

13.10 Wishing Buddhists “Merry Christmas”?

My Buddhist life began with traditional Daoist Buddhism in Malacca, but it is a very colourful Peranakan version, worshipping Shakra (“Tingkong” in local dialect), the Seven Sisters and so on. Then as a monk, I was seriously into Theravada, but this was before Ajahn Sumedho, Brahmavamso, Sujato and other students of Ajahn Chah came out to preach. Apparently, I was 20 years too early, but Ajahn Sujato quipped that he was 20 years too late: we could have been colleagues in robes.

Interestingly, both Ajahn Sumedho and Ajahn Brahm have karmic links with Wat Srales in Bangkok, famous for its Thai Pali scholarship. I met Ajahn Sumedho there, and became Ajahn Brahm’s translator before his ordination by our abbot. Then, he moved to Ajahn Chah’s forest monastery in the northwest.

As a monk in my early 20s, I had to learn Thai first before learning Pali. This was just before the age of the internet, PC and cell phone. My five years in Thailand benefitted me to this day. But with the majority of Mahayana-influenced Buddhist communities in Malaysia and Singapore, I decided to study more of Mahāyāna and Tantrayāna.

I ran various weeklong residential courses teaching a particular Mahayana text: the Diamond Sutra, the Heart Sutra, the Lotus Sutra, the Amitābha Sūtra, the Sixth Patriarch Sutra, the Tibetan Book of The Dead, and so on. I tried to explain their stories, images and philosophy in the light of early Buddhism.

In due course, however, I realized that much of the crowd loved to be entertained, like attending a large concert, rather than seriously practising the Dharma. So I stopped giving large-group public courses and returned to the Pali suttas, teaching them in regular small groups.

Simple Joys

My return to the early texts is simply refreshing. It started in 2000, which was a good year for Buddhism. Ajahn Brahm was winning the hearts of many local Buddhists. The Buddhist Fellowship (BF) organized the First Buddhist Global Conference.

As a layman, my “first” meeting with Ajahn Brahm was memorable: his first words to me were that he was grateful for my being his “chaperon” during our Wat Srales years in Bangkok. Whenever Ajahn Sujato visited Singapore, would ask me to see him. His mother, I learned, lived in Ipoh, Malaysia (where I came from), another wonderful karmic link.

Living in Singapore, I’m forever glad and grateful for the National University of Singapore Buddhist Society (NUSBS) for their continuing interest and enthusiasm in early Buddhism, which gave me new momentum to explore the Pali Suttas in-depth. I’m also grateful to the BF for giving me personal space to do what I enjoy most: teaching the suttas, that am still working on as my own spiritual cultivation, and as an inspiration for others in their meditation.

Around this time, too, I met an amazing lay Tibetan Buddhist practitioner and leader who was a keen and intelligent student in my Sutta classes and courses. As a Tantra practitioner, he said that he should not forget the true Buddhist roots, which is early Buddhism.

Another Tibetan lay leader I met, however, did not impress me. He went around shaking others’ hands like campaigning in an election, but refused or was unable to return the *añjali* commonly used by Buddhists! He told me something which rather odd: that the Tibetan masters were able to clear any our bad karma, for just a fee!

On the other hand, I am deeply inspired by the Sundarika Bhāradvāja Sutta,¹ where the Buddha gently guides a religious brahmin to the true meaning of prayer, sacrifice and spiritual liberation. The Buddha then speaks of the true “baptism” (*nahata*), an ancient Indian belief and practice. This is our spiritual legacy.

In December, do greet our Christian friends “Merry Christmas” (if

¹ Sundarika Bharadvaja Sutta, Sn 3.4 (SD 22.2).

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they are celebrating it) but *not* our Buddhist colleagues. (I have yet to meet Christians who wish one another Happy Vesak in May). We have to heal ourselves of the subtle conditionings of the Pinkerton Syndrome, and learn more about our true selves so that we will be truly liberated.

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