

THE THIEVING MONKS

An Abbot, famous for his wisdom, lived in an ancient temple. Many young men came to learn from him. They supported themselves by begging for food on the streets of the nearby town.

One day the great bell summoned them to the temple yard, where the Abbot addressed them. "Our temple needs repair. The roof leaks. The walls are crumbling. We need to raise money. I am no longer able to do the amazing feats of my youth that drew so many sponsors. (1) You are busy with your studies and meditation, so the question is, how to obtain the money we need?"

The monks listened attentively, confident the Abbot had the answer. "I want each and every one of you to creep into town tonight and steal valuable things that we can sell. Then we can repair the temple and continue our good works."

The students were shocked. He wanted them to steal?

The Abbot continued, "Do not ruin our reputation by being caught when you commit any illegal or immoral act. *You must steal when no one is looking.* There is no moon tonight, so be careful, no one will see you." The Abbot resumed meditating.

The students conversed among themselves. "How can he ask us to do this?" said one. "Stealing is wrong!"

"Not always, surely?" argued another. "We are not stealing for ourselves. The money will allow us to restore the temple. That's a good thing, for which many worshippers will be grateful. (2) Besides, the Abbot is a wise, famous teacher. He must have good reason for asking us to do that which seems so wrong." This argument persuaded many, and one by one the monks left the courtyard to prepare for their night-time adventure. "Take care," they cautioned one another. "Do not let anyone see you stealing!"

Eventually all the students had left, except one. The Abbot looked up from his meditation. "Why do you stay behind?"

"I cannot follow your instructions, Master, to steal where no one will see me," (3) said the monk. "Wherever I go, I am always there watching. *My own eyes will see me steal.*"

The wise master joyfully embraced the boy. "Thank goodness! You understand my teaching. You are the only one who has passed the test! Now go – stop the others, before they get us all into trouble!"

The story in your classroom

(1) I usually throw in references to abseiling down buildings, walking tightropes or whatever topical fundraising events certain abbots or mega-churches have staged.

(2) Stop the story and open the discussion to the class. Is stealing ever justified? Does the ends justify the means?

(3) Stop and ask: Why do you think the monk cannot follow the instructions?

Learning Points

Doing the right thing when no one is watching – when there is no discipline master, no parent, no policeman on hand to deter you – that is the time when it's most important that your own values guide you to do the right thing.

Note how the students pass the responsibility to the teacher – he's wise, he's asking us to do it, therefore it must be OK. This is a dangerous assumption, as the behaviour of leaders around the world has demonstrated time and again.

Only one monk has the courage of his convictions to say no and defy the teacher. (Oops. You will have to handle this one carefully!)



**You can close your eyes to things you don't want to see,
but you can't close your heart to the things you don't want to feel**

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