

What if we keep on making the same mistake?

This is a fictitious letter put together based on behaviour patterns I have seen and feedback given to me from informants.

Dear O-Lan,

You wrote that you have been helping out in the Om Money Centre, volunteering as a regular cook. One day, when you noticed that the high priest there is playing around with his I-pod, you asked why a religious man needed such a gadget. And he retorted, telling you off, "You do not have enough wisdom to understand it. So do not tell me what to do!"

You said that you are deeply hurt and saddened by this. Moreover, there are a lot of other improper things going on at the Centre that clearly break the religious rules. I'm deeply saddened, too, as this is not the first time you have told me such stories. Nor are you the only one who has done so. Anyway, I hope this reflection written specially for you will perk up your spirit to rise above the situation.

A lot of people might tell you to simply get out of the situation. After all, they might say, if you stayed on, you are the one to be blamed. It is like you keep putting your hand into the fire and then wondering why it keeps hurting.

But we know that the situation is not so simple. Your fiercely pious mother, for example, deeply believes that the high priest there is enlightened and should be shown every respect and obedience. You are not sure about all this, but your filial piety dictates that you should respect the opinions of elders.

You have shared with me, more times than I can remember, your moments of disappointment and despair like this. I cannot say I know how you are suffering because I am not you. But I will keep listening to you and responding as positively as I can so that you know that you are not alone.

Please remember this. Whenever you are in spiritual pain, I am always here with an ear for you. You are not alone. The Buddha's teaching is still with us, and we can be strengthened by turning to the Dharma. We can then recharge and renew ourselves.

I hope each time you contact me with such a problem, you have greater inner peace and wisdom to see the bigger picture. With this, you will have greater strength to rise above and beyond such sources of sufferings. You probably notice, in reviewing yourself, that you are actually much stronger now than before. You have learned to question what you see as wrong. Of course, some more positive changes are needed.

We all have some strong karmic connections from past lives. Maybe you were serving the priest even in past lives, which might explain why you are still loyal to him despite his taking you for granted. Maybe you feel that your kindness could make him a better person. But it is very much harder in reality to change things.

In your case, let me hazard to say that your constant goodness and compassion have brought such pain upon you. You want to help others, but they are not appreciative of

your kindness, and treat you like a common slave. They remain unmoved by your compassion.

Some might say that you are simply facing the fruits of your past karma. But I think the reason for this is that you have chosen to stay on. Our karma might have brought us to where we are, but we can wholesomely change the situation or get away from it if we choose to.

For me, all this is a powerful lesson in the human spirit. I am amazed at how much compassion and patience you have in continuing to serve those who regularly hurt you. The Buddhist texts have a very moving story of a woman who, within the same day, lost all her family and goes mad. Finally, she meets the Buddha who heals her, and she becomes a wise teacher. With her past painful experiences, she is able to counsel and relieve other suffering women.

Do keep asking yourself, “What is the meaning of all this?” In moments of your inner stillness, look deep into the pattern of things that have been happening to you. In time, you will surely see the wisdom of it all. You must persist in this vision. For, you have the stuff of which great saints are made.

The lotus will rise from the mud. For the moment, be like a lotus leaf: let all the world’s evil run off and out of your mind.

Piya Tan ©2011 110404a