

How to be Creative

Some readers have asked me how I could write a reflection or revisioning every week without fail for the last three years (beginning 2007). It is not always easy, but the sun always rises. The weekly articles started out as short introductions to the Sutta or study topic for the Minding Centre weekly class email. These short write-ups soon became somewhat complete articles in themselves. An important reason for their popularity is that they are very short: they are no longer than two A 4 pages, usually ranging between 400-800 words.

The idea is to write something that would evoke *samvega* (Dharma-moved sense of urgency) or joyful inspiration (*pasaada*). Often I am tempted to write as I think: about bad monastics, weak lay followers, selfish seekers, and problematic issues. But then we often hear about them in the temple gossips and centre talks, and in the newspapers. Let me not add to the sufferings of others.

But then too much sweet words can cause religious diabetes, a false sense that everything is all right. So I launched a new series called “Revisioning.” This new title work like a movie rating: “Be prepared, this is somewhat heavy reading. But you need to know this, and hopefully this will in due course motivate the wise and capable to bring about wholesome Buddhist changes.”

As such, in hindsight, we can see that the reflections are written for the individual, a sort of spiritual pep talk so that we are inspired to meditate, if not at least, not to think so badly of ourselves. The revisionings are meant as reflections on aspects of the Buddhist community, giving some suggestions on how we can improve ourselves as a community. This is a long-term vision.

Where do the inspirations come from? A simple answer would be: from you, that is, what you have told me; from what I have overheard from the Buddhist crowd, reports from the mass media, and my own visions. There is, however, a deeper inspiration: Buddha Dharma has taught me that we can (as unawakened beings) be much better than what we are right now.

I am confident of my own salvation and awakening in this life itself, and I would encourage you, too, to be so: that you too can be free from suffering in this life itself. The Buddha himself has guaranteed this. You only need to see the Buddha Word.¹ We also need to assure others of their self-awakening.

There are two ways that I present the narrator of my articles (this is a wonderful way of applying not-self into writing). Firstly, I write “beside myself,” that is, as a critic of my own pains and weaknesses. This spiritual exercise is famously found, for example, in the blind monk Cakkhupaala (in the very first story of the Dhammapada Commentary) and the elders’ verses (the Theragaatha and the Theriigaatha).

Self-criticism is a powerful way of keeping Maara the evil one (or our own negative minds) away. It is the recognition that we can grow out of our present difficulties to be a better and happier person.

¹ See especially the 10 suttas of the Sa.myutta Nikaaya ch 25.

The other kind of narrator I sometimes use is the reader, that is, you yourself. You are more likely to feel the positive impact of such a writing by reading it as if you have written it yourself about yourself.

How do I prepare myself to write? I try to write like an artist or musician, rather than a thinker or scholar. I try to write, not so much as I think, but more so as I feel. The Suttas are like timeless classical pieces. We need a lot of practice to play such pieces well. We need to feel the music in order to interpret it most beautifully, as the composer has intended. A good Sutta translation is like a well-edited musical score, and a conducive hall and good acoustics enhance the wholesome and lasting effects of the music of Dharma.

And for best reception, we need to kill our handphones and give the Dharma our full attention. This is respecting the Dharma and yourself. Otherwise, we will become slaves of an electronic blip. Those whose ears are controlled by their phones are likely to find meditation difficult, much less to feel joyful stillness.

To feel is a very important Buddhist act, meaning to directly experience life. Look straight and deep into the joys and goodness in our lives, and we will be empowered with beauty and creativity. It is to enjoy the present moment, to see more of our true self.

On the other hand, if we look long enough into the pains and failures of our lives, we will soon see the monsters of our shadows. The best way to tame and change these monsters into goodness is to shine our lovingkind light on them. This is the main reason why I write.

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