



42. SHRAVASTI DHAMMIKA

NDM: I would like to ask you about your book THE BROKEN BUDDHA. Critical Reflections on Theravada and a Plea for a New Buddhism.

www.buddhistische-gesellschaft-berlin.de/downloads/brokenbuddhanew.pdf

What kind of feedback, or reviews did you attain so far for writing this book?

Venerable Shravasti Dhammika: People seem to have reacted to my book in one of three ways. Those who have spent time in Theravadin countries either as monks, nuns or lay people, have tended to have a “So what’s new?” attitude. Several have admitted that there are serious problems while questioning my motives for highlighting them. Those who have only encountered Theravada in

the West have, for the most part, reacted very negatively. I suppose this is because my book paints a very different picture from what some people imagine and because they have had generally positive experiences with the monks they have met in the West. Quite a few others have basically said that most religious institutions go bad and why should Theravada be any different. My hope in writing the book was that it would stimulate thoughtful debate and discussion of how Buddhism should develop in the West; what should be taken from and learned from the tradition and what reject and put aside. From what I am aware of so far there has only been either agreement or disagreement or indifference.

NDM: Didn't the Buddha actually say to examine the teachings in the Kalama sutta?

Venerable Shravasti Dhammika: The Buddha said a lot of things. But the teacher saying something and the students/disciples following what is said is another thing altogether. In much of Asia Buddhism is a tradition, a part of the culture, intimately related to ethnic or national identity. Few people can or do ever question it or see it apart from all these things. I like to say that Buddhism in Asia is like an old man; and the old spend most of their time thinking about the past. Buddhism in the west is like an adolescent; and teens focus all their energy and attention on the future, because the world and all it offers them is fresh, new and undiscovered. We have the possibility of examining the Dhamma relatively free from age-old presuppositions and biases. The Buddhist scriptures have only recently been translated into Thai, Burmese, Sinhala, etc and even now are not widely available. In the English speaking world at least, we have access to accurate, readable translations of the Buddha's words, from any good bookshop at affordable prices; perhaps the first time in history this has happened. Now we can examine the Buddha's teaching, consider then and discuss them. In this sense we are very blessed.

NDM: What is your view on the handling of currency, especially for western Theravadin monks that live in the US in particular?

Venerable Shravasti Dhammika: The fact that we are still debating this minor issue, wringing our hands over it and shaking our heads about it, says something about western Buddhism. I have lived in Buddhist Asia for nearly 40 years now and other than the small number of forest-living ascetics monks, I have only rarely encountered monks who don't use money. In Asia its normal and uncontroversial. I can see no harm in a monk buying a \$2 bus ticket or a book he needs or whatever. My teacher used to say: "It's alright if the money touches your hand, as long as it doesn't touch your heart."

NDM: What is your view on charging 8 to 10 dollars sliding scale, per meditation class, plus a dhamma talk, but also adding a donation on top for the teacher?

Venerable Shravasti Dhammika: The idea of charging to Dhamma teaching is quite at odds with the early Buddhist tradition. In the Udana the Buddha said: "One should not go about making a business out of the Dhamma" and his famous statement in the Dhammapada that the gift of the Dhamma excels all gifts again underlined the point that the Dhamma is or should be a gift. I am very much for Buddhism being adopted to the realities of western society, but I do think that the commercialization of the Dhamma in the west is a very unfortunate trend. Many western teachers go to Burma or Thailand, become monks for a while, are freely instructed in the Dhamma, looked after by the lay community with great generosity, and then return home and charge for teaching what they were taught for free. I do not think this is right. I think that sharing the Dhamma with others should be seen as a privilege and a blessing, not as a means of livelihood. I see nothing wrong with asking for donations to help cover costs at the end of a meditation course. The well-known meditation teacher Goenka never charged for his teaching but relied entirely on donations and it never seems to have hindered

him from conducting numerous meditation retreats and establishing many meditation centers. If he could do it why cant others?

NDM: Can a sexually active worldly lay teacher, even be dana worthy? Why should anyone take instruction from someone who can't even get past lust for example but teach about this?

Venerable Shravasti Dhammika: There is no reason why a person who is not celibate cannot teach Dhamma in an authentic and competent manner. The Buddhas disciple Isidatta attained the first stage of enlightenment while living a happily married life. And he was not the only one. The qualifications for being a good Dhamma or meditation teacher should be that you abide by the Precepts, that you know the Dhamma well and have had plenty of meditation experience, and that you avoid falling into what I call "the guru trap". Lay teachers are as worthy of dana as is anyone else – if you take dana to mean generosity or sharing, which is what it does mean. If you take it to mean a fee that is another matter.

NDM: What is your view on some teachers that trademark aspects of the Buddhist dharma, or merge and blend it with psychology, science, create a new sort of flavor, or name for it?

Venerable Shravasti Dhammika You mean some teachers actually trademark or copyright some aspects of meditation?

NDM: Yes, aspects of this like "Big mind" please see here.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Big_Mind

Venerable Shravasti Dhammika: I have not heard of this before. The Buddha spent 40 years walking through northern India, over rough roads, through all kinds of weather, so that as many people as possible could hear his Dhamma. He taught what he knew to everyone, even to outcasts who were shunned by the rest of society. And if you read the Maha Parinibbana Sutta you will see that even as he lay sick and dying he allowed people to approach him to ask about the Dhamma. And now some want to trademark the Dhamma! What a betrayal!

I have always believed that contemporary psychology is a wonderful resource that can help fine tune some aspects of the Buddhist understanding of consciousness and of meditation. But it must always be kept in mind that psychology's goal is therapeutic, to help people better function in the world. Buddhism's primary focus is spiritual, to help us transcend the world. The first is a good foundation for the second. But if we reduced meditation to being just a therapy we will deprive ourselves of the many priceless treasures it offers.

NDM: Today in the west there is a "Proclaim-Your-Attainments" American form of Buddhism emerging. One of these teachers (who is married) and claims to be an arahant says.

"I believe that when Western dharma teachers can earn a moderate, middle-class income by dharma teaching alone, the dharma will have truly arrived in the West."

What are your thoughts on this?

Venerable Shravasti Dhammika I suppose it is to be expected that the values of a modern capitalist consumer society should become common in our discourse and be taken for granted, and even lauded; by which I mean celebrity, self-promotion, wealth, success, conspicuous consumption, etc. I suppose it is even to be expected that these values should intrude into spirituality; the so-called

prosperity gospel being an example of this happening. What saddens me is that so many people are taken in by greed and ego masquerading as spirituality, and that the modest, gently and reasoned proclaiming of the Dhamma is drowned out by the loud, slick, clamour of fast-talking gurus. What can be done given such a situation? Do your best to remain true to the Dhamma and share it with anyone who is receptive to it. As for the others, well, they make their choice and will arrive at whatever destination such paths lead

NDM: In your book you write: "Quite understandably, Asian Theravadins expect you to follow their traditions and not question them. You can point out that certain practices or ideas are not in the Tipitaka or are even contrary to it but it will make no difference. Right or wrong, inane or practical, thats how it has always been done and that's what you must do."

Can you please give me an example of some of the traditions that are not so practical, or wrong so to speak?

Venerable Shravasti Dhammika: In Thailand a monk must not take anything directly from a woman's hand. The woman has to put whatever she wants to give the monk on a cloth which he then draws towards him so he can then take the gift whatever it is. This practice is not mentioned in the Vinaya and is not done in Sri Lanka or Burma. A Sri Lankan monk or Western monk who is unaware of this custom when first arriving in Thailand and receives something directly from a woman will be looked upon with considerable disapproval and pulled into line very quickly. Shortly after I arrived in Sri Lanka I used to talk to the Tamil man who used to clean the monastery toilets. I felt sorry for him because he has such a lousy job and was generally treated with contempt. Occasionally I would give him things that had been given to me which I hadn't used. One day the abbot took me aside and basically told me that it was not proper for a monk to be familiar with this guy. I think the abbot's attitude was partly due to a general dislike of Tamils

and partly because the man was low caste. In Buddhist countries local customs, superstitions and traditions often trump the Dhamma. I suppose this the same with all religions.

END OF INTERVIEW