

How to really learn

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Places

Looking back over the 70 years of my life, I'm happy to say that I've always been curious about practically everything. I'm not sure whether any of us remembers how we first learned to walk. But I still remember how I learned to cycle. Basically, we should never look down at the bicycle but look ahead, holding the handles firmly and feeling the whole bicycle as we pedal. Once we learn to balance: we are cycling.

It was such a joy to be able to move faster than we can walk or run. I cycled as far as my bicycle and pedaling could take me. The farther I went, the greater the distance I had to pedal back homeward. I learned to turn back before I was lost, and still had the energy to make the return journey.

Then, I noticed that there were many lanes along the main road outside my house. I was always curious: Where does this lane lead to? Then, I would cycle up that lane as far as I could go. More than once, as I kept pedaling on, I realize the scenery was familiar again: I had cycled one huge circle of some kilometres and was returning to my starting-point, home.

People

As I grew up, I was even more curious about people. Who is this person? What is he talking about? Why does he behave in this way or that? What is he telling me? At some point, we will ask ourself the "basic questions": What is life? Why am I here? Where do I come from? What are people trying to do? I tried to find the answers by asking adults. I don't recall the answers they gave, but I know I had more questions after that.

Then, I discovered **books**—I'm always grateful to my elder brother and sister who gave me my first books when I was just learning to read. My young years of reading taught me that there are many answers to every question we ask. In due course, when I came to know Buddhism better, I realize that there is no end to the questions we can ask. However, once we know how to ask the **right** question, then we are likely to know the **true** answer.

Teachers

I learned to ask **the right questions** by imagining that every adult I met knew more than I do. Of course, not many adults are comfortable with a young boy asking so many questions, and often difficult ones, too. Imagine how excited I was when I met my first Buddhist teachers and monks. At first, they were willing, even eager, to answer all the questions I had.

I recall when they found me tedious or had difficulties giving the right answers, they would recommend me to other visiting teachers and monks. I recall being told by a monk, "Go to

that monk, he knows a lot!" I would eagerly do just that. To this day, I feel grateful to those who recommend to me the wise who can help me think, feel, myself better.

Invisible listening

As we mature and age, looking back, we often realize that we easily believe what we are told, especially from certain people who appear to know a lot. In my younger days as a Buddhist, I had two kinds of teachers: the worst and the best. I call them teachers because I thought they knew a lot.

One of the earliest teachers I recall who was willing and able to answer every question I had was a very intelligent Asian monk. Interestingly, he had a nasty temper, and would not tolerate anyone who thought he knew better. That really fascinated me. I would attend all his lessons and talks. These are the stepping-stones of my learning: I am amazed at how our learning can grow, must grow, with the years.

Angry monk

One particular incident about this angry monk was especially interesting. He noticed that our local temple was practising a mish-mash of folk Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism--and had this Vesak prayer: "Namo tassa ... In the beginning we should honour **God** ... our Father ... the Creator" Looking back, I realize that this "God-prayer" was circulated by an educated rich local follower of an American priest called Sumangalo. (See Piyasilo, *Charisma in Buddhism*, 1992:23 f).

This angry monk became very angry that this false teaching had crept into our temple. In fact, his anger brought a decisive end to such God-worship in our Temple. Many other people were terrified of his anger, and would judiciously disappear. I was deeply curious **why** he often showed anger.

Teachings above teacher

To be honest, I was fascinated whenever he got angry. I would eagerly wait while the Temple gossips and do-gooders slip away like politicians after losing an election. Here I was alone with this Janus of dissonance: an angry monk! "Why are you angry?" I curiously ask: he glared at me hopelessly, and burst into laughter.

Other than the sweet little Temple girls, I was one of the few boys who could make him laugh like that.

That's when I would go on to ask him a difficult question: "Why did the Buddha reject the Soul idea?" The start button was pressed: he would eloquently talk for hours. I can say with some dark pride that I was probably his only Dhamma student who never worshipped him, but came only for teachings.

Beyond words

During those learning years, I met many monks and nuns of a wide range of personalities. A few were strict, many were loose; some gave up, a few started their own cults; many still living elegantly as Tartuffes parasiting off society.

However, there was one memorable young forest monk, an American who, in fact, had made first contact with Buddhism in Singapore, but went to NE Thailand to ordain to become perhaps the most respected living monk today. (No, he has neither a retreat centre nor a Money Smile, only gentle Dhamma eyes that see through us).

I met him when I was a young monk in Thailand. As before, I was very curious what he had to teach. In fact, I do not recall having asked him any question. All I did was to bow to him in the traditional monastic way. Then, he spoke to me in a calm voice for nearly 2 hours on the Vinaya. This, I still recall, was one of the most peaceful moments in life.

Still learning

From all these teachers, bad and good, I learned something of great value. When we see others as teachers, we will always learn something. However, it may take some time before we really know how bad or how good such learning is.

Either way, as long as we keep on examining such teachings (teachers come and go), the good in them remains with us. Or rather, they have wakened up some great goodness in us that will benefit many others for a long time to come. That is, so long as we are willing to learn. Meantime, we are getting even better at the joy of learning.

R704 Inspiration 416

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