

To a listening year 2010

My years of being a Buddhist for the last quarter century have taught me much about the Buddha's teachings. My 20 years as a Theravada monk gave me enough training to have a good idea of what Buddhism (or at least early Buddhism) is really about. One difficulty is that this vision of what Buddhism really is, changes over time in a good way. As I look back I now see Buddhism as becoming simpler and simpler to practise.

This simplification of Buddhism began with my letting go of traditional Buddhism. I have not forgotten these teachings and training, and they would indeed always be happy memories of my life. Buddhism is more than just a cultural tradition, that is to say, simpler than a cultural tradition.

A second interesting development in my Buddhist life was when I lived with a western Buddhist community in the UK in the 1980s. This was where I learned how western and westernized Buddhists transformed Buddhism into something meaningful to them. This valuable experience showed me that Buddhism can be relevant in our modern westernized world.

Another development in my Buddhist learning process was in the early 1990s which I spent as a visiting scholar in the University of California at Berkeley. This was a mostly academic approach to Buddhism, which was refreshing, because it allowed me to keep an open mind about religion in general. It was also a time when the internet was becoming popular, and Buddhist texts were being digitized (of which my sponsoring professor, Lewis Lancaster, was a pioneer).

Throughout these decades, one memory remained permanently engraved in my mind. They were the moments I spent listening to various teachers, professors, colleagues and friends who were desirous of learning Buddhism. There were great libraries and bookshops, too, in Bangkok, the UK and Berkeley, California, so that I built up a sizeable and valuable library of Buddhist scriptures and Buddhist-related works, which are of great help to my present translating project and teaching of early Buddhism.

These decades were very happy ones because I met various living great practitioners, such as Chaokhun Prayudh Payutto, Ajahn Sumedho, and Mahasi Sayadaw, not to mention the many kind and humble monastic teachers who taught me Dharma, Vinaya and Pali. I call these decades the "listening years."

A learning environment pervaded those decades. I am reminded of what Galileo once quipped, "I have never met a man so ignorant that I couldn't learn something from him." The best teacher, however, is not a person, but a listening ear. This is often mentioned in the discourses such the 12-step learning process of the Canki Sutta (M 95),¹ or the teaching of the (Ahara) Avijja Sutta (A 10.61).²

In fact, an awakened Buddhist is not really a "disciple," but a true "listener" (saavaka). Listening deeply to the Dharma, the listener becomes liberated from suffering. Even as a Bodhisattva, the

¹ M 95.20/2:173 = SD 21.15.

² A 10.61/5:113-116 = SD 31.10.

To a listening year 2010 by Piya Tan

Buddha is a deep listener, and becomes an even deeper listener as the Buddha. For, the Buddha can hear both heard sounds and unheard sounds. The heard sounds speak of suffering, but the unheard sounds, if we carefully listen to them, are those that tell us of the way out of such sufferings.

When we are very young, we are told to listen, but we usually don't. As teenagers, we are told to listen, but we simply won't. As adults, we are told to listen, but we listen almost only to our desires. As older folks, we think we know how to listen, but we often don't. Giving advice is a karmically responsible act; it affects us, too. As such, it must be done with patience and wisdom.

Even the Buddha, much as he is able to read another's mind, would not at once advise another. He would often guide the listener by asking, "What do you think?" and only when the listener is calm and ready, he would teach them. More often than not, the Buddha would use the "socratic method," asking helpful questions until the listener himself sees the truth within.³

The point is that to listen to others is to appreciate them. The Buddha is wise because he is himself a great listener right to the end. The truth of not-self teaches us that there is no fixed personality, and, as such, no fixed problem. When we listen carefully to a troubled person, the words express and define the problem. In the silence in between the words is where the solution lies.

As a true listener, our task is to referee the troubled person's speech so that he is able to hear his heart's clear stillness. A good listener teaches others to listen to themselves. The best person to solve a problem is the person himself; for, if he knows how to listen to himself, he will hear the solution. The best teacher teaches another to truly know himself. Early Buddhism, as such, is a listening religion, a self-help method of spiritual liberation.

May the New Year bring you more than success and prosperity: may you find happiness in the present moment and be a source of happiness to others, too.

Listen to your heart when it is happy; for, it will bring out the best of you and others. When it is sad, listen to your mind; it will remind you to look deeper and longer into your heart.

May the New Year be a listening year.

Piya Tan ©2009 rev2

³ See eg **Anatta,lakkhaṇa Sutta** (S 22.59/3:66-68) = SD 1.2.