

To read, to see

The will to keep on learning and to be truly free
[Previously published as fb200516 Piya Tan]

We can write what we feel to be one of the best opinion pieces. We may have written the article very clearly, but dozens of people, maybe very much more, will either ignore it or reconstruct it to suit their opinions. This often happens to the best of writings or posts in **blog comments**: often, some or many would neither allow for any flexibility of interpretation nor seek the significance of the message, even when the shoe was on the wrong foot.

Analysis

For example, we may quote an interesting saying by a famous thinker: “The ability to observe without evaluating is the highest form of intelligence.” There are 3 parts to this statement: (1) “the ability to observe,” (2) “without evaluating,” and (3) “the highest form of intelligence.”

When we only cursorily read (3), may jump to the conclusion that “intelligence” is not possible (2) “without evaluating.” Or that we should blindly accept whatever we see.

In that case, we have not considered the actual meaning of (1).

Many cursory readers, upon reading (3), may jump to the conclusion that “intelligence” is not possible (2) “without evaluating.” And we have not even considered the actual meaning of (1) yet. In other words, we should start by reading the statement as a whole so that we are clear about its **context**.

Making sense of it

Disagreements easily arise simply because readers often come from different premises: we have different viewpoints. For example, we may differ in how we define “evaluation,” or in what constitutes “intelligence.” Then, there is the overarching purpose of the Blog or the discussion group. If it is a Blogspot on “mushrooms,” such a topic, which is not about mushrooms, would not interest any blogger here!

Let us focus our discussion on **early Buddhism** so that we do not end up trying to say more than we can handle, with arguments bigger than all our common sense. After reading the sentence, a note of familiarity rings in my mind: This statement is about how, according to early Buddhism, we should experience the meditation object in **undirected** meditation (such as in the so called Vipassanā practice).

Blinded by the light

The discussion would not be complicated, but would be fun indeed, if we, with great interest, discussed only mushrooms. But when we are making a critical analysis that challenges the popular perception of the “great contributions” of a powerful and successful Chief High

Priest of Buddhism in Malaysia or in any country, it is bound to raise more than just eyebrows.

No matter how well reasoned we write, how well documented our evidence, how serious our concerns, how good our intentions, there will always be those who will instinctively react thus: We must respect him, you know, he was the Chief. In popular local Buddhism, Priests especially those in big temples are held in high esteem simply on account of their status: “They are Venerables, you know!”

First of all, most of the Buddhist crowd are contented with, indeed, dependent on, the current crowd consensus. Whatever is stated otherwise, even in the best of intentions and wisdom, does not count: we must not go against the status quo. So it is with a **status-conscious** society.

The Book must be respected for its cover and thickness, even if it is left unread. It is too sacred to be touched anyway! It is to be worshipped.

This is, of course, delusion, which can be worse than ignorance. To be **deluded** is like being blind and used to the dark so that we know our way well around. We are like the prisoners in Plato’s cave, only fitting to our times, this is a huge cavern with well-crafted electronic shadow-plays and the prisoners are free to move around this Cavern City, but never see beyond it.¹

The **ignorant**, on the other hand, does not know what is really going on. He is curious about **why** the celebrated 50-year work of purportedly great foreign missionary is seriously questioned. Unlike the deluded devotees and admirers, the ignorant cannot see into the dark clouds of devotion and admiration.

He sees best in the light of historical evidence, social realities and reasonable concerns, not to mention good intentions in the vision of our own common future as Buddhists who want to manage our own affairs instead of being dependent on foreign missions.

The delusion of the devotees and admirers is rooted in their inability to see, to think, to feel, beyond how they have been conditioned. Their measure of life is probably that of the memes of **success**: a huge temple, great power, high status, immense wealth, admirable intelligence, intoxicating charisma.

This is all **bias**: the inability or fear to see beyond how we have been blinkered to look. Such a biased reader will be compelled to ignore the words and ideas they neither like nor understand, even when it comes from one of their own. They simply ignore what they do not want to see. In short, this is a **wilful misreading**.

Unwillingness to learn

The grave self-harming danger of wilful misreading is that we fail to see any good in the

¹ See R801 Happy prison: <http://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/R801-230301-Happy-prison-464.pdf>

truth and reality of what the writing is about. In other words, wilful misreading is a symptom of a more serious underlying problem, even an illness, a crippling handicap. This is the **unwillingness to learn**: to learn from the past, work with the present for a wholesome and free future.

When we are unwilling to learn, we are caught in our own **blindness**, convinced that we are not blind because we know our way around in the dark—**but** without knowing anything about what actually exists in that darkness and what lies beyond.

The will to learn

When we **lack learning** but are willing to learn, by that very fact, we are **not** blind, only unable to **read** the significance of what we see, hear and sense around us. When we are wisely taught, we will rightly learn, quickly or slowly, but surely.

Then, our course is always clear and free: we learn to think for ourselves, see the best in ourselves and in others, and are able to chart the safest and most fruitful course towards the path of true freedom as taught by the Buddha.

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