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# Thinking Like a Thief

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By Thanissaro Bhikkhu

In Theravada, the relationship between teacher and student is like that between a master craftsman and his apprentice. The Dharma is a skill, like carpentry, archery or cooking. The duty of the teacher is to pass on the skill not only by word and example, but also by creating situations to foster the ingenuity and powers of observance the student will need in order to become skillful. The duty of the student is to choose a reliable master, someone whose skills are solid and whose intentions can be trusted, and to be as observant as possible. You have to pay attention both to your actions and to their results, at the same time using your ingenuity and discernment to correct mistakes and overcome obstacles as they arise. This requires that you combine respect for your teacher with respect for the principle of cause and effect as it plays out in your own thoughts, words and deeds.

Shortly before my ordination, my teacher Ajaan Fuang Jotiko told me: "If you want to learn, you'll have to think like a thief and figure out how to steal your knowledge." And soon I learned what he meant. During my first years with him, he had no one to attend to his needs: cleaning his hut, boiling the water for his bath, looking after him when he was sick, etc. So, even though I was a foreigner – barely



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fluent in Thai and probably the most uncouth barbarian he had ever met – I quickly took on the role of his attendant. Instead of explaining where things should be placed or when certain duties should be done, he left it up to me to observe for myself. If I caught on, he wouldn't say anything. If I didn't, he'd give me a dressing down but still wouldn't fully explain what was wrong. I had to observe for myself: Where did *he* place things when he straightened out his hut? And I had to do this out of the corner of my eye, for if I was obvious in watching him, he would chase me away. As he said, "If I have to explain every-

thing, you'll get used to having things handed to you on a platter. And then what will you do when problems come up in your meditation and you don't have any experience in figuring things out and experimenting on your own?"

So I swallowed my pride and learned to take my mistakes as my teachers.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu (Geoffrey DeGraff) was born on Long Island, NY, in 1949. In 1976, he was ordained in Thailand, practicing in the Thai Forest Tradition. In 1991 he returned to the United States to help set up Metta Forest Monastery in the mountains north of San Diego, where he is currently abbot. He is author of *The Mind Like Fire Unbound*, *The Wings to Awakening*, and *Noble Strategy*.