

Value of loss

A well known Turkish folk tale of the 13th-century Sufi Nasrudin relates how he once went to a Turkish bath. As he was poorly dressed, the attendants treated him poorly, giving him only a scrap of soap and an old towel. When he left, Nasrudin gave the attendants a gold coin each. They of course did not complain, but wondered if he had been better treated he might have given an even larger tip.

The following week Nasrudin, very well dressed, visited the bath again. This time, he was looked after like a king. After being massaged, perfumed and treated with the greatest deference, he handed the attendants just a tiny copper coin each. "This," said Nasrudin, "is for last time. The gold coins were for this time."

Such stories serve as jokes to those who love jokes. Others tell it as their own to show off how clever they are. Still others simply collect them, and die without ever laughing or smiling. However, if we love the Dharma, we would know that every story is about the Dharma, about life and liberation. It is just a matter of looking deep enough.

There is a legend about the layman Dharma teacher Vimalakirti who was poorly dressed, poor in social manners, and who spoke the plain truth about things. The wise naturally loved him, the proud understandably disliked him. Whenever he talked on Dharma, only a small handful of people would come to listen.

The crowd was elsewhere enjoyably laughing at the entertaining talks on how to be rich and successful given by various well dressed well known well titled wealthy speakers. Vimalakirti was giving them gold, but the crowd was only getting and making airy emptiness. That's why the Buddha's image always smiles at us.

Another beloved story of Nasrudin is about a moving friend. One day, a friend of his who was moving away asked him for his ring. "Why do you want my ring?" asked Nasrudin. "I want something to remember you by." "In that case," suggested Nasrudin, "why don't you give me *your* ring." "Why," retorted the befuddled friend. "You can easily lose my ring," explained Nasrudin, "But if you give me your ring, whenever you notice it's missing, you'll remember me!"

Many of us love to collect things we see as valuable or pleasurable. I used to love collecting books, and family and friends, too, would give me books, knowing that I loved them. My library could fill a whole 4-room flat in Singapore with only space for sitting and studying (besides the toilets, of course).

Then one day, the temple officials, upset with my constant critical writings and talks, and open sharing with others, asked me to leave. They kept almost all of my books claiming that they came from temple donations, so they were not mine. It was impossible to persuade them otherwise. Anyway, it was quite a lot of books to move around with.

The best way to stop a writer is to take away his pen, so they thought. To them, my writings were too disrespectful, even destructive, of the old beliefs and traditions, which had supported the temples for generations. When people knew too much Sutta and Dharma, they become too self-reliant and do more meditation, they would not donate to the temples and would not serve the temple as free workers.

Secretly, I was quite happy to have “lost” the books. There were simply too many books to read, and not all of them are really useful. Fortunately, too, I had with me the Tipitaka and related books wherever I moved to. The irony of it all was that later I found that nothing was really lost. All the books I need are found on the Internet and the various public libraries where I live.

Even more wonderful is the fact of impermanence. As the decades passed, I find it ever easier to understand the Suttas and the Dharma. That is with a simple dose of regular meditation. There is no need for dhyana, because I discovered that in Chapter 25 of the Samyutta Nikaya, the Buddha says that if we regularly reflect on impermanence, we would awaken as a streamwinner (the first step to awakening) in this life itself – if not, surely at the moment of passing away.¹

In other words, we do not really need the books and computers, or even religion, to be free from suffering. It’s all in the mind. If we learn to regularly work on our inner peace and smile at all things and everyone, our heart will shine like a radiant lotus upon the words of the Suttas, Their meaning and connections simply appear to us in the still spaces of our lives.

This reminds me of another insightful story of Nasrudin that helps us know the Dharma better. One day Nasrudin and his friend were sitting together, drinking tea and chatting about life and love. His friend asked: “How come you never married?”

“Well,” said Nasrudin, “to tell you the truth, I spend my youth looking for the perfect woman. In Cairo I met a beautiful and intelligent woman, but she was unkind. Then in Baghdad, I met a woman who was a wonderful and generous soul, but we had no common interests. One woman after another would seem just right, but there would always be something missing. Then one day, I met her; beautiful, intelligent, generous and kind. We had very much in common. In fact, she was perfect!”

“So, what happened?” asked Nasrudin’s friend, “Why didn’t you marry her?” Nasrudin sipped his tea reflectively. “Well,” he replied, “it’s really a sad story. It seemed that she was looking for the perfect man!”

I love this story because it reminds me of my own fervent quest as a young Buddhist. I was looking around for the best teachers to teach me Pali, Sanskrit, the Suttas and meditation. I went to one teacher after another. A few were really good, most were notoriously quirky – but I learned different things from all of them, and I am truly grateful for this.

I have stopped searching for gurus and teachings, partly because I’ve simply become too old for shopping around, but the real reason is that I’ve found all that I need in the Suttas. Dharma joy is sufficient fuel to move me (or rather to keep me still) to translate, study and teach the Suttas almost every day for the last dozen years. And to write such a reflection as this every week for the last 7 years.

There is another reason for my love for translating the Suttas – I have accepted the fact that I am imperfect. I have been looking for perfection outside of myself for as long as I can remem-

¹ (Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta (S 25.1), SD 16.7: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/16.7-Anicca-Cakkhu-S-s25.1-piya.pdf>

ber. In an important sense, I have found that perfect partner: the Dharma. And the Dharma tells me that I am yet to be perfect. This is the most wonderful thing to know, because I am also able to do something about it – with the Dharma’s help through the Suttas and my own heart.

Of course, not everyone needs to translate the Suttas to understand themselves better. We only need to reflect on them. If we look at the Suttas only as words, or views to defend, or rituals to perform, or powerful holy beings to worship, then that is all we might get. The Suttas are a Dharma mirror for us to look into, to accept ourselves as we are as a start, and move on to be a most wonderful person in the world, and beyond. The most valuable thing we have is our view of ourself. If we are willing to lose that view, we will become even more valuable ourself.

R313 Simple Joys 232

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