

Gain, Honour and Fame

by

Venerable Ajahn Brahmavamso

A talk given by Ajahn Brahmavamso to the monks at Bodhinyana Monastery, December 2002.

This is my first talk at Bodhinyana Monastery after another trip overseas, teaching Dhamma, looking after the sasana. As monks, it's part of our duty to help if we can, even if by simply upholding vinaya, not giving any sermons at all; even this is a wonderful gift to offer the world. I find it useful, however, to sometimes wander beyond the bounds of this monastery, not just to Nollamara, but to other places in the world, to explain to people how wonderful are the Buddha's teachings. Some of the dangers, however, of getting involved at the international level are labha, sakkara, and siloka: gain, honour and fame. This subject has been in the front of my mind after my trip to Cambodia, Malaysia and Singapore, because I am now well-known over there and it requires mindfulness and right effort to ensure that these things are kept in perspective.

My journey began with an invitation to participate in a Buddhist Summit in Cambodia. When the aeroplane landed in Pochentong airport in Phnom Penh, I was sitting with the Buddhist delegates in the economy class, talking with a couple of American holiday makers, who suddenly pointed out that there was a big reception committee on the tarmac. When I looked out the window, I saw a line of maybe a hundred monks and other officials, and a red carpet which had been laid out, stretching from the bottom of the aircraft stairs to waiting limousines. The flight attendants asked the business class passengers to wait, to allow the delegates for the Buddhist Summit to disembark first. From that moment on, some of the delegate leaders, especially myself, were feted, and there was no need to pass through immigration or customs. When we left the aircraft, a group of girls presented us with big bunches of flowers, and we were greeted by the long line of monks with hands in anjali. We were shown to limousines; each limousine had not only a driver but a security guard. On top of that we had a motorcade, and police lined the way to the hotel, clearing the road of traffic. I felt like a visiting head of state or a powerful politician.

When you are feted in front of kings and princesses in the way that I was, you must remember that you are just a simple monk. It is important to remember that the honour which we monks are given should never be taken personally; it stands only for what we represent, which is the Buddha's teachings. In that sense I was very happy, because I reflected that it wasn't me who was being feted, but what I represented: a good standard of Vinaya, the effort to establish a good monastery, and the virtuous Sangha with which I live. It was as if the Sangha was with me: the monks and nuns, the Buddhist Society, and everyone who supports us. I was just a figurehead. It was the whole Sangha that was given the gain, honour and fame. For that I felt a lot of joy and inspiration, seeing one of the Triple Gems, the Sangha, accorded such honour and esteem, and realising that the Buddha and Dhamma were being praised as well; they were also being held high.

After Cambodia, I flew to Malaysia and then Singapore. Many people came to listen to my talks, a thousand at a time. For each of the talks it was Dhamma that was inspiring, it was Dhamma that brought people to see me, it was Dhamma that gave them great joy, it was Dhamma that changed people's lives. For that I felt very proud, very inspired, but it also presented me with the dangers of gain, honour and fame.

During the trip I was offered some very fine gifts, which I usually handed on to others. I was given a beautiful Buddha statue by King Sihanouk, which I gave to the Buddhist Fellowship in Singapore because they have a new centre there and it seemed suitable. The Japanese co-host gave me a very beautiful, probably very expensive carved figure of Amitabha Buddha. Seeing that I'm a Theravadan, I gave it to a Mahayana Buddhist nun in Sydney.

I always try and remember that any gain, honour or fame which I get as a monk does not belong to me. Nothing belongs to me, not even my body, my robes, my food or my hut. Gain, honour and fame belong to the Buddha, to the Dhamma, to the great Sangha. I encourage you all to see this in the same way. Whatever respect you receive, whatever gains you acquire, whatever fame you enjoy from being part of this well-known monastery, please understand that it belongs to the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. If you reach any attainments on the path, if your meditation goes well, or if your understanding of the Suttas or the Vinaya is very deep and learned, please never take that to be 'mine,' 'my knowledge,' or my 'attainment'.

Never think that it's your achievement, because if you do, you will get lost in the dangerous pit of gain, honour and fame. Whatever you achieve in monastic life, whatever knowledge you have of the suttas, whatever your understanding of Pali or Vinaya, never think that it's your knowledge, that it's your understanding. Don't take that as being a jewel in your crown. Remember, that are only three jewels in this world: the Triple Gem of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. So whatever you have as a personal jewel, offer it to these beautiful Triple Jewels. See any learning which you have not as your learning; see it rather as your way of worshipping Dhamma and Vinaya, to which you give all gain, honour and fame. If awakening occurs, give any resultant gain, honour or fame to the Buddha. Any understanding or enlightened experience, any insight, any deep meditation, give it all to the Buddha and to the Dhamma. It's not yours. If you regard them as yours - your attainment, your understanding, your knowledge - you'll find yourself arguing with your fellow anagarikas, novices and monks; you'll find your understanding becomes an embellishment of your ego; you'll find yourself getting proud; you'll find yourself defending your position and feeling uncomfortable when somebody questions you. All these are signs that you are getting lost in gain, honour and fame. So please don't allow your achievements, your success, and all the wonderful fruits of your diligent effort to hinder your progress; please don't allow them to become fuel for contention in this monastery. Whatever you have attained doesn't belong to you; it belongs to the Triple Gem. If you see it like this, how could you get lost in gain, honour and fame?

In Ajahn Chah's tradition, monks are not allowed to have personal stashes of cash. Because we don't own money, whatever is given goes into the common account, the common fund, so that whichever monk is in need can make use of it. If it wasn't like this, I would be a millionaire by now. In Cambodia I was invited to meet the wealthy patron who funded the conference. He offered me a small packet which I thought was a medal or a set of pens; it was about that size, a little box wrapped in white paper. When I opened it I found two million Yen in cash (£10,000). It became the biggest Nissaggiya Pacittiya offence I have ever had to confess! How easy it would be for me to become personally wealthy! But as you know, in this monastery we share out everything as evenly as we possibly can. None of us needs very much, so any gains which we get we offer to the Buddhist Society so that it can benefit the whole Sangha: the monastery, the nuns' monastery, and the city centre.

I was told - I had nothing to do with this - that when Ajahn Kalyano was in Singapore deputising for me for one of the afternoon sessions, an auction was held to raise funds for his new monastery in Victoria. One of the things which they auctioned off was a zafu, a cushion, which I had sat on whilst leading a meditation session there last August. Some person paid \$1,400 for that zafu. (It made me wonder about the zafu in my kuti. I have been

sitting on that for many years now; it must be worth a fortune. Perhaps I should guard it to make sure that no one steals it...) Although I found such a compliment ridiculous, I was of course very glad that it was used to help Bodhivana Monastery in Warburton. Anyway, it is better not to take such praise seriously, because no matter how much fame we get, we'll get criticism as well. I find it marvellous to return to a place like Australia, because if one finds oneself becoming at all superior while travelling, one is soon cut down to size here. And so be it; it's good.

Sharing our gains with our fellow monks and anagarikas produces a wonderful feeling of family, of community in harmony. That's why, even at Christmas time, if people give you things, please share them with your fellow samanās, your fellow Dhamma-farers; don't keep them only for yourselves. Some monks, because of their past good kamma, tend to get given a lot of things; other people get very little. So we should share our gifts together. A good monk is supposed to share even the food in his bowl with his fellows. It's a wonderful way of saying, 'Even the contents of my bowl are not my gain. People don't feed just me; they feed the Sangha, they feed the whole community.' By keeping little for ourselves we give up the idea of personal gain. We don't store things up; we have the courage and faith that when something is really needed the monastery will provide it for us; and if the monastery can't acquire it, surely there must be a kind, considerate and generous lay supporter who will. This is how we should look after ourselves.

We also need to see the dangers of gain, honour and fame in relation to spiritual attainments. This is why I always encourage the visitors, anagarikas, novices and younger monks to come and tell the senior teachers if you have an experience and want to tell somebody; don't go telling each other, because that just swells pride. A person who recounts an experience may feel "I am better," and the person he tells may feel "I am worse". This encourages the fetters to arise. It generates bad states of mind in you and in others. It's not conducive to happiness or spiritual progress. So don't tell each other. We put all our opportunities for fame and respect aside.

In each of my talks, whether it's on gain, honour and fame, or anything else, I always end up talking about jhāna, because I love jhāna so much. It is such an important aspect of Dhamma that I try to put it into every talk I give. It is important, however, for monks to realise that even the attainment of jhāna is not their ego, not their self, not a person, not them. Jhāna is simply an empty process. When a person understands anatta, then whatever experience they have, it never becomes a source of pride, or of personal fame or gain. It is just part of nature, that's all.

Of course, attaining jhāna is an inspiring event. It's inspiring because it is a way of praising the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. To do what the Great Teacher instructed us to do is to worship the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. It is inspiring to prove to ourselves that we can still realise the Dhamma that the Buddha pointed out; it is inspiring because it is what the Buddha himself experienced, and it is inspiring because it is conducive to seeing anicca, dukkha and anatta - to see these beautiful Dhammas. So our honour and praise should go to the Dhamma, and to the Buddha for discovering these things. It should go to the Ariyasangha, the Streamwinners and above, who are the guardians of Dhamma, who have preserved the precious jewels of Dhamma for so many centuries and in so many lands. So if you attain jhāna, bow down and say: Buddhāṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi, or chant the verses of Itipi so, Svakkhato bhagavata dhammo, or Supatipanno; chant in honour of the Triple Gem, give praise to the Triple Gem, because this is where praise is due. All the gains, all the honour, go to them, not to you. The jhānas do not belong to you; they belong to the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. The jhānas aren't your jhānas, the jhānas aren't your attainments. Sometimes you look at yourself and ask, "Did I do that?" If you understand jhāna, you know that you didn't bring it about at all. You actually had to get out of the way. If you try to bring it about, you just mess everything up, so why bother praising yourself? It wasn't you who

produced these things at all. Only when you completely disappear and stop doing, can things like jhanas happen. So why praise yourself for doing something you didn't do?

How about the Dhamma talks, the insights and wisdom which you speak, explain or write down: is it you who does that? Is it you who gives the Dhamma talk? Is it really Ajahn Brahm whose talks are recorded on all those CDs? No, it's just conditioning that came from Ajahn Chah and from all the great teachers whom I had the privilege to meet. All the gain, honour and fame for talks which I give goes to Ajahn Chah, not to me. He's the one who conditioned me in this way; or you can take it all the way back to the Buddha: the Buddha, Dhamma and Ariyasangha is responsible for everything I say. I can't take responsibility for any of it. How can I personally accept the gain, honour and fame for talks, when it's not me talking. There's nobody here; there's nobody deciding to say this or not say that. It's not my skill at all. Seen this way, how can gain, honour and fame exist for myself?

This applies even to Nibbana: when you get enlightened, it's not you that produces the realisation. You haven't done anything; all you can produce is suffering and defilement. So if you think you have created something, you can be sure that all you've created is more attachment, more craving; so all you get is more suffering. The true disciple, through understanding Dhamma, never thinks of any attainment as: "This is my attainment. I did that. Look at me. How great I am." The true disciple sees that spiritual evolution only happens through letting go, letting go of me, mine and self. If after some attainment you think that it was you who did it, that it was you who had the great insight, that it was you who attained the great Dhamma, or the great jhana, you are simply stealing the attainment from its true owners.

Remember that skilful states are all based on letting go; they are based on not doing, not owning. My goodness! You have to give up so much to attain jhana; you have to give up so much of yourself, of the idea of self, of the delusion of self. It's only through letting go that you can get to those refined places which are beyond the reach of ordinary humans. (Ordinary humans are such great doers, controllers; they are always manipulating, managing!) Finding your way into the deep meditations and realising enlightenment cannot be done by you or via you. So how on earth could you say that you are proud of your efforts? It wouldn't make any sense to a wise person. How could you say that you own those attainments, that they are yours? You can't, because you have to let go of yourself, of the delusion of self, to realise those things. As soon as you start to own them, to steal them from their rightful owners, then they are lost, they disappear, they are gone.

A good person never thinks that they are comprised of their attainments; they never think they are made up of their fame, their gains, or their honour. They never identify with their speeches, or feel they exist as their skill, their competence, or incompetence. These things don't belong to anybody, they are not me, not mine, not a self. If you see this, how could gain, honour and fame ever get a hold on you? There's nothing for them to grab hold of. It would be like trying to get a foothold on a ladder with no rungs; there's nothing there. Gain, honour and fame just fall away, like a bird trying to alight on a tree with no place to alight.

Whether you are frugal, whether you keep the precepts, whether you've given up much, whether you've worked hard for the Sangha, whether you give great talks, whether you are a wonderful meditator, whether you have deep wisdom, remember to give it all away. Apply yourself to this 'non-self business', because it leads to the truth: you don't own anything in this world. You don't own the robe on your back, or the skin on your body, or the thoughts in your head. You don't even own your will or your consciousness. You may think you do, but that's just delusion. Not me, not mine, not a self; when you have this deep insight, you will understand the pleasure of gain, honour and fame; you will understand their danger; and you will understand the escape from them.

The talk this evening has been on a subject close to my heart for the last three weeks. It's not every day that you say 'Hello' to a king, or have lunch with a princess, or get red carpet treatment and limousines. None of that is me, none of it is mine. All of it I give to the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, out of gratitude, out of praise, out of worship to the three highest gems in the world.

Published in the Forest Sangha Newsletter: January 2005, Number 71

Source: <http://www.forestsangha.org>