

Investments

A dear young friend of mine once remarked that his parents were unhappy that he wasn't spending the whole of Sundays with them. Then again, he said, they're usually glued to the TV than to head out and enjoy the outdoors. This reflection is based on my reply to his email. After all, he is one of my valuable dear friends who often teased out some of my best inspirations.

Traditional Chinese parents tend to see their children as investments for their sunset years, that their children, or at least one of them, would care for them or support them. As Singapore urbanizes and globalizes, our values, too, are changing and seeking proper directions.

Much as we try to champion "Asian values," it is anyone's guess what they are. Are they the Confucian values of China or East Asia as a cultural region, but Asia has many other nations, even larger than East Asia. "Western values" are even more problematic, because the western and westernized worlds, communities and individuals are even more diverse. If a westerner is a Buddhist, has he adopted Asian values?¹

Even "Buddhist" values vary from country to country where Buddhism was or is dominant. Furthermore, these values are radically different amongst Buddhist sects and even individuals themselves. Furthermore, ethnic Buddhists place race and culture above the Dharma, which teaches human and spiritual values.

Many Buddhists of Singapore and Malaysia, consciously or unconsciously, look up to the values of the ethnic Buddhisms they are drawn to, rather than root themselves fully in sutta teachings. On the other hand, a Thai Buddhist, or a Burmese Buddhist, or a Sinhala Buddhist, or a Japanese Buddhist is unlikely to live by the values of Singaporean Buddhism or Malaysian Buddhism because these "cultures" are seen as only evolving, nascent or even non-existent. What does this tell us?

What we are really running on is some kind of global values that we feel would give us some meaningful and purposeful place in our society. Again here "our" means that we don't have any real influence on how we would like it to be. Some Asian Chinese (but not only them) often adopt western nick-names, and dye their hair blond – and we are so used to western clothes and food. Does this mean we have western values?²

One aspect of Asian culture is clearly still with us – filial piety. The traditional Chinese notion of filial piety is essentially a very pragmatic one: to support parents and elders in old age, and pray for them when they are dead.³ As such, it is more of a social duty, that a spiritual practice like the early Buddhist teachings on respect for parents and elders (as Buddhists, we are to ensure that they live the path of moral virtue, inner calm and self-awakening, that is, not to be self-centred, not be superstitious, and not to doubt themselves).

The Buddhist notion of renunciation is often misunderstood simply to mean "leaving the home" to become monks or nuns. Because of our pragmatism, this has come to mean leaving our unhappy home for a bigger, better and wealthier spread. This is evident when we look at how our modern priests live today. Is this an example of a "modern" Buddhist value?

On a spiritual level, renunciation means progressively letting go of the past as the present turns into the future, or even as we grow and mature. "We" here refers to both us as parents and as children. If we are wise parents, we would know that it is a natural human need to be free to try things out, to make mistakes, and to learn from them, or from the mistakes

¹ I've reserved my thoughts here, and invite the reader to think for himself.

² Further on this, see Reflection, "Asian culture?" forthcoming.

³ See Reflection, "[Who are the hungry ghosts?](#)" R97 2009.

of others. All our lives we have been letting go of our old selves: we only need to see and accept this.

Parents who try to own their children as filial chattel or investments are only stunting or skewing their growth, so that they only grow old, but never grow up, never realise or enjoy their wholesome potentials. On the other hand, we tend to see western children becoming more independent emotionally (and often financially, too) by their late teens. Most would also agree that the West has produced many profound philosophers and thinkers, creative inventors and engineers, imaginative writers, monumental musicians and inspiring artists, unmatched by other cultures.

Granted, Asia is the cradle of our great civilizations, but they have all evolved, responding to more global and material influences. Granted, Asia produced the world's great religions – and Buddhism -- but they, too, are following the global and material flow. Like it or not, we (non-westerners) today tend to look west rather than east. Go to any airport or hotel or crowded shopping mall, or even religious gathering in Singapore, for example, and observe who generally gets prior and better treatment: locals or white westerners?

Even today, a well titled or well vested Asian guru or priest in the west might easily draw a local crowd and followers. After all, surely they are enlightened! If Christianity is failing in the west, is ritual and catholic Buddhism filling the gap? In Asia, the trend seems to be the opposite. Are we rebelling against the ways of our parents? Here's a hint of culture; something to think about.

Yet, we all have one great irrepressible faculty: the will and zest to learn and to change. As parents, the first 7 years of our children's lives are the best years to bond with them. If we do not truly love them, but merely drill them as biological insurance and social props, they will simply be our shadows and fixtures while we live, and merely mourn us when we die. They have no lives of their own. Ours then would be a culture of the dead.

On the other hand, they might rebel and go their own way, mess up their lives, but somehow, in time, they usually turn out well, even better than their parents had been. Loving parents have loving children. Divorced parents are likely to have children who echo them. Yet, if we learn from our losses and pains, we can teach others valuable lessons.

If we punish our children for failing (their failure is punishment enough for them), or force them to be doctors or lawyers, they are likely to become poor doctors or bad lawyers. If we raise them to make money, that's all they are likely to make. On the other hand, if we think we have failed to find a partner or fallen into hard times, and resort to priesthood, then we are likely to become lustful money priests. Living and really loving, and connecting with others is something else.

As parents, we could have lacked real love for our children, taking them for granted. The most versatile comic star of our time, Robin Williams, was found dead in his home in Tiburon, California, hanging by a belt with superficial cuts to his wrist. As a child, raised in a 30-room mansion in the affluent Detroit suburb of Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, USA, he developed a sharp sense of humour to attract his parents' attention. To his father, Robert, who liked to be called "sir," he instead used the honorific, "Lord Stokesbury, Viceroy of India." (Doesn't this remind us of priests who insist on being addressed by their titles?)

Robin first learned about humour from his mother, Laurie, who recited funny poems, and from watching the inimitable Jonathan Winters, an American absurdist improvisational comic of film and TV. In a remembrance to Winters, who died in 2013, Robin wrote in the NY Times that he was entranced by Winter's effect on his normally staid father, who responded with fitful laughs at Winters' antics.

Robin wrote: “May dad and I lost it. Seeing my father laugh like that made me think, ‘Who is this guy and what’s he on?’” Winters was playing a series of lunatic characters, and the world was his laboratory. Robin was hooked, and tried to be, indeed, became, the comic master that his father had loved. Yet his father never really loved him.⁴

Long-time friend and fellow comedian, Bob Zmuda, the founder of the charity Comic Relief (for which Robin helped raise US\$70M), said that the Oscar-winning Robin had difficulty connecting with people off-stage. (Doesn’t this remind us of some of our Buddhist speakers?) Even those who were close to him did not know how severe his depression was.⁵ Robin made millions laugh worldwide, but he died unlaughing. We will always love you, Robin; we will learn to love you.

As children, on our part, we must remember that it is only a phase we are passing through, as our own parents did. We would be parents or elders or seniors in good time. Our roles will change in due course. We will have dreams, jobs, affairs, families, children, and certainly some friends.

Sometimes, we may hate our parents (or one of them). We might even wish them dead. First, we need to accept them as they are, just as we accept ourselves. Then, we forgive them; for, we are now strong and happy enough to do so. If we do not forgive the past, we will only remember it as pain, not as wisdom. Above all, forgiving them, we break the chain of pain that we might inherit and bequeath to those around us.⁶

If not, we might as well buy them a coffin, for they are already dead to us. Here’s an absurd urban story: A hard-working money-conscious family saw that it was time to be rid of an aged parent who could only sit in his rocking chair and play with the grandchildren.

The family religiously congregated at a cliff edge, and the son and wife (the leaders of the family) told the helpless old man that he was not useful anymore, and they would be better off without him. They suggested that he got into the coffin, and they would push him over the cliff so that he would die painlessly! Then, the grandchildren exclaimed: “Father, grandpa can jump by himself. Coffins are expensive. Keep it: they will go up in price like our flats. We’ll need it for you when your time comes!”⁷

If we see our children as investments, then we must understand that the dividends they earn are theirs. We may or may not share in the blessings that they enjoy. However, if we have raised them with love, they will return that love, as this is what they have learned.

Our children are not our refuges; the 3 jewels are.⁸ They come through us, but they are not of us. We cannot own them: they come from life’s eternal love. We can try to be like them, but we cannot make them like us. As we have breathed them into our lives, we must breathe them out again, so that they too may breathe and live and love. We may give them our love but they have their own hearts. They must themselves see the light.

For, life moves on, never backwards -- they are the joyful dreams of tomorrow. Our children may be mirrors of ourselves, but they must still stand on their own. We are the bows and they the arrows that we shoot into the open sky. We can only aim high and pull the bow-string as well as we can. We must then let the string go, so that the arrow flies as far into the sky as it can.

⁴ See Washington Post: http://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/robin-williams-found-dead-in-his-home-in-california/2014/08/11/a165171c-21aa-11e4-958c-268a320a60ce_story.html.

⁵ See <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/08/13/us-people-robinwilliams-depression-idUSKBN0GD29X20140813>.

⁶ See Piya Tan, Reflection “[Compassion or gratitude?](#)” 2009.

⁷ This clincher is brilliantly suggested by my inspiring wife, Ratna.

⁸ See Dhammapada 62.

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We only give birth to our children; we do not own them. For, they are still unfinished: they have yet to make their own worlds, as we have ours. Our best link with them is our sky-like love. Then we will meet again in the same spacious sky.⁹

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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⁹ See Kahlil Gibran, "[On children.](#)"