

Dish-washing

One of the dreaded domestic chores is dish-washing. After a meal, we have unwashed piles of plates and dishes, a tangle of forks and spoons, and a miscellany of bowl and cups, and what else. None of us, after a good meal, really feels like washing anything except our mouths. Not my wife, who, as a rule, ends up washing, after the hours she has lovingly cooked for us.

It's amazing how she does not seem to tire. But she does. As age creeps up upon her, she feels aches and pain especially in the joints. So, she has patches of Tokusen plasters all over her arms, that even the vegetable sellers at the Jurong market asked, with some concern, if she was all right or if she is advertising the brand. We must envy the pains she has taken to befriend the hoi polloi who now know her almost as well as our local MP.

I'm usually the last person to turn in when I end my sutta work at around midnight, when I feel really sleepy. However, when I still feel a little fresh, I would quietly—well, not so quietly—wash the dishes. Then, the next morning, my wife beamingly says, "Someone washed the dishes last night!" My usual reply: "Oh, it's the house Leprachaun. You never see him doing it."

The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (M 10), in section 6, says, "In whatever way his body is disposed, that is how he understands it."¹ This includes dishwashing, too. Why is it not mentioned, we may ask? Well, the monastics only have their almsbowls, with which they receive almsfood, from which they eat, and which they must wash. Good faithful monastics, that is, do this. Even then, they still have to wash their bowls, dry them carefully and then store them away in a safe place. It's a symbol of the sacred link between renunciation and the world.

Whenever I can (this is never enough) I will wash the dishes. As with my books, I will first sort them into proper piles: the big plates, the smaller ones to top; the big bowls, the smaller ones on top; the forks and spoons in a big unwashed pot filled with water; and finally, the miscellany. I usually start with the forks and spoons, which are the most tedious to wash. But, I remind myself, this is more fun than having to read prolix postings by a cerebral poster who dogs us on social media.

There is a story about a very slow-witted monk whom the Buddha teaches a very simple meditation. He is told to spread a piece of clean white cloth around his palm, and with the other palm mindfully to keep on rubbing it, mentally noting, "Cleaning, cleaning ... " Then, he notices how the cloth becomes soiled, and reflects its impermanence. In due course, he becomes a full-fledged arhat (DhA 2.3). There is good reason to note, then, as we wash the dishes, "Washing, washing ...".

¹ See Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (M 10), SD 13.3. <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/13.3-Satipatthana-S-m10-main-piya.pdf>.

The Scotch-Brite must have enough washing-fluid, but not too much—just enough to remove the remnants and grease from whatever we are washing. This is like putting in just enough effort to remove distractions and so that our attention is fully directed to the breath or to lovingkindness, the object of our meditation. Our washings should be spick and span just as our mind is at the height of its joy.

And before you know it – there is only “washing, washing” – the washing is done! And we actually begin to miss it. OK, not really, but a sense of small accomplishment. Not as big as how Sisyphus feels when he runs after his boulder and it stops at the foot of the hill. We don’t have to wash for a while, and can go back to sutta work.

This is not about washing really—it’s about showing our love to someone we care about, and who cares for us far more than dirty dishes and unwashed pots.

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