

Thinking like a Thief

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

In Theravada, the relationship between teacher and student is like that between a master craftsman and his apprentice. The Dharma is a skill, like carpentry, archery, or cooking. The duty of the teacher is to pass on the skill not only by word and example, but also by creating situations to foster the ingenuity and powers of observation the student will need in order to become skillful. The duty of the student is to choose a reliable master – someone whose skills are solid and whose intentions can be trusted – and to be as observant as possible. After all, there's no way you can become a skilled craftsman by passively watching the master or merely obeying his words. You can't abdicate responsibility for your own actions. You have to pay attention both to your actions and to their results, at the same time using your ingenuity and discernment to correct mistakes and overcome obstacles as they arise. This requires that you combine respect for your teacher with respect for the principle of cause and effect as it plays out in your own thoughts, words, and deeds.

Shortly before my ordination, my teacher – Ajaan Fuang Jotiko – told me: “If you want to learn, you'll have to think like a thief and figure out how to steal your knowledge.” And soon I learned what he meant. During my first years with him, he had no one to attend to his needs: cleaning his hut, boiling the water for his bath, looking after him when he was sick, etc. So, even though I was a foreigner – barely fluent in Thai and probably the most uncouth barbarian he had ever met – I quickly took on the role of his attendant. Instead of explaining where things should be placed or when certain duties should be done, he left it up to me to observe for myself. If I caught on, he wouldn't say anything. If I didn't, he'd give me a dressing down – but still wouldn't fully explain what was wrong. I had to observe for myself: Where did *he* place things when he straightened out his hut? And I had to do this out of the corner of my eye, for if I was too obvious in watching him, he would chase me away. As he said, “If I have to explain everything, you'll get used to having things handed to you on a platter. And then what will you do when problems come up in your meditation and you don't have any experience in figuring things out and experimenting on your own?”

So I swallowed my pride and learned to take my mistakes as my teachers. Before, I could never tolerate being in the wrong. But when I could finally admit to being wrong, I started finding the inner resources I needed to start setting things right.

Still, the issue of balancing respect was a problem. Ajaan Fuang was amazingly principled, wise, and compassionate, and I could always trust his intentions toward me. As a result I felt enormous respect for him. Nevertheless,

he was a human being with human foibles. Because my Christian upbringing had taught me to reserve my ultimate respect for a supposedly infallible being, I was awkward in handling the occasions when Ajaan Fuang was a little less than perfect. At the same time, I didn't know quite what to do with my strongly ingrained streak of independence. So one day, out of the blue, Ajaan Fuang he told me a story about a disagreement he had had with his own teacher, Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo.

Toward the end of his life, Ajaan Lee built a monastery in a mangrove swamp on the outskirts of Bangkok. The lay supporters wanted an ordination hall, so that was the first permanent building erected in the monastery. When laying the foundations, they placed a concrete vault under the spot where the Buddha image was to be situated and filled it with sacred objects: Buddha relics, Buddha images, amulets, pieces of scripture, and so forth. Then they sealed it up for posterity. Traditionally in Thailand, Buddha images always face east—the direction the Buddha was facing on the day of his Awakening—so the vault was placed under the western side of the building. Halfway through the construction, though, Ajaan Lee changed his mind and decided to have the Buddha image placed on the eastern side of the building, facing west. Although he never offered an explanation for this unusual move, his students are generally unanimous in their interpretation of what he wanted it to represent: the Dharma was going West.

Not until the building was finished, though, did anyone realize that the vault was no longer in line with the image. That meant that people entering the building through the western door would be stepping right over the sacred objects in the vault, violating a strong Thai taboo. So one evening Ajaan Lee said to Ajaan Fuang, "Get the monks together and move the vault to the other side of the building." Ajaan Fuang thought to himself, "That vault is firmly planted in the ground, and the area beneath the ordination hall is nothing but mud." However, he knew if he said that it couldn't be moved, Ajaan Lee would say, "If you don't have the conviction to do it, I'll find someone else who does." So the next morning, after the meal, Ajaan Fuang got all the able-bodied monks and novices in the monastery down under the building, with ropes to pull the vault over to the eastern side. They worked all day but couldn't budge it an inch. So now was the time to express an opinion. Ajaan Fuang went to Ajaan Lee that evening and said, "How about if we build another vault under the image, open the original vault, take all the sacred objects out of the old vault, and seal them up in the new one?" Ajaan Lee gave him a brief nod, and thus the problem was solved.

"And that," Ajaan Fuang concluded, "is how you show respect for your teacher."