

Signs

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The Buddha Dhamma is everywhere in this world and beyond. It is present in what we call “**signs**” (*nimitta*). The wise look into them like a clear mirror to see what is really there. But most of us read into these signs, or simply ignore them just as we ignore what we think are not useful to us. Or, worse, we project our own ideas there, taking them for real.

These are **clues** to life—but, sadly, most of us are **clueless**, even when the signs are right before us and everywhere. In fact, right now, right here—this is one of those signs.

Don’t look for it, no need to look around. It’s right here as we read this: it’s in our own mind. It’s a sign that we are seeking some meaning and purpose in life. Of course, we could be reading this to keep a watch on what mischief I’m up to next with such “iconoclastic” writings, “talking bad” about “others”—but who’s talking now? Sadly, these are not the signs I’m really referring to. These are the darkness that blinds us from the signs—it is our delusion, our own ignorance.

What are the signs? Simply, the **1st sign** we often see around us is how things **change**. Instead of seeing it for what it really is, we call it **fashion**. Take the computer and the Internet, for example: within the life-time of most of us (this generation) we started having the email, ICQ, Facebook and so on. In less than a couple of years, we see new generations of computers, handphones and other electronic gadgets.

We get all excited with the new models like a superwealthy figure (they are non-human) seeing a new model and tires of even his latest: a new addition to its harem of measured objects. Fashion means we keep running after things we **want** but don’t really need. We have put our remote in the hands of the fashionistas. We enjoyed being tickled by the new and bizarre, until suddenly we could not feel even a subtle touch—we have aged well beyond our years. We have not read the signs correctly.

The **2nd sign** is more obvious, loud and showy. What prevents us from doing what we want very often is **financial independence**. As long as we are dependent on parents or others for our living, our horizons are at best the skylines around us—which we never reach, anyway. However, today, in wealthy urban set-ups, like Singapore, we get financial independence very quickly, often as soon as we graduate and get a good job. We relish the “freedom” like a fish out of water, racing up the waterfalls for some breeding ground, impulsively. We have no choice really!

Once we feel the touch of our first pay-cheque, we feel we can change the world. One of the first things we must do is to get out of this tiny island, away from all those **old** folks—they are bad reminders of our past and our future: we don’t want to be **them**. Yet we read the works of the great old minds or other aged master we haven’t even met. After a few clever lines, we think that we are better than even them.

The idea is to be **different**: say different, act different, think different. We need to be on the move, be with the right **crowd**, at the head or near there, if possible. Being young and having “more” money and measurable objects that show we “have” more than others. We see **money** as a status symbol, a measure of class (consciously or unconsciously, mostly the latter): we forget that money is only what it does. It only makes us forget the really vital things in life. When memory returns, we realize we have wasted most of our precious life over what does not really matter.

One day, usually about the age when Siddhattha saw the 4 signs, we realize we really have **nothing**, we **are** really nothing. Perhaps some ancient wisdom remains with us like gound in the corners of our eyes. We even feel obsolete: as we had felt towards others who did not measure up to us.

But we see a bit better now, so we think. For, this is also the time when we may fall prey to those Gurus who desire nothing less than our body, mind and heart — to enslave us, and from whom very few indeed ever survive sanely. This is a really bad sign, but we fail to see it: success proves the Guru, we cry. We then keep on crying.

By the time we notice the **3rd sign**—our **youth** is gone, our **health** is not the prime it was — we feel a sudden pervasive cold. **Age** has caught up with us. (Actually it is always there! Decay begins in us as soon as we were born.) The winds of change are howling in and out of our hollowness. Our lives have been empty for so long: we have neither really lived, nor loved nor seen the light.

If we are desperate enough, we will probably now turn to **religion**; even, teaching religion. After all, as long as we have some title, we feel entitled, we easily get an admiring crowd. We feel safer in a crowd, feeding on the attention, going with the flow—like dead or dying fish. Religion, after all, are soothing purrs from those we admire from above, on whom we can look down upon.

Siddhattha saw all these signs. He saw an **old man**. Instead of looking down on age, hating his past, fearing that image of his future, Siddhattha reads this sign fully and well: we all must change; in fact, we **are** changing from day one. We just have to keep up with it. Turning away from it, even closing our eyes, only hasten this sign, leaving us clueless.

Siddhattha saw a **sick man**. Instead of feeling superior that he is young and healthy, he feels compassion and wonder at how vulnerable this body can be. That, despite all the good stuff we faithfully feed it with; all the care we dearly tend it with; all the routines we proudly spend with it. Yet, our body simply cannot keep up with us, with our dreams or hopes. This body is just our past present before us.

Finally, Siddhattha saw the ultimate sign: **death** itself. Most of us are only initially shocked, more often politely upset with another inconvenience in our busy calendar: a wake, a funeral, polite quips. Then again, often enough, secretly, we feel relief at the absence of someone who has been a rival, a nuisance, or of no measure to us. We might even benefit from a death. Hence, we dismally fail to see what Siddhattha saw in the dead man: our turn will come, just as we were born. But let us leave it at that.

It's never too late to read the **signs**, to understand and accept them. We begin to decay from the day we were born. We may not seem physically sick, but emotionally, mentally, we always feel there's something missing (or worse, we just feel numb, until too late); we have not lived really well enough—suddenly, we fear death.

What can we learn here? **Youth** is not the antithesis of **decay**: youth **is** decay. Time is on our side, for the moment (as you read this). It is on our side when we use it for **learning** all the good that we can. **Health** is not a fine physical I-shaped living meat for the consumption of others; not just freedom from **disease**. It means full respect for this unpredictable inter-being of the elements dancing in flux that allows us to communicate truth and beauty.

Finally, and forever perhaps, **life** is not the opposite of **death**. When we see them as being separate, we will desire one, fear the other. When we see them as **one**, we neither desire nor fear either. When we truly and really understand truth and beauty, then, we are really living. Death is but the turning of a page for a new chapter until we have read all the stories in the book.

We have to start reading the book that we are; for, it is the book of life and signs unlike any other.

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

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