

Write words

What George Orwell writes in his essay, “Why I Write,” must surely strike a harmonious chord with those who love writing and believe in humanity,

“My starting point is always a feeling of partisanship, a sense of injustice. When I sit down to write a book, I do not say to myself, ‘I am going to produce a work of art’. I write it because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing. But I could not do the work of writing a book, or even a long magazine article, if it were not also an aesthetic experience.” (1946)

Writing, in its own way, is more permanent than talking, which is usually impromptu, and, as such, does not really engage us to the fullest of our knowledge and ability to think and feel. Moreover, talking means talking with another or others, that is, we need to be interactive, if we are ever to keep the friends at all. Often, our listeners are our immediate critics and censors, which means we never really get to fully say our piece.

Then again, to hold our peace is not helpful, except in meditation. To be able to write something that brings both the writer and the reader some inner peace is surely one of the greatest gifts and joys of writing—and of the Dharma. Yet, to say this is to acknowledge that there are some things, even many things, that disturb our peace and blur our vision.

The most difficult thing to write about is religious matters. The reason is simple: everybody has an opinion or feeling about religion, whether they know it or not. Even within the same religion, there are dissenting voices. An unconditional goodness of Buddhism is that it allows the most latitude amongst its followers. There are at least two reasons for this: a simple one and a complex one.

The simple reason for the Buddhist tolerance of differing opinions and dissent is because we all have views. It is like looking at the same mountain, but each of us is standing on different sides of it. We are each talking about our “view” of that same mountain, and yet we are saying different things about it. We have to allow space here for others because all of us are right: we are speaking from our personal experience. Yet, we are all wrong, too, because we are not speaking of the whole mountain: if we ever could that is.

Perhaps it is best we all climb the mountain, reach its peak, and silently enjoy the breath-taking view from the top. And then smile at each other for having scaled the heights to be on top of things. There is nothing more to debate or quarrel over.

If we do write clearly and accurately (as far as possible) with a passion about things that matter to us, this becomes a useful testimony for posterity. Truly enriched are our lives, when in our readings, we are able to look into the minds and hearts of our forebears who have written with clarity, accuracy and wisdom. These are like signs

and markers left behind by great and kind travellers on our trail through this jungle called life.

As Buddhists, the best trail for us is the Pali highway of early Buddhism, which is direct and clear. Some, however, might prefer the numerous side-shows, noisy festivals, and colourful events that cultural Buddhisms have to offer. So we linger on as the captive audiences of some sweet theatrics of the Big Screen and the exciting magical illusions of the Diamond Stage.

When the diversions are over, all seen and done, we realize that it's all smoke, mirrors, bells, incense, and robes. We must move on. We need to hit the safe and straight highway again. For many of us, we may have to go back to reading the travel brochures again, so that we know better how to choose our destination and mode of travel. We need to go back to the Buddha Dharma.

What if we do not like writing, or often feel at a loss for words? Using the wrong words or figures, or writing something hazily, can be as bad as not writing, or worse. Even then, we could still just read on: what is a writer without readers, who are the vital majority? Reading, especially enjoyable reading, is the art of allowing ourselves to learn how to live well and more fully.

A good book would fully absorb us, to be one with our reading. A better reading is one where, having read, we are so overwhelmed with a sense of our self and other melding into a blissful oneness, that we are joyfully, smilingly, at a loss for words. The best reading is one that turns us fully inwards into our own goodness. It is such a blissful goodness that we have no need for anything else, that is, for as long as our hearts are still.

And when we emerge from that enlivening bliss, we might feel a burst of urgency as to why others have not tasted such sublime and joyful freedom, too. So we are compelled to act, to write, so as to awaken the goodness in others, too.

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