

Easy to Instruct

July 28, 2007

There are a couple of stories related to the chant we did just now, the Karaniya Metta Sutta. It starts out: “This is what should be done by one aiming at a state of peace.” I happened to be sitting in on a course one time that was focused on translating the sutta. They took it apart line by line, compared different translations, and the group came up with what they liked, their favorite translation of each line. With that first line—this is what should be done—someone in the group raised his hand: “Wait a minute, I thought Buddhism didn’t have any *shoulds*.” They spent the whole morning discussing that point.

It’s not as if the Buddha was a lawgiver enforcing people to do things. Everything in his teachings is voluntary. Take the altar here in front of the room as a symbol. It doesn’t have the clean aesthetics, say, of a Zen altar. It looks pretty cluttered. It’s a group effort. Nobody designed that it was going to be this way. People saw that there were empty spaces on the tabled and they brought things in. It’s entirely voluntary and entirely a group effort. We’re all here voluntarily. Nobody forced us to come, nobody threatened us with fire and brimstone. So that way you might say there are no *shoulds*.

But notice the structure of that sentence: “This is what should be done by one who aims at a state of peace.” In other words, *if* you want peace, this is what you have to do. It’s a simple statement of cause and effect. And you have to have respect for cause and effect. You can’t just dream up your own way of practice, saying, “I like this, I like that.” The spiritual life is not a smorgasbord where you can choose only what you like. Some things work, other things don’t. If you want to get results, you submit to what works. You have to put your likes and dislikes aside.

Someone once said that the great way is not hard for those with no preferences. Now, to follow the great way, you do need a preference for wanting to get results. But if you learn to put your likes and dislikes off to one side and see what actually does get results, then if you find things you don’t like to do but they give good results, you find some way to make yourself like them, willing to do them. As for the things you like to do but don’t give good results, you’ve got to learn to put them aside. And again, use your wisdom to make yourself willing to put them aside. That’s the kind of *should* we have here in practice.

The second point was the line that says, “We should be easy to instruct.” Now, if you’re ever been a teacher, you realize that there are two qualities you look for in

a student who's easy to instruct: One, the student is respectful and obedient; and the two, the student is smart and knows how to think independently. Those two sets of qualities very rarely go together, yet they're both essential for the practice.

I look back at the students I've had who haven't worked out for one reason or another, and they tend to fall into extremes. One was a student who wanted to be told precisely what to do and not have to think or have responsibilities—just be told to do *x* and then just *do x* without having to think about it, no questions asked—and the teacher was responsible for guaranteeing results. That doesn't work. You have to learn how to check what you're doing yourself and see what's working and see what's not working, and then figure out why. You have to be responsible as well. That's how you develop your powers of judgment.

The other extreme, of courses, is the person who doesn't like to be told what to do at all, who wants to be left totally free.

Somewhere in between those two is the right attitude. And one of the tricks of learning how to practice well is to find that right balance.

Year back, when I was first staying with Ajaan Fuang and, being a typical American, I had a lot of problems dealing with the hierarchy and issues of respect, I'd swing back and forth between the two extremes. I thought to myself, "Okay, I'm in this hierarchy, I'll just do what I'm told and not think." Well, that didn't work. Ajaan Fuang would get after me for not using my head. And when I did use my head, he got after me for not listening to what he had to say.

After a while, it became obvious to him that I was having problem finding the right balance. So he told me a story of his time with Ajaan Lee. There was one time, toward the end of Ajaan Lee's life, when he was building a new monastery on the outskirts of Bangkok, Wat Asokaram, and the temple committee decided they wanted an ordination hall. It's typical in Thailand that ordination halls tend to be on an east-west axis, the Buddha on the west side of the ordination hall facing east, like the one we have here. This may not be precisely east-west, but it's pretty close. So they lay the foundation for the ordination hall. What's typically done in Thailand is that, under the spot where the Buddha image is going to be, they make a concrete box and put all kinds of auspicious things in there—passages of the Dhamma, little Buddha images, relics—and seal it up, kind of like a cornerstone. So that's what they did in Wat Asokaram.

But as the building progressed and the time came to put the Buddha image in the hall, Ajaan Lee changed his mind. He wanted to have the Buddha image on the east side facing west. As Ajaan Fuang once told me on another occasion, that was to symbolize the fact that the Buddhism is going to go West. But anyway, when the hall was done, someone realized that spot where they had put that box

full of auspicious things was not under the Buddha image anymore. In fact, it was under a spot where people were going to be stepping over it, which is a real taboo in Thailand. You don't step over sacred things.

So they brought this to Ajaan Lee's attention. He turned to Ajaan Fuang and said, "Tomorrow, get all the monks in the monastery under the hall"—there was a kind of crawlspace there—"and move the box." Ajaan Fuang thought to himself, "There's no way we're going to be able to move that box, it's buried deep in mud." But he also knew that if he said there was no way to do that, Ajaan Lee would have said, "If you don't have the conviction I'll find someone else who does."

So the next morning, Ajaan Fuang got all the able-bodied monks and novices in the monastery down in the crawl space under the ordination hall, with lots of ropes and crowbars. They tied the ropes around the box, tried all kinds of ways of moving the box, but after a full day's effort, they hadn't been able to get it to budge an inch.

That's when Ajaan Fuang went back to Ajaan Lee and said: "How about if we make a new box under where the Buddha image is now, open up the old box, remove all the sacred objects from the old box, and put them in the new box and seal that one up?" Ajaan Lee nodded his head just a little bit and said, "Okay, fine."

At the end of the story, Ajaan Fuang said, and "That's how you show respect for your teacher. That's how you're easy to instruct."

You do what you are told, but if it doesn't work, you come back and say, "I tried it, but it doesn't work." Then you offer an idea about what might work, and then you can discuss it. That way, your responsibility for practice becomes a two-way street. You show that you're willing to put in the effort and put your mind to solving your problem.

There's a spot where the Buddha says that admirable friendship is the whole of the holy life. This practice is not something you can do alone. As you saw today at the ordination, there wasn't just one person there, making up his mind to be a monk. There was a whole community to support him. This is the way it is, not just in ordinations, but with every aspect of the practice: For each of us to practice, we depend on other people in one way or another.

So learn to find the right balance between what you want to do and what other people suggest you should do. That's one of the big issues in the practice. It's going to be awkward, but try to learn from experience what the proper balance is, where every side is acting voluntarily, and every side is taking responsibility. That's how we help one another along.

We have to respect one another's voluntary spirit but, at the same time, we have to respect what we learn about cause and effect within our own practice, and learn how to develop the proper balance.