Prof. Ven. Dhammajoti on Studying Original Texts and Languages and Approaching Buddhism with Integrity and Rigor

By Raymond Lam | February 17, 2017

Venerable Dhammajoti. Image courtesy of the Buddha-Dharma Centre of Hong Kong

Over the course of his life, Venerable Dhammajoti has devoted himself to a path of Buddhist study (not just in the academic Buddhist Studies sense, but Buddhist study as a path of liberation and insight) marked by rigor and integrity. He has sympathy for the idea that scholarship should not take precedence over practice-oriented meditation and devotion, yet is comitted to the idea that one should also know well the spiritual path they have chosen to walk. To *know well* means not only following good preceptors, although this is a crucial part of the story, but also understanding Buddhism as it has arisen in human history, which means looking at its original sources and early languages. This is a focus that Ven. Dhammajoti, who heads the Buddha-Dharma Centre of Hong Kong, has spent a lifetime helping his students to grasp.

Ven. Dhammajoti is perhaps best known in Hong Kong for his tenure as Glorious Sun Professor* at The University of Hong Kong's Centre of Buddhist Studies. In 2014, he set up his academy in Hong Kong's Wan Chai District, and last year moved to a much roomier space in the neighborhood of Shek Tong Tsui. Ven. Dhammajoti feels more freedom to articulate a vision of Buddhist Studies through his center, which awards master's degrees in Buddhist Studies in collaboration with Sri Lanka's University of Kelaniya.

"I'm always a very serious teacher," says the senior monk. "When I teach, I want to make sure that I teach responsibly and I want to make sure that I'm imparting the proper knowledge to my students, and that this knowledge should contain the most updated understanding and research in my field. This means that I don't simply repeat what I've taught in past years just because the title of the course is the same." He gives the example of a course in which he has specialized for decades: the *Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma* texts. The same topic has had different course materials each year thanks to his continuous reflections and updating of notes, making each academic year's lessons unique.

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The skills that Ven. Dhammajoti hopes to inculcate in his students are impressive. “I talk often about having an objective, non-sectarian approach to Buddhism. I also emphasize engaging with the original sources. Many students have biases, presumptions, or prejudices because, to a large extent, they depend overly on secondary sources,” he says. By original sources he means the ancient Pali Canon, Sanskrit Buddhist texts, and Tibetan and ancient Chinese translations from original Indian scriptures: “They don’t really know what the texts themselves actually say. To really have a genuine and solid foundation of Buddhist teachings, one needs to go to the original sources.”

He gives the example of the doctrine of “emptiness” (*śūnyatā*): “You go to the original source of Nagarjuna and the early Prajñāpāramitā texts if you want to understand emptiness, so you have to be able to read at least, for instance, the verses of the *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā*. You should know basic Sanskrit. It’s all well and good to say, ‘everything is empty’—but what does it mean? If you misunderstand it or bring in a modern Western philosophy that speaks of emptiness/voidness [which might sound superficially similar but suffers from a fundamental difference** to the Buddhist implications] . . . in spite of your good intentions, you might be distorting Buddhism.”

“Likewise, if you really want to understand the profundity of early Buddhist and Theravada teachings, you must be able to read the Pali terms and texts,” he emphasizes. Developing the skill to read the original sources without relying on secondary interlocutors is therefore one of Ven. Dhammajoti’s prime concerns.

“Because of this concern, I’ve been emphasizing language courses to the extent that I’m often represented as being primarily interested in languages,” observes Ven. Dhammajoti. “Actually I’m not. To me, all these languages are just tools for understanding. My true concern is doctrinal—to understand correctly the doctrines of the Buddha. But to take the first step you have to have the right tools and equipment.” His courses at the Buddha-Dharma Centre of Hong Kong are shaped around this methodology of learning the necessary languages to understand Buddhist doctrines on one’s own terms, without the need for a translator.

“If you don’t have the ability to assess the texts directly you are forever dependent on secondary sources. Not only can you not absorb the profundity for yourself, you might even be misled by the interpretations of modern writers! For instance, there are many English translations of Pali texts that differ on interpretation, which leads to confusion and contradictions. So you have to be able to judge for yourself and you can only do this if you know the language.”

Image courtesy of the Buddha-Dharma Centre of Hong Kong

Integrity and rigor are universal concerns for Ven. Dhammajoti, whether he is based in Hong Kong or Sri Lanka. However, he notes that students from different cultures have divergent weaknesses. In Theravada regions such as Sri Lanka, students might know the Pali terms and teachings well, but often view the vast traditions of Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism and their concomitant languages as heterodox and unworthy of learning. Conversely, he discerns a certain undercurrent of snobbishness among East Asian practitioners towards learning Pali and Theravada teachings, mainly because Buddhism has also flourished for so long based on the Chinese language and traditions. Ven. Dhammajoti returns to his point of language as a tool: "They don't have to be great grammarians, and I don't at all claim to be a specialist in any language, but I want my students to see language as an important path to understanding the doctrines for themselves."

In this spirit of integrity, Ven. Dhammajoti has plenty to say about the development of "Buddhist modernism"—a worldwide movement crafted consciously through collaborations between Asian teachers and Western thinkers. "One serious concern I have is that among many Buddhists, Buddhism means scanning our brains [in an attempt to conform with science], millions of dollars [in celebrity endorsements], publicizing in mass media to attract big celebrities to come to Buddhism . . . I find this very sad," he reflects gravely. "I don't question their sincerity or good intentions, but I worry that such an approach will negate the value of serious study. It's a misnomer, he says, to talk about "applied Buddhism" because Buddhism is *in its very nature* application. The Buddhist teachings are meant for our living and existence as human beings, to deal with human problems."

"The Buddha's teachings have benefited the whole of humanity, in different forms, from ancient times up till now. That's because his teachings are meant to be applied in daily life and to do that you have to understand them properly. The first step is proper understanding.

"Always try to learn from the Buddha's example, his emphases, and what he wanted to impart; don't be swept along by modern, 'Western' models. There is little to pride yourself on in being modernistic. That's really important." He relays the example of how Buddhism disappeared in India: one critical reason was that it lost its individuality and, from the 6th century until the 12th century, assimilated Brahminical discourse. Even the logicians, beginning from Dharmakirti onwards, began debating on the Brahmins' terms.*** While tantric Buddhism is an invaluable component of Buddhist heritage, losing individuality among the sea of Indian schools of thought doomed it to obscurity until the modern period.

Ven. Dhammajoti stresses that we need to learn from both history and—more importantly—the Buddha's example, to strive to be true individuals (which of course is different from being "individualists"). The Buddha is the True Individual *par excellence*, he notes—had he not succeeded in acquiring his true individuality, today we would not be having the good fortune of practicing his Dharma!

At the turn of the 19th century, Buddhism turned to secularism, science, and modernism to survive the intellectual and colonial onslaught of Christianity. Since Buddhism managed to weather the storm after World War II, I believe that Buddhism must not allow its onetime allies to turn it into something unrecognizable to the Buddha, even if Western Buddhism itself should have the space to adapt to the needs of its home cultures.

By his own admission, Ven. Dhammajoti could easily follow the trend of teaching or privileging "pop" Buddhism, which he thinks many celebrities (specific names are not mentioned!) favor. But he prefers to suffer any losses, both professional and personal, for his independence—for moving "against the stream"—if it should be called suffering at all. This is the mission of the Buddha-Dharma Centre of Hong Kong and Ven. Dhammajoti's moral priority in life.

"I get myself into trouble, but I don't mind that," he laughs.

* The Glorious Sun Professorship was created by Glorious Sun Charity Group in 2005 and bestowed on Ven. Dhammajoti in 2007.

** Since the 19th century, Western philosophers have attempted to tie the Buddhist notions of Nirvana and emptiness with notions of nothingness and nihilism, and these days are often equated—not always soundly—with a range of schools, such as Humean philosophy, existentialism, and phenomenology.

*** Ronald M. Davidson's excellent chapter "The Medieval Buddhist Experience" (pp.75–112) in *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of the Tantric Movement* (2002) provides a thorough analysis of how Buddhist centers of learning conceded more and more intellectual ground to various rival movements until they were forced to assimilate the aesthetics, values, and even philosophies of non-Buddhist tantric movements.

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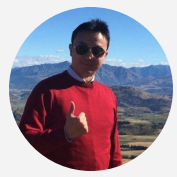

Raymond Lam

Raymond Lam is senior writer at Buddhistdoor Global. For over a decade, he has reported on and analyzed Buddhist affairs and their interconnected, global matters in culture and the arts, politics and diplomacy, and academia. He is aligned with a cosmopolitan, orthodox, and historically-informed vision of Mahayana and early Buddhism (in particular Huayan and Pure Land). He took refuge and the five lay precepts under Ven. Rong Ling in 2008 and Ven. Prof. Dhammajoti in 2022, and underwent the Five Mindfulness Trainings as devised by the late Thich Nhat Hanh in 2013. He read theology at The University of Queensland, Brisbane (2009) and Buddhist Studies at SOAS, London (2012). He became a journalist of religion at BDG in 2010.

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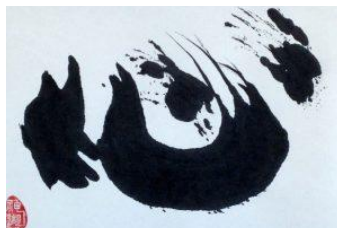

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