Steal the Dhamma

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When I went back to Thailand to ordain with John Furrow, he told me very early on that I would have to think like a thief if I wanted to learn the Dhamma. If a thief wants to steal something from a house, he can’t go up to the front door, knock on the door, say, “Excuse me, could you tell me where you hide your valuables? Could you tell me when you’re going to be away so I can come in and take them?” He has to watch very carefully, very secretly, notice things. When do the people come? When do they tend to go? Which part of the house do they seem to be most protective of? Then he can figure out how to sneak in, get what he wants, sneak out. The same way as John Furrow said, “I couldn’t expect that he would explain everything to me. I had to notice for myself. When he did things, how did he do them?” It started out with simple things like arranging his hut. Where were things placed? Where did they go? I started putting them in places where I thought they should go, and if I was wrong, he would just throw them someplace else. He wouldn’t tell me what the right spot would be, but I learned, well, that’s obviously not the right spot. I’d run into other things as well. Because, as he said, when you’re out meditating in the forest alone, and problems come up, if you’re used to having everything handed to you on a platter, you won’t know what to do. But if you learn to figure things out on your own, you’ve developed a good quality. In other words, instead of thinking of the Dhamma as a body of information, he was teaching it as a skill. And part of the skill is ingenuity, figuring things out on your own. He himself told me at the time, when he was young, starting out meditating, and the instructions back in those days were just, “Bring your mind down.” This was before John Lee had formulated his Method One and Method Two. So John Foy would meditate, bring his mind down, down, down, down. And he got very depressed, very dull. So he figured, “This must not be right.” So he turned it around, bringing it up, up, up, up, up. And he got too far up. That wasn’t right either. So he tried to figure out what was just right. That was how he was able to get his mind into good concentration. After all, we’re following the path. It’s called the Middle Way. And for the extremes, it’s easy. You just go for the extreme, as extreme as you can. With the Middle Way, you have to be sensitive. What kind of middle is the Buddha talking about? One extreme is indulgence and sensuality. The other extreme is self-torture. But the middle doesn’t mean a neutral feeling. It turns out that in that particular case, the middle is the pleasure of concentration, which can be a very intense pleasure. But it’s not the pleasure of sensuality. It’s something else. We can read in the Canon about how it took the Buddha a long time to figure that one out. But then again, who did he have to teach him? There’s nobody else. So he had to use his ingenuity. This is one of the qualities that you should look for and test in yourself. It’s called attanyu, knowledge of yourself. You’re asking yourself, “How far have I come in conviction? How far have I come in generosity, virtue, discernment, learning, ingenuity?” Four of those qualities. Conviction, virtue, generosity, discernment. Those are the qualities of a good friend, an admirable friend. So to what extent have you learned from your admirable friend? And there’s learning, which is learning the Dharma. What Dharma do you know? Do you know enough to protect you, to give you advice when things get difficult? And then finally, ingenuity, do you have the ability to extrapolate, to think up Dharma on your own? And Jamma Habbo talks about this. He says the Buddhist teachings are like a doctor’s basic tonic. Back in those days, traditional doctors would have a general tonic that they would give to everybody and then they would adjust the ingredients, add this, add that, for specific diseases. So the Buddha is giving us the general tonic. But as for the specifics of our defilements, our individual defilements, we have to figure out what to add. Because we’re not dealing with generic defilement. Generic greed, generic anger, generic delusion. We’re dealing with specific instances of these things. And you have to know how to deal with the specific instances. A lot of that has to do with your ingenuity, your ability to think like a thief, watch, observe, try things out. You might say you’re here to steal the Dharma. Because on the one hand, the Dhamma is proclaiming itself all the time. But we need to have the right ears to listen properly. That’s what we have to train. It requires powers of observation. This is why of the two words that Ajahn Brahm would use in his meditation instructions, more than any other words, were one, be observant, and two, use your ingenuity. Those are the qualities the Buddha developed, those are the qualities the Ajahn developed, all the Ajahns. And even though we’re depending on them for a lot of what we’ve learned about the Dhamma, there’s still a lot that we still have to steal for ourselves. So it starts with simple things. How is this done? How is that done? When the senior monks do this, how do they do it? You have to learn pretty quickly. There are some senior monks you can take as examples, and others you can’t. That’s part of being observant. Then when you find somebody you can take as a good example, you watch carefully. One of the mistakes that was often made by Western monks going to Thailand, is they would see the Ajahn do something or say something which seemed odd to them. And all too often they would write it off, “Well, that’s because he’s Thai.” The implication being that if you come back to the West, you don’t have to do it the Thai way. But as Jeanne Vaux once said, “If the Ajahn is good, he has a reason for everything.” After all, the Ajahns didn’t think just like ordinary Thais. They were the people who had left Thai society, gone into the forest, and come out very independent thinkers, very independent people. So they had their independent reasons for doing things. And your ability to try to figure out what would be a good reason for the Ajahn to say that or do that, may not be precisely what the Ajahn’s reason was. It might actually be better. At least it gets you to thinking. It expands your imagination. So be all eyes, all ears. Watch. Listen. Observe. And that way you can steal some really good dhamma.

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