

## *Honest to Goodness*

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*“Let an observant person come—one who is not fraudulent, not deceitful, one of an honest nature. I instruct him. I teach him the Dhamma. Practicing as instructed, he in no long time knows for himself, sees for himself: ‘So this is how there is the right liberation from bondage, i.e., the bondage of ignorance.’” — MN 80*

When I was a young monk in Thailand, I knew a woman whose father had been the chief musician for the royal Thai court in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The family was never wealthy, but they lived in the palace compound, and that was where she was born. That was also where, as a child, she learned how to cook. By the time I knew her, her palace years were over, but she still had a reputation as an excellent cook. Many women asked to study cooking with her, but as far as I knew, she taught only three or four. Time and again, she told me, she had to reject potential students on grounds of character. One was “too flighty.” Another, “too proud.”

Part of her attitude reflected the fact that she refused to accept money to teach, so she was free to take on only the students she felt like teaching. But a more important part of her attitude, as she explained it to me, was respect for the skills she had been taught: They deserved to be passed on only to those who were reliable enough to maintain them, and observant enough to pick up their subtleties and to apply them to the vagaries of time and place—what kind of food was available, what kind of people would be eating the food.

As I became more familiar with traditional Thai culture, I found that her attitudes were shared by many people who had mastered the old skills. Instead of teaching students at large, they would take on apprentices, accepting only the apprentices they felt were worthy of their skills. This attitude applied not only to the skills of lay life, but also—as I found in my relationship with my teacher, Ajaan Fuang—to those of monastic life. Ajaan Fuang was passing on the skills he had learned from his teacher, Ajaan Lee, and my position was that of an apprentice who had to make himself worthy of those skills. Looking into the texts, I found that this attitude stretched all the way back to the time of the Buddha. The Dhamma he taught was a skill (*vijjā*): the skill for ending suffering. Any student who wanted to learn needed clearly-defined character traits to qualify as an apprentice in that skill.

This perspective is rarely appreciated in Western Buddhist circles. That’s because most of us in the West gain our first exposure to Buddhism in a denatured setting: in a classroom, on-line, or in a meditation retreat. We learn the teachings as a body of concepts, and meditation as a series of techniques for

seeing the truth of those concepts. Rarely, though, are we taught that either the teachings or the meditation involve qualities of the character. Even when we're taught the social emotions of goodwill or compassion on a retreat, they're usually presented as an expression of our innate good nature, with very little notion that strengths of character—such as self-honesty or restraint—might be needed to embody them.

This is in sharp contrast to the way the Buddha himself recommended that people encounter the teachings: in the context of a relationship with a person who embodied admirable character traits, and who wanted you to develop those traits as well. The fact that the Buddha described this relationship as an apprenticeship meant that the teacher had to look for admirable potentials in a prospective student, and the student had to look for similar traits in a prospective teacher, before each side agreed to take the other on.

While this sort of relationship was modeled on the apprenticeships of other skills—such as carpentry or goldsmithing—it wasn't simply a relic of ancient Indian traditions. Instead, it grew out of the nature of the skill that the Buddha taught and trained his students to teach. Training in this skill required more than just memorizing a body of concepts or mastering meditation techniques. It also required such qualities as honesty, harmlessness, and restraint—qualities that were best transmitted through close personal contact, from one real person to another.

We can see this in the Buddha's descriptions of how a person might get started on the path to mastering the skill to end suffering. As he said, everyone's first reaction to suffering is twofold: bewilderment as to why it's happening, and a search for someone who might know how to end it. Because of our bewilderment, our search for someone to end this suffering can often lead us astray, as we look for help from all the wrong people. That's the negative side of the search. But its positive side is that it opens our mind to outside help. This way, when we find the right person who really knows how to put an end to suffering, we can be responsive to that person's positive influence.

One of the most distinctive features of the Dhamma is that it points to the source of suffering inside. In other words, we suffer because of our own actions, and we'll be able to end suffering only when we can change the way we act. To be willing to take on such a teaching—rather than one that blames our suffering on things or people outside, or that promises that someone outside can end our suffering for us—we need at least a glimmer of two qualities of the character. We have to be (1) observant enough and (2) honest enough to admit that, yes, we do suffer from our own actions, and that we'll have to clean up our own act if we want the suffering to stop.

These two qualities—being observant and honest (or “no deceiver,” in the Buddha's words)—were precisely the qualities the Buddha looked for in a student. But they weren't merely signs that the student was ready for the training. They also served as the qualities that the student had to use reciprocally, in order to judge whether a particular person was reliable enough to take on as a teacher. After all, as the Buddha also said, you don't want to

associate with people lacking in integrity, and you can't know whether another person has integrity unless you have some integrity yourself.

The Canon contains many lists of qualities that a teacher should embody, but two stand out. In the first list (MN 95), you look for honesty and harmlessness. To check for honesty, the Buddha has you observe whether the teacher shows any signs of the greed, aversion, or delusion that would cause him to claim knowledge of things he didn't really know. To check for harmlessness, you observe whether the teacher ever tries to get other people to do things that would lead to their long-term harm or suffering. Only when a teacher passes both tests should you place your confidence in him.

The second list comes in the Buddha's description of how to develop admirable friendship—which, he says, is the most important external factor conducive to awakening (AN 8:54). Admirable friendship means both having an admirable friend—a really wise, good person—and trying to emulate that friend's good qualities. And the qualities the Buddha recommends looking for are four.

The first good quality is conviction in the Buddha's awakening—believing that the Buddha really did put an end to suffering, that he did it through his own efforts, and that he did it through qualities that were not peculiar to him. They're qualities that we all have, at least in potential form, simply that he developed them to a very heightened degree. But we can do that, too. What that means is that an admirable friend is one who's convinced in the power of his or her actions, in the power of the mind to change itself in a way that can lead to a reliable happiness, just like the happiness the Buddha found in his awakening.

The second quality is virtue. You want to look for someone who sticks to the precepts and encourages other people to stick to them, too. This second quality follows naturally on the first, because anyone who really believes in the power of action wouldn't want to harm any being at all. This means no killing, stealing, illicit sex, lying, or taking intoxicants. In any situations. At all. As the Buddha says, if you can hold to these precepts without exception, you're giving universal protection to all beings. If you make exceptions, that protection is only partial—and you're only partially protected as well.

The third good quality is generosity. Admirable friends give freely not only of their material belongings, but also of their time, knowledge, energy, and forgiveness.

The fourth good quality is discernment: insight into how suffering arises and passes away, with the primary focus on how suffering is caused by mental actions that can be abandoned by training the mind.

So when you're looking for a teacher, you have to be responsible to find someone who embodies these qualities. This will take time, along with all your powers of observation. And you have to be honest in your judgment. You can't turn a blind eye to a potential teacher's breaches of virtue, pretending that they don't matter. Otherwise, you'll develop the attitude that your breaches won't matter, either.

Once you're convinced that you've found the right person, you have to be observant to pick up his or her good qualities. Not every Dhamma lesson is in words. As Ajaan Fuang once said, a good student has to learn to think like a thief. You can't wait to be told where the valuables are. You have to figure out how to find them yourself.

You also have to bring honesty to the relationship, paying careful attention to the teachings and then weighing them against your own actions to see where your actions do and don't measure up.

In this way, your honesty and your powers of observation get turned in both directions—toward your teacher's actions to pick up good examples to emulate, and toward your own actions as you try to improve them in line with the teacher's example. As these two qualities get developed in this way, they turn into a quality that the Buddha called "appropriate attention."

Just as admirable friendship is the most important external factor in the practice, appropriate attention is the most important internal one. "Attention," in the Buddha's vocabulary, is a matter of which questions you take to heart—the ones you pay attention to and focus on trying to answer. He never taught "bare" attention, as there are no bare questions. However, there are appropriate questions—appropriate for helping to bring suffering to an end—and inappropriate questions, which focus on issues that pull you off the path.

Inappropriate attention focuses on questions such as "Is the world eternal? Is it not? Who am I? What am I? Do I exist? Do I not exist?" These questions get you tied up in what the Buddha calls a "thicket of views," from which it's hard to disentangle yourself. To insist on answering them is like being shot with an arrow and refusing to get it removed until you've found out who shot the arrow or how the arrow was made. You'd die.

With appropriate attention, though, the questions come down to: "What is skillful and what's not skillful? What, when I do it, will lead to long-term welfare and happiness? What, when I do it, will lead to long-term harm and suffering?" As you pursue these questions, you realize that the answers don't stop with words. They lead to actions. And they force you to develop your powers of observation and honesty even further.

The Buddha's instructions to his son, Rāhula, show how to do this in the context of an admirable friendship.

As the Buddha told Rāhula, before you act, ask yourself, "What do you expect to be the results of your actions?" If you foresee that an action is going to cause suffering or harm, don't do it. If you don't foresee any harm, you can go ahead and do it. But look at it also while you're doing it to see if any harmful results are coming up in spite of your original intention. If you see any harm arising, just stop. If you don't see any harm, you can continue.

When you're done, though, you're not really done. You have to look at the action's long-term results. If you realize that you did harm even though you didn't expect to, you go over and talk with your admirable friend, both to develop your honesty in being willing to admit mistakes, and to gain advice

from your friend on how to apply your powers of observation to be more harmless the next time around.

Here is where all these basic qualities of character come together. You're paying appropriate attention to your actions, trying to be honest and observant to make sure that you're not causing any unnecessary harm. And you're depending on the help of a reliable person to force you to be even more honest and observant—to the point where, when you look at your actions and don't see any harm at all, you can trust what you see, because you've been trained to be reliable. You can take joy in the fact that you're making progress, and that joy gives you the energy to keep pursuing the training to higher and higher levels, ferreting out more and more subtle ways in which your actions need to be fine-tuned.

Because this framework of appropriate attention starts with questions about intentions, it gradually moves its focus from actions in general to something more specific: Which intentions lead to suffering, and which to the end of suffering? These are the questions that underlie the four noble truths: suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation. And here again, the focus of your attention is on what you're doing—and what you need to do better. Suffering isn't simply something you passively endure. It's an activity, the activity of clinging, in which the mind feeds off the things to which it clings. Its cause is also something you're doing: You crave either to fantasize about sensual pleasures, to take on an identity in a particular world of experience, or to see your identity in a world of experience destroyed. The cessation of suffering requires that you develop dispassion both for clinging and these forms of craving. The path requires that you develop the qualities of mind that lead toward that dispassion.

This is a tall order, because you'll have to abandon many of the activities you've taken as food for the mind, thinking that the pleasures they gave were worth whatever pain they involved. Now, however, honesty requires you to admit that they're not, and so you have to give them up. And this is where you realize that the principle of harmlessness is not just inoffensive meekness. It requires strength: the strength of restraint, the strength of consistency, the strength of determination, the strength of really being true to yourself, the ability to sacrifice immediate pleasure for long-term good.

This is why this skill can be taught only by people of strong character, and can be mastered only by people who have the integrity to realize that character is a quality they need to develop. And this is why the Buddha recommended that the Dhamma be taught in the context of an apprenticeship, where qualities of character are emphasized so that they can prosper and grow into something solid and true. But that's one of the signs of the Dhamma's true goodness. It can be mastered only by people who are truly good.

But what can you do if you can't find an admirable friend to gain this sort of training? There's one passage in the Canon that, at first glance, sounds discouraging: the one where the Buddha says that admirable friendship is the whole of the practice, or the whole of what he calls the holy life (SN 45:8). By that

he means that without him as our admirable friend, we'd be nowhere. We'd have no idea of how to put our sufferings to an end.

But there's another passage (Sn 1:3) where he says that if you can't find an admirable friend, it's better to go alone. Of course, at present we don't totally lack an admirable friend. We have the example of the Buddha as portrayed in the texts, as a sketch of what an admirable friend would say and do. It's not quite the same as having a real person, because you can't confess your mistakes to a text, and it's all too easy to read your own standards as to what counts as character into a text. But if all you can find around you are people who are lacking in conviction, lacking in virtue, lacking in generosity, and lacking in discernment, it's best not to associate with them. You certainly can't take them as a guide in the path.

Which means that if that's your only option, you have to be your own admirable friend, especially stringent with yourself in developing conviction, virtue, generosity, and discernment, along with all the other qualities of character needed for the practice: honesty, harmlessness, and powers of observation. The lack of an admirable friend is like a deep hole in your path that, with effort, you might eventually get across. But any lack in character is a bottomless pit.