

How to write a reflection

Before we can write a reflection, we must *reflect*. How do we reflect? A helpful guideline is given in these four principles of right speech:

- (1) He speaks the truth, the truth is his bond, trustworthy, reliable, no deceiver of the world.
- (2) His words reconcile those who have broken apart or consolidate those who are united. He loves concord, delights in concord, enjoys concord, speaks things that foster concord.
- (3) He speaks words that are humane, soothing, loving, touching, urbane, and delightful and pleasant to the multitude.
- (4) He speaks in season, what is true, what is beneficial. He speaks the Dharma (the spiritual practice) and the Vinaya (the moral practice). He speaks words worth treasuring, timely, backed by reason, measured, connected with the spiritual goal.

In short, a Dharma reflection must be truthful, promote harmony, be inspiring and be beneficial.¹

Here, “truthful” means that a reflection may sometimes be pleasant, sometimes unpleasant, but both are given in a timely manner, that is, when it is the right occasion.² Such an occasion can be a happy or inspiring one, such as a beautiful meditation experience or a remarkable story: this is the rule of thumb followed by an “inspirational” reflection (like this one).

Or, it could be a somewhat unpleasant or difficult situation which needs to be addressed. This is the kind of reflection we call “revisoning” (or “re-visioning”), that is, examining the situation again and carefully in the light of the Buddha Dharma. One great difficulty here is that, often we simply cannot really know “who” caused the problem.³ There is a vital difference between blaming someone and knowing the real conditions bringing about the problem.

There are two important reasons for this. Firstly, if we were to blame someone, it is only to stereotype him, as if declaring that the person *is* the problem. Just as we place the teaching above the teacher, here we are dealing with a problem, not a person. This is also in keeping with the universal truth of non-self. Secondly, we need to define or explain the problem clearly so that we will understand the gravity and significance of the problem, and so have a good idea what to do or not to do.

A Dharma reflection inspires us to connect with others, especially our loved ones, and to cultivate unconditional acceptance of others. Such an attitude helps us to live, work and play happily with others. This is where our own joyful feelings should pervade the reflection.

In a way, we cannot really plan to write a reflection. It simply comes to us when the time is right, and this can happen anywhere. The rule is that we need to get into a wholesome state of mind, especially through meditation,⁴ or on account of seeing something really inspiring or meaningful,⁵ or upon hearing

¹ See eg **Kandaraka Sutta** (M 51,14), [SD 32.9](#).

² See **Abhaya Rāja,kumāra Sutta** (M 58) & [SD 7.12 \(3\)](#).

³ See “[Who what why how](#)” (R277) 130130.

⁴ See eg “[Meditation has no name](#)” (old title): “The meditation without a name” (R155), in *Revisoning Buddhism* 2011 no 27; “[Awakening moments](#)” (R206), in *Loving Words* (SJ3), 2013 no 21a, which is translated into German as “*Aufrüttelnde Momente*,” in *Loving Words* (SJ3) no 21b; “[Breathe Dharma](#)” (R324) 131225.

⁵ Once I was looking at some beautiful nature, lovely music arose in my mind, upon which I wrote “[Silent sunny spaces](#)” (R285) 130327. On another occasion, it was upon seeing a sunbird building a nest outside our main door: “[The sunbird and free will](#)” (R82) 090520, in *Simple Joys 1* (2009) no 7.5.

a Dharma-moved testimony,⁶ or after a good friendly meeting or therapy session,⁷ or from beautiful literature,⁸ or even from a dream.⁹

Often I would come across some negative report in the news,¹⁰ or a bad situation in connection with Buddhism,¹¹ or some misperception of Buddhist teachings,¹² or someone who is really suffering some setback or difficulty.¹³ It is easy to write about a bad or painful situation. This is nothing new, but only adds on to the burden that we all are already bearing. We want to know how to solve problems, or better, to simply feel happy – some simple joy -- despite the problems. In other words, a good “revisioning” or reflection makes our day.

The truth is that revisionings are more difficult to write than reflections. Revisionings often point directly to human failings, sometimes in Buddhism itself, or in the local community, or in famous teachers,¹⁴ or someone we know well. What else can we re-envision, but those whom we know and love, and what we have deep faith in and practise (Buddhism)?

Very often, I would simply write what I think as a catharsis to resolve my own sadness or failure, as it were. Such revisionings would be stored safely away until the right time to publish them (perhaps even posthumously). However, these are the kinds of writings, if regularly, properly, compassionately and courageously done would raise the quality of our religious lives and enrich our Buddhist community. But we must be ready for them.

Such reflections or revisionings never come ready made. The best we can do is start somewhere, especially when the Dharma touches us. Two important occasions are often pivotal in firing us up to express our feeling in moving words. It can be either when we perceive pain or when we perceive joy. Pain often tells us that something is not right, and we can learn from this. In a reflection we try to define this pain, examine the conditions that brought it about, then we envision a state where this pain is no more, and finally work to attain the end of that pain. This is, of course, the four-truth approach.

Similarly, if we experience something blissful, deeply moving or profoundly peaceful, we are at first at a loss as to how to express the feelings. We need to choose what sort of genre or medium to express this joy: a poem,¹⁵ a story,¹⁶ an essay¹⁷? And, of course, we then need to choose our words and express our feelings.

Then we need to ask ourselves: would anyone be interested to read such a reflection? Of course, anyone interested in the Dharma would be likely to have an interest in them. The point is that we, the reader, must be able to relate to the reflection. For this reason, the first person plural (“we”) is almost always used in these writings. It is as if we, the reader, are ourselves writing it, or that we are having in a spiritual soliloquy.

⁶ See eg “[Still centre](#)” (R320), 130415, rev 131125.

⁷ See eg “[Bus ride to nirvana](#)” (R41), in *Simple Joys 1*, 2009 no 8.3.

⁸ See eg “[New lamps for old](#)” (R190) 110525, in *Healing Words* (SJ2), 2011 no 60.

⁹ See eg “[Tikkun olam](#)” (R157) 101006, in *Healing Words* (SJ2), 2011 no 37; “[Canaletto dreaming](#)” (R272) 121226.

¹⁰ See eg “[Self-destruct or self-construct?](#)” (R245) 120620.

¹¹ See eg “[Aliens and UFOs in Buddhism](#)” (146) 100728, in *Revisioning Buddhism*, 2011 no 22.

¹² See eg “[Buddhism without words](#)” (R165) 101201, in *Revisioning Buddhism*, 2011 no 30.

¹³ See eg “[Making the same mistake](#)” (R184) 110406, in *Loving Words* (SJ3) no 56.

¹⁴ See esp **Ahita Thera Sutta** (A 5.88), [SD 40a.16](#), which says that even famous teachers can have wrong views.

¹⁵ Eg “[Shadow and light](#)” (R121) 101027, in *Healing Words* (SJ2) no 18.

¹⁶ Eg “[Making the same mistake](#)” (R184) 110406, in *Loving Words* (SJ3) no 56.

¹⁷ Most of our reflections and revisionings are essays.

The reflections mostly try to inspire or remind us to look within ourselves to touch our potential for being truly happy, or even being creative ourselves. We often have people who respond with appreciative responses (some saying how they have been uplifted, or their lives changed; some of these emails can be rather long, giving their own views of the reflections. Often enough, such responses in turn inspire more reflections.¹⁸

The Dharma moves us in joyful ways. We must prepare ourselves to taste just joys before we express them to others. Firstly, we need to love learning, especially of languages, at least the language we commonly communicate in. We need to master the language to some highly expressive and beautiful level. In other words, we must also love mythology and literature.

Of course, we must love writing and communicating, and to write in a way that is truthful, easy, pleasant and beneficial to others. To do this, we must live and love the Buddha Dharma, which teaches us to see ourselves and others not as fixed entities, suffering pain or enjoying bliss, but as conscious processes, changing and learning every waking movement, maybe even in our dreams. This is the joyful path toward awakening. I have taken this reflective path for the last 7 years (since 2007) and still journeying, and can only say how joyful I am to have you as a travelling companion moving towards self-awakening.¹⁹

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¹⁸ Eg "[Present being](#)" (R323) 131219.

¹⁹ See also "[How to be creative](#)" (R123) 100210, in *Healing Words* (SJ2) 2011 no 20.