

## Stolen Address

A Vesak reflection



Just before I was getting down to writing this Vesak reflection, my wife Ratna told me that our nephew, Cedric Tan, has posted on social media regarding the loss of our Melaka (Malacca, Malaysia) ancestral house address plaque. It was stolen between midnight and dawn of 26 May 2018. The address plaque has been with us since the mid-1930s, that is, for 5 generations. It first hung above the main door of 210 Tranquerah Road, and then moved up the street to 293. “Tranquerah” was the local word for the Portuguese “tranquera,” meaning “palisade, rampart,” built by the Portuguese occupiers in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

The traditional address plaque 址号 *zhǐhào* (local Hokkien or Fujianese *Jiho*), was carved on wood, about 4 feet by 2.5 feet (1.2 m x 0.76 m) [see photo]. The twin Chinese characters are carved into the wood with a gold-leaf background of stylized clouds. Carved into it were the traditional Chinese words 福興 (“Hock Hin” in local Hokkien; read from right to left): *fú* “good fortune, happiness” + *xīng* (simplified as 兴), “to rise, flourish,” meaning “flourishing happiness.”

Such an address plaque was found above the main door of every house in our ancestral village of Eng Choon (in local Chinese dialect), located on the upper reaches of the Jin River in modern Yongchun 永春 (*Yǒngchūn*, “eternal spring”), a county of Fujian province, People's Republic of China.

I have lived in this house since 1949 until I was 19, when I became a Theravada monk. Hence, the news of the theft made me feel as if a vital part of me was suddenly taken away by some shadowy figures. These thieves saw it purely for its monetary value to be sold away in Australia

or the West where it would fetch quite a handsome price, attached with a fib about its royal pedigree from China. But such an address plaque is unique with its own signatures at the top sinister corner and the bottom dexter corner. It will be at once recognized by its owners.

As my regular practice is that of the perception of impermanence, the loss rings a precious lesson. “The more significant the object the more painful the loss.” The thieves, however, only see it for its monetary value, and the sentiments of the rightful owners do not matter. In this sense, thieves are subhuman, like the violently acquisitive asuras, to whom other humans, other beings, are merely victims with valuables to be harvested.

At the back of my mind is the bright pervasive thought that whatever we have is in some way being stolen even now. Go to any social media where Buddhists and non-Buddhists hover to share what we have pilfered from Buddhism. “Pilfered” because most of our posting are taken from someone else’s experiences—the Buddha’s or someone else who had pilfered from him earlier on. Anyway, we console ourselves with mirrors—if we cannot be the candle bright, we should be the mirror to reflect its light.

Pilfering and plagiarizing of the Dhamma has gone on ever since the Buddha’s passing. Those of us who are unable to hold a candle to the Buddha, revise his suttas, write new ones, or posture like him. We call that, or much of it, Buddhism.

Dhamma pilfering is highly sophisticated today, and even beneficial to a greater number of people. But “beneficial” needs to be defined. For about a century now, western psychology has systematically adapted Buddhist teachings and methods that it finds serve its higher purpose—the healing of clients. Even more vital than that would be what the healing is all about: the self-healing. After all, to be able to use an ancient wisdom with modern science is surely a noble livelihood.

The thick silver lining here is that we Buddhists learn that our outdated Dhamma which we have persistently modernized and protestantized is actually a valuable source of theory and techniques for mental health. The Buddha has been teaching this all along, coded in the computer-language of the suttas—in all their concatenations, nestings, recursive sequences and cycles—which we see merely as boring repetitions to be crunched in commercialized translations.

Every time a Buddhist speaker misrepresents the Buddha, or twists the Dhamma, or trivializes the sangha, he steals from the vast legacy of wisdom the Buddha has left us. The Buddha Dhamma is our most precious legacy which we have left unattended, unloved and un-lived. When we do not realize and embrace this rich legacy, we are depriving ourselves of its ennobling, awakening and liberating values.

In **the Dhamma Dāyāda Sutta** (M 3),<sup>1</sup> the Buddha pleads to us to be his Dhamma heirs, not heirs to his material things—images, stupas, temples, wealth. Such worldly things will only attract thieves and marauders. And they did—and Buddhism was wiped off the face of India because of what we have stolen from the Dhamma; others then steal from us.

There is only one way to keep our Dhamma legacy: we must attend to it, love it and live it. Only when we internalize the Dhamma is it safe from outsiders. Once we internalize this legacy, a straight path opens up to us, leading us to its source, away from the thieving crowd. This is a wealth we will never lose, one that will liberate us for good. This is the message of Vesak.

A blessed Vesak to you and your loved ones.

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

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<sup>1</sup> M3, [SD 2.18](#).