

Knowledge limits

Reflections like this are an expression of joy, at least that is how I try to begin with when I write this so that it will bring some joy to the reader. Being joyful also helps us to think more positively and live fully. We can even say that the happier we are, the fewer problems we have, and the more empowered we are to overcome problems.

But isn't this putting the cart before the horse? How can we ever be happy if we already have problems in the first place? This is of course true. Yet I have friends who tell me they face a number of issues relating to themselves, their family, their work or their relationships, but they still feel calm, even happy, about the difficulties. They attribute this to keeping in touch with the Dharma and the suttas.

A problem may be defined as a difficult situation, but how difficult the situation is depends on how we view or define the difficulty. A problem is not a thing, but how we think of a difficult situation.

The first thing we need to tell ourselves is that nothing is forever: not even this problem. Then we should ask ourselves what is really wrong here, so that we know what we should deal with. Thirdly, we must ask what have we learned from all this, so that we do not repeat the problem or allow it to overwhelm us.

Ironically, a key reason for problems arising, our inability to solve a problem, or even worsening the problem, is because we *think* we know. The truth may not be easy to accept: we are limited and handicapped by what we know. We know a language or languages, we know science or some kind of learning, we know religion, or have a philosophy of life, we know people, and so on. So we think.

Knowing a language is mostly to know how to use words, to communicate and, best of all, to learn helpful things. However, here we are limiting ourselves only to thinking (that's what we usually do with words). Almost all of this is third-hand (even many-handed) information: views of views of views...

We need to carefully note *how* the words are said: Is the speaker happy, sad, angry, confused, and so on? How often when we ask someone "How are you?" and they almost automatically say "I'm all right!" However, if we carefully note his voice and his body language, we might sense that it is not really so. Or if they honestly reply: "No, I'm not all right!" we just drop away into a hole of silence or denial. Apparently, we do not fathom the significance of the question we have asked, or keep to our word (so to speak). Have we become merely hollow talking heads?

Of course, if we do not know the person well enough, we would think nothing of it. But such "heart-reading" is vital when we are close to those other persons. If we notice such an incongruity, we should carefully probe further and be a healing listener. This is a good way of nipping a problem in the bud.

Next we should be as clear as possible what we or the speaker *means* by his words. How often we have "nice" people easily replying us with a "yes" but it does not mean that they agree with us or will do what we say. (This is sometimes called a "Chinese yes" because in a crowded culture saying "yes" helps prevent conflicts.) So we mean (with *arrière pensée* or mental reservation), "Yes, I hear what you say, but I don't really agree." Such a response can of course be frustrating when others really need help from us.

Some time back I wrote "Being and time" [R273], a reflection on our need to appreciate that we are more than merely body and mind: we are also heart and feeling. Someone wrote back to me a long mail pointing out the scientific inaccuracies in that piece. It was a very informative email and I enjoyed reading it, as the scientific working of the human mind and body is one of my deep

interests, too.¹ More importantly (often we miss this): if someone criticizes us, he is appreciating our being. The benefits begin when we curiously learn from that criticism.

However, I was not writing a learned scientific paper. It was a reflection encouraging us to feel our inner being with joy. I'm trying to put together some joyful music, but the person is explaining to me the physics of sounds and mechanics of music.

Then there are those who really know a lot, so that they seem to have lost the interest or ability to really listen to others. They "unsubscribe" from us. One well known scholar and ordained religious master whom I thought I knew well, wrote to me to stop sending these reflections to him, and that I can still be his friend!

I think what he is saying is that "You can read what I've written, but I don't think your reflections are worth my time." This is a good experience, as I can see how I need to deal with my pride or hurt: I imagine how other people must feel and react to a sense of rejection especially from those we know. Here we should reflect that we are not alone, and that we are not "them." We would surely feel more terrible if it had been the other way around.

If you have been reading these weekly reflections, you would probably see that they are meant to be self-healing, self-empowering, or simply joyful. The best way to read these reflections is to expect nothing from them (like gazing at a moonless cloudless starry night sky or listening to good music). If we read expecting "something," that's all we'll probably get. However, we would find it most rewarding if we allow ourselves to be surprised by them.

Then there was this nun of a contemplative order who only checks her email once in a long while. She once wrote back, saying, "Mudita, with warm regards." It took her hardly a few second to type those simple words of joy. I recall a happy fairy tale of a princess who spews gold nuggets whenever she speaks!

A growing number of people tell me how the "Simple Joys" series of books they have passed around help to keep marriages happier, uplift people from their low moments, and inspire others into greater creativity. One person even tells me that whenever she is down she would open a page in "Simple Joys" and simply *enjoy* it. Such people have opened up their hearts: the joy of the Dharma simply flows in. When we bow low enough, we will see the Buddha.

Listen to the words as they sing through our hearts. When I write, I imagine these words are musical sounds and I am putting together some sweet music. You might notice that I try to make the words flow with soothing sounds and images. The word is not the thing. The music comes from your own heart. For a thousand people might read these same words, and they would mean a thousand different things, each of us making sense of this very same words in our own way. Yet a part of us connects with these frozen notes of joy, we feel them, thaw them into reality, so connecting our lives by them.

One of my favourite reflections is to imagine you, in your part of the world or even beyond, reading this and feeling happy. It's like a glow-worm or firefly merrily piercing light into the night sky. As more people reflect and feel joyful, we see more little living lights, until we get myriads of them covering the whole earth, just like the twinkling stars piercing the darkness of the heavens. Even in the darkest night, a single firefly of joy can guide us along.

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¹ <http://www.snopes.com/science/stats/populate.asp>