

Living joy

We do not really know Buddha Dharma if we have never felt the spontaneous joy and pervasive peace, having tasted the Dharma during meditation, sutta study or solitude. It's like we have never seen a beautiful sunrise or a glorious sunset, until one day we spend silent moments early at dawn to welcome the sun or just before twilight to take leave of the day.

The “joy” arising from attending a religious ritual or meeting a holy person is not mentioned here because such reactions are not true spiritual joy, as they are dependent on external stimuli. It is similar to the kind of excitement or rapture teenagers get during a musical performance or meeting with their musical or screen idol.

Even on a very mundane level, when we watch, say, our favourite soap opera, we rejoice, perhaps to tears, when our long-suffering hero is dramatically and finally vindicated of his wrongs, and the real criminal punished, when the hero and heroine live happily ever after. Minus the worldly element, such a joy is close to spiritual joy, which is also basically permanent, in the sense we do not easily forget it.

On a subtler level, we read a good book and rejoice not only at the beauty of the language of a writer like Herman Melville, or the humanity of a classic like George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, or the graphic characterizations by Dickens. Such things of beauty are a joy forever.

True happiness makes us good and noble, respectful and compassionate, appreciative and responsive towards the smallest kind act of another. It inspires joy in us at the simplest act of beauty and peace in nature, such as trees bursting with autumn colours, or a warbling brook, or the open space below a Point Reyes cliff watching sea-lions play.

An even more pervasive, lasting and moving joy arises from a full-hearted reading of the suttas—not so much from our more intellectual areas of our mind—but our feelings touched by the events and effects of the inner eye. This is like looking through a small window, or even a key-hole, into the light of a secret garden, an open secret, where only we can enter by ourself in this very moment.

A religious reaction to ritual or charisma, or a rapturous response to a highly sensual experience is rooted in the level of our mind processing the more “animal” or herd instincts. As such, they are not spiritual experiences, a response of the spirit, our inner or higher self.

Further, even if we merely know the 3 characteristics, the 4 noble truths, the 5 precepts, the 6 sense-bases, the 7 awakening-factors, the noble eightfold path, the 9 progressive abodes, the 10 perfections, and so on. And all we do is to defend our knowledge of these teachings without ever tasting their fruits, then, that knowledge has merely held us back. It is just a burden, from which we have no joy.

We now have the whole collection of early Buddhist texts—the Pali canon—in fine translations with modern commentaries.¹ If we do not at least read some of these

¹ For sutta translations and teachings: <http://dharmafarer.org>

texts, even a little less regularly than we read the daily papers or watch our favourite TV series, or social and religious rituals, we would surely see some truth and beauty in the early Buddhist texts. How can we really know our blessed faith if we do not study and live our sacred texts?

Without the early Buddhist texts, our well bound thick emblazoned volumes are but white pages tainted with ink. Few even open them, even less read them for wisdom. They may be gazed with reverence, even worshipped, but blindly. Some are kept away piously to be forgotten. How can we know Buddhism to bring us joy then?

Dharma teachings only open up to us when we read and listen with love for learning and respect for change. The teachings seem new and strange at first – like new-found friends – but over time, we begin to see how they are linked, and their meaning and power shine in our hearts, inspiring us to seek and see the path taken by the Buddha and his saints.

Whenever we look at the suttas, we feel greatly amazed at the Buddha whose ways and wisdom they preserve. We feel a sense of appreciation that the ancient teachers have taken so much time and trouble to ensure that they will today be read, heard, and lived by us for our benefit.

Now is our turn and duty to embody these liberating truths so that we inspire our own generation to live and love the Buddha word for posterity so that this world will be a better place before we move on the path closer nirvana.

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