

From stumbling-blocks to stepping-stones

The world's worst floods of recent times occurred during the 2011 monsoon in Thailand, most severely in the Chao Phraya river basin. Beginning in late July and continuing for four months, the floods affecting over 2.3 million people, with over 500 deaths, and causing damages estimated at up to 156.7 billion baht (5.1 billion USD). The flooding affected about six million hectares of land, over 300,000 hectares of which were farmland, in 58 provinces, from Chiang Mai in the north to parts of the capital, Bangkok, near the Chao Phraya mouth.

Seven major industrial estates were submerged by as much 3 meters (10 feet) of water. Amongst these were the factories of one of our kindest Buddhist supporters. One of his first urgent responses was to transfer his existing orders to overseas competitors so as not to affect his customers. Fortunately, all his factories were fully insured. Still, he would lose 70% of his business for the next 6 months, without any compensation.

Despite this, his thoughts were with the some 3000 workers affected by the floods, a number of whom lost their homes and properties. His office raised one million baht within three days to help such Thai co-workers. They formed a Thai Flood Relief Team to help them rebuild their houses, and get back on their feet.

Personally, he had survived Mt Kailash in 2002, a triple bypass in 2004, and the Lehman financial crisis in 2008. Yet he reflects that there would be more opportunities with every crisis. However, things would have to get worse before they get better. He assures us that we will overcome all obstacles and survive,...in cycles.

Fortunately, he confides, he is more of a saver and giver than a borrower or spender. So don't worry about him, he said, but pray for the flood victims. This is the nature of samsara, unpredictable and impermanent. And he thanked us for our concerns. He closes his email message with a reassuring "Cheers (when the water subsides)."

When I first read his message, images of devastating ancient floods in the world's great civilizations appeared in pastiches in my mind: the Huanghe in China, the rivers of India, the Tigris and Euphrates in Mesopotamia, the Nile in Egypt and wherever great rivers ran. Water gives us life and movement; water can also take away whatever we treasure. It is as if the water element, through its floods, is teaching us never to take things for granted. What we gain, by that very token, means we can lose it.

More significantly, we can enjoy the wealth and blessings that nature provides us for limited times only. We can celebrate life only when we understand that there we can lose everything we have loved or worked for. For losses and pains are better teachers than gains and pleasures.

Water is everywhere. There is water inside us; there is water all around us. Our internal water element and the external water element are the same. We are all earth, water, fire and wind. We are all impermanent, changing, becoming other.

Thus, in times of difficulties and losses, we will see our good sides, our desire to learn, our will to recover. Sometimes when we are deprived of all that we "have," we begin to truly touch what we "are." Things, we can only *have*, but goodness and resilience are what we truly *are*,

what we must be. This is the beauty and verity of the first noble truth: only in really looking at pain in the eye, can we get out of its sight. No pain, no gain: know pain, no suffering.

It is fascinating, and rewarding, to learn about how many of the illustrious minds who found greatness when their lives were flooded with difficulties. Yet, they refused to drown in their trials and tribulations. We are reminded, for example, of how O Henry became one of the greatest short story writers in the English language.

O Henry (1862-1910), the American short story writer, whose real name was William Sydney Porter was, in 1896, charged with having embezzled money while working as a teller in an Austin, Texas, bank some years before. He fled to Honduras, and thereafter visited several South American countries. While holed up in a Trujillo hotel for several months, he wrote *Cabbages and Kings* (1904), in which he coined the term "banana republic" to describe the country (Honduras), and which became an expression for any small, unstable third-world country.

In 1897, on hearing that his wife was dying, he returned to Austin, well knowing he would risk prosecution. Indeed, in the following year, he was arrested and sentenced to serve four years in the Ohio penitentiary (1898-1901). Later, his innocence was established, and that had he originally stood trial, he would have been acquitted. His wife died in 1897.

Apparently, it was while in prison that he wrote some of his great works, and where he first adopted the pen-name of O Henry. In 1902, he settled in New York, where he produced a regular series of greatly popular stories (such as my schoolboy's favourite, "The Last Leaf"). They are characterized by a rich imagination, reminiscent of *The Arabian Nights*, of which he knew well. Some, however, have criticized him for his "literary vaudeville" of constant striving for effect and the excessive use of slang. He is perhaps best loved for his myriad insights into the humanity in New York City, and for his stories' wit, wordplay, warmth and clever "twist endings."¹

Both my kind friend whose factories have been inundated in Thailand recently and O Henry's troubles at the turn of the 20th century are each telling us, in their own way, that although material wealth is out there to be made, it is when we are deprived of the most precious things we own, that we would see the wealth that is truly ours. That wealth is our true genius, our heart, undefined by worldly wealth, but defining it, making it worthwhile and liberating. With such wealth, we have truly lived well, and will warm others into wanting to live well, too.

Both the stories of the kind friend and of O Henry are inspiring to us because, in important ways, at their best, they re-enact the Buddha's renunciation of the world. The Buddha, however, is unsurpassed in having given up everything he *has*: his wealth, even his kingdom, his family, even his wife and only son, and in previous lives, even his own lives. As a Bodhisattva, he dies for us, many times over; as the Buddha, he lives for us. No greater love has a man than to live, life after life, for the liberation of others. This is the supreme sacrifice anyone can make. For, on account of this, we, after the Buddha, need only walk the path he has opened up for us.

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¹ <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F40A17FA3F5F13738DDDAD0A94D8415B868DF1D3>: view.