

Free genius¹

The American inventor and businessman, Thomas Alva Edison (1847-1931), whose numerous inventions included the phonograph, the motion picture camera, and the electric light bulb, was attributed with the quip: "Genius: one percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration."

This quip arose from a remark he made in a 1929 press conference, when he was recorded as saying, "None of my inventions came by accident. I see a worthwhile need to be met and I make trial after trial until it comes. **What it boils down to is one per cent inspiration and ninety-nine per cent perspiration.**"²

Here "genius," of course, means an exceptional natural capacity of intellect, especially as shown in creative and original works of the arts and the sciences. This usage, as noted by the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), was recorded in the second half of the 17th century.

The oldest meaning of "genius" was that of "the tutelary god or attendant spirit³ to every person at his birth, to govern his fortunes and determine his character, and finally to conduct him out of the world." The OED records the first usage of the word "genius" in this sense as far back as 1390. In this sense, we often hear of someone's "evil genius" when he does a terrible bad or admirable wrong; but the phrase "good genius" is almost never heard of.

Both the senses of "genius" as used by Edison and its ancient usage refers to our propensity for learning. In both cases, we can say that this is a good, or, at least, a useful, form of learning. In early Buddhism, too, there is only one kind of learning (*bahu,sacca*), that of the good Dharma.

Our need and advantages for learning good are, of course, necessitated by the possibility, even proclivity, for learning bad, and so reaping its disadvantages. Hence, we have a broader sense of "genius," that is, our natural aptitude, coupled with more or less an inclination for something bad or good.

Simply put, this is our capacity for learning, which, as we know, can go either way: the bad or the good. This very much depends on whom we associate with and what we choose to learn – and with what values (wealth, power, beauty, kindness, happiness, spirituality) we have been conditioned since young.

Take, for example, a young nation like Singapore or Malaysia, which, because of her lack of deep roots and wealth of local literature and spirituality, needs to heavily borrow or plagiarize from other more dominant nations, especially the material and religious cultures of Britain and the United States, or any other nation whose cultural genius (another important sense of the word) seems more mature and developed.

Singapore is predominantly Chinese, with a steady influx of mainland Chinese (we only need to visit Chinatown to feel what China is probably like). Malaysia, though predominantly Muslim, has a significant (but steadily diminishing) population of Chinese. In both countries, the Chinese (along with the local Thais and Sinhalese) are predominantly Buddhist. However,

¹ Dedicated to those who have lived under gurus, and survived to teach and heal us.

² Quoted in James D Newton, *Uncommon Friends: Life with Thomas Edison, Henry Ford, Harvey Firestone, Alexis Carrel & Charles Lindbergh*, London: Cengage Learning EMEA, 1987:24.

³ "Genius" also has the sense of "a local guardian spirit," such as a **yaksha** (*yakkha*) in early Buddhism. The yaksha, however, refers to either an inoffensive nature-spirit or a ogre or ghost inhabiting the wilderness. The yakshas (or a group of them) serve as the warriors and attendants of Vessavana, the Great Guardian King of the north (one of the 4 Great Kings, inhabiting the lowest of the Buddhist heavens). Popular Buddhism of SE Asia sees the yaksha as a powerful terrestrial guardian deity.

the Chinese population, especially the young, better educated and upper classes, are steadily drawn to various forms of Christianity,⁴ so that within a couple of generations, we can say that Singapore will very likely be another South Korea (where, in 2007, 29% are Christian, and only 21% Buddhist).⁵

Yet, Buddhism – especially early Buddhism, the teaching of the historical Buddha – is not about church, crowd or charisma. So numbers do not really matter. For spiritual change can only occur individually, just as we must each see for ourself, breathe for ourself. Only then Buddhism is present within us to transform our lives, to liberate us.

For Buddhism to be a wholesome presence in Singapore, Malaysia or any society, it must highlight spiritual growth and free our genius.⁶ I've often spoken about spiritual growth in other reflections, so here we will only examine how to free our genius.

Let us begin by asking what prevents spiritual growth and stifles genius. The worst way (or the *best* way, if we do not love the Dharma) to stifle our Buddhist genius is to allow ourselves to be persuaded, and so to be deluded, by gurus who have never tasted the Dharma, but insidiously feed on the crowd and audience.

Whenever we approach such a guru as a person, we are dismayed (if we are perceptive) that he has neither time nor wisdom for us. Or worse, if we present a problem to him for his counsel, we are likely to be told that just as “emptiness” is a key Buddhist teaching, there is no such thing as a problem! Some of us actually are impressed by the guru's ways with words.

When we meet such a guru, we are likely to think that we are seeing God (if we believe in God), or some cosmic Buddha (if we believe in them), or that this guru is some Bodhisattva in flesh and blood. This is the kind of faith that feeds gurus. We create gurus by our own greed, hate and delusion: the greed for being told we're right, the hate of a common dislike, and the delusion of it all.

The guru is divinely adept at riveting our attention, time and resources to only one thing – to himself. He has usurped the place of the Buddha; his fiats and fancies – what he commands and imagines – become the pillars and bars of our “Dharma”; and our admiration for him and him alone is our “Sangha,” the ground that holds us up.

In short, we are nobody and nothing, but a reflection or shadow of the Guru. We are “nobody” because we have never really looked within to see what we really are. Of course, we are nothing, because we do not see that we are totally dependent on the Guru. We have stopped thinking and seeking for ourselves. The guru has destroyed our genius.

Those of us who have been enslaved by a Guru painfully know that we are so used to being chained to him, his words, and his ways, that even when the door is wide open we dare not walk out for fear of the light and space out there. And when we do find ourselves out there, we are still chained to the Guru. Our Guru still thinks for us: it is as if we have left our remote control with him.⁷

⁴ In 2010, Singapore was 33% Buddhist; Christians 18%, no religion 17%, Muslim 15%, Daoist 11%, Hindu 5%, folk religion 1%. While Buddhist growth is declining (1980, 57%, Buddhist+Daoist, 27% Buddhist; 2000, 51%; 2010, 44.2%), Christian growth is increasing (1980, 10%, 2000, 14.6%, 2010, 18.3%, note the percentage rise). See [Official Singapore Statistics](#); Wiki: [Religions in Singapore](#).

⁵ On the historical fate of Buddhism in premodern Korea, see R E Buswell Jr, “Buddhism in Korea,” in *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2005:1173.

⁶ We see this happening more often in western (“convert”) Buddhist groups than amongst ethnic Buddhists: see eg Reflection, “[Buddhism rises in the West](#),” R150, 2010.

⁷ See Reflection, “[Mental slavery](#),” R118, 2010 & “[Your mind, use it or lose it](#),” R125, 2010.

These chains are, of course, the views, beliefs and mirages that the Guru has put into our heads. The best way – perhaps, the only way – that we can break free from this divine prison is to learn and understand how the Buddha himself has broken the chains of priestcraft of the brahmins and the rut of rituals. He rejects the very idea that goodness belongs only to the highest class, the perfect preacher or priest who saves and succour us. Above all, the Buddha breaks the tenacious chains that belittle us and kill our genius: the chain of views.

To be free from views, we must first understand they are really mirages. They are real all right, but are only as real as we allow them. However, as we draw nearer to the Guru, we only see his clay feet (if we look hard enough), and feel no warm heartbeat (but only our own).

The Buddha has left his legacy of wisdom and ways of freeing oneself from Gurus and God, of freeing our genius, so that we can think for ourselves, feel the beauty of goodness, and taste true freedom for ourselves. If we humbly allow these teachings – **the suttas** – to open our eyes, warm our hearts and free our minds – we have then become geniuses ourselves!

Genius, then, is neither Guru nor God, but our own ability to understand what bad and good are, and our wisdom to choose good rightly. Such a choice is like the key that opens the prison door of views, and we find ourselves in a boundless world of beauty and joy that are difficult to pin down in words, but we must try. Then, others, too, would know that they need only to look within to free their genius.

Then, declares the Buddha, we are “one who has crossed over doubt, gone beyond uncertainty, won spiritual confidence, who, independent of others, dwells in the Teacher’s teaching.”⁸ If we diligently live by the Dharma – reflecting on the nature of impermanence all around us – then, the Dharma will make a true genius of each and every one of us.

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⁸ **Nakula Sutta** (A 6.16), [SD 5.2](#). See **Entering the stream**, [SD 3.3](#). See also **The teacher or the teaching**, [SD 3.14](#).