

Willing to Learn

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The Buddha talks a lot about the process of becoming, which is a combination of two things: one, a particular world of experience; and two, your identity in that world, your sense of who you are, what your capabilities are. And the two are very dependent on each other.

You see this particularly when you go into a new place where the language is different, culture is different, and all of a sudden you become very sensitive to the fact that who you are is not as clear as it was back in your old world: which of your talents from the old world are still useful and which ones are going to have to be changed if you're going to live happily in this new world.

The same process happens when you come to the Dhamma. It's like a different world, a different culture. The Buddha actually calls it "the culture of the noble ones." And a lot of its assumptions are very different from the world of secular life out there. Here we have rebirth; we have karma. The training of the mind is the big value. Money is not the big value. The way people interact is a little bit different.

And so in the beginning, it's very normal to feel awkward. There are things you're enthusiastic about but other things you're very unsure about. And you're going to be changing as a person as you come into this world: sorting through your old habits and talents, trying to figure out which ones are still useful and which ones are not.

But one part of your self that you want to hold onto—and you will be fashioning a sense of self as you practice—is your willingness to learn. If you're going to take pride and have a sense of confidence in yourself, that's where you want to place it. Some people come into a situation and they like to pretend that they know everything already, that they can bluff their way through anything. But that doesn't help. They don't learn anything. If, however, you're afraid to do anything at all for fear of making a mistake, then you don't learn that way, either. It's to be expected that there are going to be mistakes.

It's like learning a new language. You trip over the grammar; you trip over the vocabulary. And oftentimes the most memorable lessons come from making a big mistake that burns itself into your memory for a long time. We've had examples here with the monks trying to learn Thai or French. But you can't let the mistakes get you down. You've got to decide: "This is something really valuable here. I want to master these skills." And you can have some confidence that as you master the

skills and are paying careful attention, with that desire to learn, you're going to become a different person, a person who feels at home in this new world.

What does it mean to be willing to learn? The Buddha lists three types of discernment that you're going to need: the discernment that comes from listening, the discernment that comes from thinking, and the discernment that comes from developing. They're usually ranked with the discernment coming from developing as the really important one, but all three of them help one another along. It's not the case that you listen and then you think and then you just work on developing the mind without ever thinking or listening anymore. You still have to listen, and you have to think even as you're developing qualities in the practice. It's through the combination of those three things that you learn.

Now, a lot of people have problems mixing those together. Some people are really good at just listening and doing as they're told. Other people refuse to do as they're told until they've thought it through and come up with their own ideas. But it's important that you learn how both to listen and to think.

Toward the end of his life, Ajaan Maha Boowa was recorded as saying that Ajaan Lee was Ajaan Mun's favorite student. When you look at Ajaan Lee's life, you can see why. He was the kind of person who would listen and think in addition to meditating. That's how he wrote all those books. And he was constantly interested in new things. Ajaan Fuang once told me that he thought it was a shame that Ajaan Lee hadn't met me. Here I was, someone with a Western education, and Ajaan Lee would have really picked my brain. He was always interested in learning new things.

When he was the abbot at the monastery in Chanthaburi, there was a new magazine, *Dhammacaksu*, that came out at the time. The monks in Bangkok were in the process of translating the Pali Canon into Thai, and they published a magazine with some articles here and there, but also some new sutta translations as they were being produced. And Ajaan Lee was a subscriber. Once a month, the magazine would come, and for the next couple of nights Ajaan Lee would simply read the magazine out loud during the group meditation.

So it's not the case that you learn a few basic concepts and then forget about the books and just meditate, or you just do as you're told. You have to think some things through. And then, as you meditate, you've got to think through the results of what you've done and try to make sense of where you are, what you've learned.

This had been another characteristic that Ajaan Mun liked about Ajaan Lee. Because on the one hand, Ajaan Mun would give Ajaan Lee some really difficult assignments—you know, sit up all night many nights in a row—and Ajaan Lee would simply do it. But he noticed that Ajaan Lee also had a mind that liked to

put things together to make sense out of them. And as he told Ajaan Lee, he didn't see anybody else who could help put the different principles of the practice into order.

That's what we see in Ajaan Lee's books, what they call *lak wichaa* in Thai, or the principles of the knowledge or the principles of the skill. They require that you have that kind of quality: On the one hand you listen, and on the other, you try to put things together, make sense out of things.

And then with the developing, you actually try to take what you've learned, put it into practice, and be very honest with yourself about the results that are actually developing. And then take those results and think about them again: Where are they still good? Where are they lacking? As we put all those three characteristics together: listening, thinking and developing...

Ajaan Lee gives the analogies of developing skills. He says you learn from the teacher, say, how to weave a basket or how to sew a pair of pants, how to make clay tiles. Then you think about it, and then you do it, and then you think about it again. You look at the example from the teacher and you look at your product: Where is yours still lacking? What does it look like you did wrong? And then you work at it again, keep observing. Eventually, as you keep this up, you can go beyond what you simply learned from the teacher, and you start thinking of new ways of using that skill.

When you meditate, you learn the instructions on how to breathe, how to work with the breath. And then you try them out and you look at what you've got. If the results aren't good, go back and look at what you're doing again. Think about it. What's still missing? Try to be observant, look around. Ask questions if you can't figure things out—and don't be afraid to ask questions.

One of the things the Buddha prided himself on was that the teaching he gave was a teaching where you could cross-question the teacher, and he encouraged that. He said, "This is a community where people are encouraged to cross-question," in other words, to ask people about what they've said, and be willing to engage in a dialogue.

The purpose of that, of course, is to get you to ask questions of yourself. After all, that's how the Buddha gained awakening. He looked at what he was doing. He said, "The results are not what I want. So what am I doing wrong?" He went back and looked at his actions. He had to think his way through: "What might be wrong here? What could I change?" And then he tried that out. And it was through trial-and-error that he finally reached trial-and-success. You look at the many setbacks he had: Most people would have given up. But the pride he took in his willingness to learn was what saw him through.

So as you move into the world of the Dhamma, the culture of the noble ones, you're not expected to know everything. In fact, you're expected to learn how to listen. And "listen" doesn't mean simply listening to the words. You notice actions. You actually try to memorize some things that seem important. Because after all, when you meditate you can't have a book put out in front of you. And you know people who listen to Dhamma talks while they meditate—there are a lot of things that are not going to be in a particular Dhamma talk that may be relevant to your meditation right now, but it's good to have them someplace in the back of your mind. So that when something seems important, memorize it. That's how you listen.

Then you think about what you've learned and how it fits in with what you've already learned to see where it seems to fit together and where it doesn't seem to fit together. That's when you ask questions. And the way of asking questions, either asking someone else or saying, "Well, I'm going to put it into practice and see if there's a real conflict here, or if things actually fit together in practice."

It's in this way that you grow. As you master more and more skills, you become a different person. The skills allow you to function in this new world, the world of the Dhamma. But simply having the skills doesn't necessarily mean that you're going to be successful. There are some people who find it very easy to get the mind to settle down, no big deal. Other people can read books and immediately explain what they've read. That doesn't make that much of an impact, either. It's when you really stop to listen and think and develop and then think again with as much honesty as you can bring, with all your powers of observation—that's when you grow. That's when the skill makes you a new person. You find that you develop a new identity that really is helpful in the world of the Dhamma. There will come a day when you don't need that identity anymore. But in the meantime, use it and develop it as best you can.