

How to address a Dharma teacher

My students are often at a loss on how to address me. Some address me as “Dr . . .” because I was invited for a stint as a Visiting Scholar to the University of California at Berkeley. My Thai students call me “Ajahn” (“Teacher,” like Shifu in Chinese, both meaning “Teacher”). Most of my local students address me as “Teacher Piya,” which is quaint but warm.

Frankly, I am quite happy being addressed simply as “Piya.” This way I know at once I am being addressed. When I feel ego-deprived, I remind myself that in Myanmar, Piya is quite an honourable title.¹

Some of my students and Buddhist executives have also remarked that I should spruce up the way I dress. Being better dressed attracts a bigger audience, I agree. Still I want to dress comfortably rather than for show, even if I may not attract a large audience. I would be quite disappointed if people came to listen to my clothes rather than to Dharma teachings.

There is a more important reason why I dress simply and comfortably. The monastics of old dressed very simply, often in rag-robos. These robes were simply random patches (including patches from a shroud) that were stitched together and then dyed in an even natural colour.

It was not a uniform; for, many other non-Buddhist ascetics, too, dressed in the same way. In fact, they all looked somewhat alike. It was much later in the Buddha’s ministry, probably after the first 20 years, maybe later, that Ananda, on the Buddha’s instruction, it is said, designed the simple Theravada robe with paddy-field patterns.

The fact that the early monastic robes are not a uniform is often missed today. Some modern monastics wear rather fancy robes. In Japan recently, the priests (clerics who are non-celibate) even had a fashion show, walking the runway showing off different types of colourful robes, to bring more Buddhist awareness to the public, as temple popularity seems to be rapidly declining there.

Those who are attracted to monastics because of their uniform (nice robes) probably like the feeling of power or status. That is the reason why the army is famously uniformed. Power often invokes fear and obedience. Understandably, those Buddhisms that place a premium on uniform (magnificent attire and paraphernalia) attract and control the bodies and minds of those who are more faith-inclined. This is sometimes known as psychological dependence and counter-dependence.

A lay guru who wants the profits of both worlds (eg the secular and the monastic) might keep long hair.² The long hair of the gurus is like the full beard of polygamous tribal leaders. Or like the mane of a mature lion, king of the beasts. It is an expression of male dominance and predation, from which glassy-eyed females best keep away

¹ I’m not against anyone who is comfortable addressing monastic or teacher by title. My point is that we need to remind ourselves of what good we can clean from such teachers rather than merely admiring or worshipping them.

² I’m not against long hair. The context here is the misuse of symbols to attract and distract others.

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(but they often don't, and let themselves be irresistibly drawn like moths into a flame).

Monastics shave off their hair, as an important symbolic gesture, to renounce sexuality in all forms. As such, a monastic involved in sex of any kind is a contradiction in terms, and even a single sex act is enough to automatically deprive him/her of monastic status.

If we think that a monastic is “holy” and worthy of our adoration simply because he is robed, then we are fetishist (treating people as objects). This explains why we are often plagued with “false monastics” collecting cash donations publicly. These false “false monastics” are not the real problem: they are only a symptom of the real problem: the true “false monastics,” the Tartuffes with four-five-digit salaries, credit cards, cars, expensive tastes, etc.³

Of course, we should not judge such people, “because they are also doing good works”: but who is saying this? Could two, or a hundred good deeds cancel a bad one? Karma does not work numerically; it works by habit and exponentially.

My point is that a Dharma teacher should not entice or distract his/her students and audience with external and worldly symbols, and statistics (not too much, anyway). If we are attracted to a Buddhist teacher merely because of a “PhD” or title or status or skin colour or great following,⁴ then we are probably intellectually, socially, or psychologically challenged.⁵

External symbols may promise power, popularity and plenty, but that's what they are: merely promises. A bad teacher wants you to look at him, admire him, never question him. A Dharma teacher tells you to close your eyes, look carefully within, and discover the true spiritual power, wisdom, compassion, and peace, within yourself.

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³ False “false monastics” & true “false monastics”:
<http://dharmafarer.googlepages.com/Falsefalsemonasticsandtruefalsemonat.pdf>

⁴ Again, a caveat: I am not against good teachers with such qualities. They should not be used to exploit others.

⁵ If you feel a bit upset reading this, try this spiritual exercise: sit calmly and ask yourself: “WHY do I like this teacher?” Let the answer arise by itself, and then ask WHY again, and so on. In the end, if you are open, you see yourself with better self-understanding.