

## Farewell, brother

My dear elder brother, Beng Tee (77) or Nya (local Baba for “big brother,” as my sister and I lovingly addressed him) passed away in Melaka, Malaysia, just after our Sutta Discovery class on 27 March 2012 (in the Buddhist Fellowship, Singapore). He started having dementia in 2009, which then worsened into schizophrenia. He was unable to recognize any of us most of the time. During his lucid moments, however, he had memory flashes of his childhood, but nothing after that.

One of my earliest memories of him, as related by our mother, was his involvement with almost any local religious festival. The most memorable was when he dressed up in one of the two huge effigies of the “Hantu Tetek” (*boothengkel* in local Tamil),<sup>1</sup> the highlight of the Ponggal or harvest festival and street procession unique to the Peranakan Hindus of our kampung, opposite our old family house in Melaka.

As a very active young man, he would climb coconut trees to pluck coconuts. One sad day, he fell from the tree-top.<sup>2</sup> Fortunately, he clung on to a large coconut leaf, which broke his fall. He was hospitalized for five days.

He, along with elder my sister, Bulat (meaning “round,” from eating mostly rice and black sauce during the Japanese Occupation of Malaya), presented me, as a pre-school boy, with memorable picture-books, many pages of which are still vivid in my mind. This started off my love for books and reading. In an important way, this was a foundation for my joy in doing full-time Tipitaka translation work today.

Nya had an old Remington portable typewriter which I would play with as a primary schoolboy. In fact, on account of it, I became quite an accomplished typist with four fingers. However, my curiosity got the better of me one day, and I decided to dismantle the typewriter to repair it. Then I realized I could not put it back together again. When he found out about it, I recall, he just smiled and got a new model!

As a teenage schoolboy, Nya and our youngest uncle could not get along at all. As a result, my parents agreed to send him to live with our eldest uncle, Tan Gim Ann, in his Limbongan house. My parents probably did not know what he was heading for, as our aunt (Mrs Tan Gim Ann) was a devout Christian (who after our uncle’s death turned her house into a Gospel chapel).

Much as he resisted being converted, he was basically entrapped. His colleagues would regularly tease him as an “unbeliever” (“boxiangxin” in local Hokkien), to the extent it affected his studies. In due course, he converted, and indoctrination and training did the rest. After a few decades, he even became one of the church elders.

In the early days, when the church was still located diagonally opposite our Melaka house, some of his Christian friends would come over to our house to try to convert my sister (I was 13 years younger than her). She was so terrified, she tells me, that she had to hide in the toilet until they were gone. In 1965, the church split, and his group moved to the Limbongan chapel.

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<sup>1</sup> See S S Dhoraisingham, *Pernakan Indians of Singapore and Melaka*, Singapore: ISEAS, 2006:41 f.

<sup>2</sup> See picture for the huge leaves and man atop a coconut tree, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coconut>

Our parents, on account of the sad loss of their eldest son to Christianity, advised me that I should be a Buddhist, so that there was someone to pray for them in the proper family way when they passed on. This led me to regularly attend the local Seck Kia Eenh (Malacca Buddhist Association) on the next street. But that is another story.

However, I loved and admired him enough, so that during my adolescence, out of my religious curiosity, I agreed to his suggestion to sign up for a correspondence course with the Emmaus Bible School (Australia). I duly completed two courses, one in the New Testament and the other, the Old Testament, and received two certificates for them.

Then came the religious trauma. When I completed the course, in the Q&A section, I asked my tutor the fatal question: What would happen to my many non-Christian friends (including my parents, my sister, and my relatives)? Answer: Since they were unbelievers, they would all go to hell! I remember a powerful shock overcame me: despite all the biblical claim of Godly love for man, this is not unconditional love at all.

I told my brother about this, and I recall his troubled silence. I could even detect a sadness in him, not that I would never convert now, but at my tutor's unloving remark. In fact, since then, we never mentioned the course again. When, in 1970, I decided to become a Buddhist monk. He was not surprised at all. He was almost proud of it, as he would often tell his non-Christian friends (which he had many) about me.

Once, he confided in me that as brothers, we should never be stumbling-blocks to one another. He was quoting the Bible: looking back at what he told me showed that he was more tolerant than most Christians. In fact, after he had attended the landmark Conference on Evangelism for Malaysia and Singapore (COEMAS) (April 1978)<sup>3</sup> in Singapore, he handed over the whole thick file to me. Again his silence was very telling: he surely had disapproved of such high-handed evangelism.

The file contained various ambitious Christian plans to evangelize all the local religions (Muslims, Hindus, Daoists, Confucianists, Sikhs, and Buddhists), and specific groups within each religion, such as Mahayana Buddhists, Theravada Buddhists, English-speaking Buddhists, and Chinese-speaking Buddhists, and exposing local Buddhist teachings that contradict the Buddha's teachings, etc. Cold chills ran down my spine as I studied the file. I decided to hold national seminars for young Buddhists in Malaysia and Singapore to discuss the sections related to Buddhists. My commitment to Buddhism was more purposeful than ever before, thanks to Nya.

In fact, I learned to trust him enough to sometimes discuss with him some of my own spiritual struggle, especially as a Buddhist worker who wanted local Buddhists to be more grounded in our own early scripture. Many of the Buddhist leaders, especially the Sinhalese Buddhist missionaries in Malaysia, saw this as a threat to their local influence and source of income. The local Buddhists, furthermore, feared the foreign robes enough not to work with a lay Dharma teacher who had come from a poor local family, one much poorer than a temple priest.

One day, I confided in him: Why is it so difficult to teach locals the Buddhism of the Buddha? His reply: you are a "prophet," and a prophet is not without honour, except in his own country. He

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<sup>3</sup> For its significance, see <http://efosingapore.org/aboutus/>.

gave me another useful advice: since I had difficulty working with the temple Sadducees and Pharisees (the Buddhist “elite”), I should instead register a trust or a company to work independently.

Another warm memory I have of my brother was when I had to leave a local temple after being blackballed for my “critical Buddhism and Dharma over-enthusiasm,”<sup>4</sup> and I had to remove my huge library of Buddhist scriptures, books and materials. He personally volunteered and drove the Gospel Chapel van right into the temple to help me move them!

Now I can say that whenever I think of the Minding Centre, I also recall my brother, Beng Tee, whom I know loved me for what I am. No greater love has a brother than this.

Revisioning Buddhism 51

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

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<sup>4</sup> Meaning my social criticisms on how Buddhism can serve society better, and that Buddhists should know their Tipitaka better than merely highlighting rituals and social events.