who knows what we're buying. So, at the very least, we have a sense of shame about buying things that would be inappropriate. That's a case where things on the outside may look a little bit illogical but they are reasonable.

There are also cases where we simply misunderstand the Dhamma. Years back, we had someone staying here who had practiced in a tradition where they translated the term *sakkaya-ditthi*, self-identity view, as personality view. He had been led to believe that part of the practice was trying to get rid of your personality—learning how to be affectless. And he was upset because the monks around here still obviously had personalities. That misunderstanding was based on a simple mistranslation of the term. Or take the term *silabbatta-paramasa*, grasping at *sila* and *batta*. It's often translated as rites and rituals but *sila* doesn't mean rite. It means either virtue or habit. And *batta* means protocols, practices. Some people say, "Before I came here, I didn't have any rites or rituals that I was involved in. Suddenly, coming to Buddhism, there are rites and rituals. It doesn't seem right." But go back and retranslate the term. Before you came here, you had habits. Here we have other habits. You followed certain practices. Here we have other practices. It's not that people who are totally devoid of rites and rituals have abandoned that fetter. They still have their habits. The thing is, their habits are not very well thought out, or they don't lead to the end of suffering. And same with their practices. Here, we try to make use of habits and practices that are conducive to release. We realize that they're not going to do all the work, but they're an important part of the work.

After all, *sila* covers three factors of the noble eightfold path. We try to develop good habits and good practices, habits that are conducive to the end of suffering. We know when to pick them up and when to put them down when they're finished their work.

We have to remember that the practice is aimed at a goal. And this is where the practice makes sense. Often it's only when you get toward the end of the path that you realize how much sense it does make. This is not to say that it's not supposed to make sense beforehand, simply that you have to think about it. You have to expand your ideas of what it means to make sense.

Now, there is the difference between the culture in which the Buddha founded the Dhamma and some of the cultures in which it's gone through. In India, there was a lot of intellectual ferment, with a lot of challenging debaters. The Buddha had to be very precise in his explanation of terms. As a result, he was very sophisticated in dealing with issues like that. Basically, he was ready for all comers. You go to Thailand, though, and there's less of a tradition of debate. In fact, in schools, students are discouraged from asking questions because it seems to imply that the teacher hasn't explained things properly.

There's that passage where Ajaan Chah is asked about the difference between awareness itself and awakened awareness: Are these the same things? Because oftentimes you listen to him, and it sounds like they're the same thing. But he said, "No. Of course not." Well, it took somebody who had the gumption to ask him. All too often when you're in a monastery like that, you're afraid to ask the teacher. So sometimes there is a greater role for questioning than we might assume.

Coming back here to the West has been good for me. I've learned how to think up reasons for things I had simply accepted when I was over there. I remember getting off the plane one time in Dallas the first time I came back alone. I come out of customs, and there's this guy with long frizzy hair who comes up to me says, "Why are you monks bald headed? Why do you shave your heads?" I took one look at him and said, "So that we don't get lice." The look on his face was worth it. So, there is room for challenging the teacher, for asking questions. but you do it in the context of respect. You listen to the teaching. You give it a try. You say, "This must make sense somehow." And you learn.

I remember Ajaan Fuang telling me that you always have to assume that when the teacher does something, he has a reason. He may not explain the reason, but that simply means that you've got to figure it out: What would be a good reason for doing things that way? I know all too many Western monks who went to Thailand and assumed that the reason the ajaans did things certain ways was just because they were Thai, which meant, of course, that if

you're not Thai, you don't do them that way. You can do it some other way. But often there was a lot more going on.

So there is room for questioning. After all, the Buddha said, if you don't question things, you're not going to understand them. But the questioning comes in that context of committing yourself to the practice, giving it a try. If it doesn't work out, try to figure out why it's not working out. *Then* you ask questions. It's a sign that you're taking it seriously. It's in this way that an attitude of respect is a sign of intelligence. It shows a willingness to learn and a willingness to put aside your preconceived notions and to put yourself out to try something out. When a teacher sees that, he's happier to teach. In this way, you're more open to learning, and the teacher's more open to teaching. That's how an attitude of respect creates the right atmosphere for learning the Dhamma that's really going to be useful for you.