

Text and Subtext

Are parrots holy?

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Dhamma-spirited living is based on our ability to see a good truth and accept it. Such a truth is not person-based but reality-based. For example, “telling the truth at the right time” is true no matter who says it. But the speaker must also accept the truth and follow it.

For this reason, if this truth is spoken by a cunning Guru, it should not be quoted, since it is unlikely that he actually practises what he preaches. Despite the wisdom of the words (that’s all it is), it is a Fake Quote.

It is also unhelpful for us to blindly accept what a famous Teacher says simply because he is famous, or because a large audience applauded or laughed loudly when he made that statement. Firstly, we do not know what kind of mind (or heart) spoke those words. Secondly, we need to examine how true and useful that statement is.

In other words, we should not merely collect the Words and parrot them (say on Facebook or any social media). We should reflect on the wisdom of the words (if any). We should act on the wisdom if it helps.

If we are clever by repetitions and postings, then we should worship parrots and posters. A **good quote** is one that challenges us to think for ourself, and even see our weakness that needs strengthening, or see our inner goodness and rejoice in it for the benefit of others.

Often enough, we hear some important truths based on the wisdom of experience. For example, we are warned: Do this, or Don’t do that. It would be unwise on our part to simply ignore such truths because we feel that the writer is neither famous nor “high class.” When we react in this manner — listening and believing only those who are popular or powerful or holy — then, we are being “slavish” minded. We are **parroting** the person, not seeing the wisdom.

On the other hand, we may hear some really wise words from a very good teacher. We even keep these words in mind and quote them for the benefit of others. However, if we do not really examine further what these words **mean**, and how we can better ourself on that account, then, we are merely parroting words. The wisdom has eluded us. We have beautiful feathers, but we are still a parrot.

Wisdom does not always come from the words we hear. Wisdom comes from seeing the causes and effects of words, of what is said or unsaid, of what the words can mean. Often enough, we may even be able to know the mind or heart of the author of those words. The words may be wise, but was the author wise enough to actually understand what he has said? Or worse, does he have other agenda with those clever words?

Hence, we need to reflect what happens when such words are believed or put into practice? Who really benefits? Are the benefits really worthwhile, or will there be some hidden costs?

In other words, we must also consider the **subtext** of the text (the words). For example, when we ask someone, “How are you?” And he replies angrily, “I’m fine!” Clearly, he is not fine, and we may be curious why he reacts in that manner.

During this Covid-19 Pandemic, we see some monks on social media doing chants claiming to ward it off, and so on. We need to examine whether these teachers who tell us to chant, also properly teach us **what** we are chanting (assuming they themselves know what they are and believe in them).

Will these chants work when they are recited by monks who do not follow the Vinaya? Is it the words themselves that are magical, or our goodness that makes them work?

If we think that merely by chanting some holy words, the Pandemic can be ended, or even warded off, this is priestcraft or magic. This is not the way the Buddha has been teaching us.

Indeed, if such chanting does work, it’s really good. Then, we do not need medical services and good hygiene any more. The point is that we should understand what we recite, reflect on their teachings, and most importantly, practise them in a proper way.

We should also never forget who are really doing all the hard work, even risking their lives, to help the afflicted and overcome the pandemic. Or worse, when we do group chanting, will we be spreading even more of the coronavirus to others?

Let us then, keeping to the precepts, know the chants, understand their teaching, recite them mindfully, with calm and joy.

R708 Inspiration 417
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