

Living well, dying well

To be a Buddhist is to know we have eyes and to use them well; to have ears, nose, tongue, body, and above all, to know we have a mind and use it well. We learn to sense peace and beauty, or at least we know it is possible to do so. We do not just see a glorious sunset or a beautiful flower, but experience it fully. To do that we need to suspend all judgement and disbelief, and just be present with the sunset, with the flower, with the people we love, with those whom we care.

Sometimes we read something so beautiful; it leaves us speechless; it should. For beauty is beyond all language, even poetry or art. The most beautiful poetry is not words, it is not read, nor heard. The best poetry is felt deep in our hearts, when we are truly present with this joyful moment, this beautiful inner silence, which even the most enchanting music can only echo, and which words fail to convey.

If we ponder over the great figures of history who have enriched our lives, we will see this sense of goodness, peace and beauty. Such great minds always have a place in their hearts for the Buddha, and also see goodness in others. One such example is the analytic philosopher, Richard Rorty (1931-2007), who wrote in his “Fire of Life” (*Poetry*, Nov 2007), some of the most beautiful lines ever written:

Shortly after finishing “Pragmatism and Romanticism,” I was diagnosed with inoperable pancreatic cancer. Some months after I learned the bad news, I was sitting around having coffee with my elder son and a visiting cousin. My cousin (who is a Baptist minister) asked me whether I had found my thoughts turning toward religious topics, and I said no. “Well, what about philosophy?” my son asked. “No,” I replied, neither the philosophy I had written nor that which I had read seemed to have any particular bearing on my situation. I had no quarrel with Epicurus’s argument that it is irrational to fear death, nor with Heidegger’s suggestion that ontotheology originates in an attempt to evade our mortality. But neither *ataraxia* (freedom from disturbance) nor *Sein zum Tode* (being toward death) seemed in point.

“Hasn’t *anything* you’ve read been of any use?” my son persisted. “Yes,” I found myself blurting out, “poetry.” “Which poems?” he asked. I quoted two old chestnuts that I had recently dredged up from memory and been oddly cheered by, the most quoted lines of Swinburne’s “Garden of Proserpine”:

We thank with brief thanksgiving
Whatever gods may be
That no life lives for ever;
That dead men rise up never;
That even the weariest river
Winds somewhere safe to sea.

and Landor’s “On His Seventy-Fifth Birthday”:

Weekly reflections by Piya Tan

Nature I loved, and next to Nature, Art;
I warmed both hands before the fire of life,
It sinks, and I am ready to depart. (Richard Rorty, *The Fire of Life*, 2007)

As I read these, I feel my weaknesses, my ego, my self-righteousness, my foolishness, do not seem worthwhile any more; I begin to see greater goodness in others. I am all alone in such moments, but never lonely. For, I can feel the warmth of spiritual greatness before me. I am most of all reminded of the supreme sacrifices that the Buddha has made to give us such wisdom so that we learn to treasure our senses and use them really well to see true peace and beauty.

All my post-child life I have wandered like Sudhana in the Gandhavyuha, who is but fortunate to find so many great teachers. I found only a few, for whom I am profoundly grateful for all the wisdom they have imparted to me. Sadly, these were only brief moments, like lightning-flashes in a dark storm. But they are enough for me to see my way through it. And, the still bright dawn is rising.

It is so difficult to find a truly good teacher; that is, until I found the Suttas, the Buddha Dharma. I can almost feel how Ananda feels at the Buddha's passing, when he reflects:

The old ones have passed away,
I do not get along with the new ones.
Today I meditate all alone
Like a bird gone to its nest. (Tha 1036)

I hear Sariputta, the greatest saint after the Buddha, singing these fearless words in the Theragatha:

I delight not in death, nor do I delight in life;
I shall cast aside this body fully aware and mindful.

I delight not in death, nor do I delight in life;
I await my time as a servant his wages. (Tha 1002 f)

If you read this as if you wrote it yourself, the benefit would likely be greater. Forget me for a moment; focus on yourself.

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