

Cost of living

One of the great things about being a Buddhist is that we are free to choose how “Buddhist” we can be. A better way to put this is perhaps: Being a Buddha follower, we can choose what kind of Buddhist we want to be, or not to be a Buddhist at all. The number of such Buddha-inspired practitioners is much bigger than we know (if we consider how many people actually practise meditation or mindfulness of some kind).

In 1978, when I was still a Theravada monk, I started the first Sutta training camp in Malaysia called the Dharma Preachers’ Training Course (DPTC) series, and a similar one, called Singapore Dharma Interaction (SINDI) beginning in 1979. The early Suttas have been the focus of my full-time work ever since.

After over 40 years of Buddhist life and work, I’m surprised and sad that most local Buddhists do not know their own Suttas despite their definitive significance for being Buddhist. More often, many are drawn to the “glamour Dharma” of self-intuitive success-driven gurus more qualified in worldly things than experienced in the Dharma spirit.¹

Singapore has the most millionaires per capita and millionaire families in the world.² Understandably, as a tiny nation³ without natural resources, it is strategic to focus herself upon finance. She is expected to take over Switzerland as the world’s financial centre by 2015.⁴ On a worldly level, this is well and good, but there are heavy human costs. The loss is most serious when, goaded on by the glamour and fever of wealth, we see even Buddhism as a tool for winning a place in such a measured realm of being.

Once we limit ourselves to a materialistic idea of Buddhism (including the view that worldly success means “good karma”), we then seriously limit our choices of what is really true, good and liberating for us. It’s like swearing by a certain brand of soap,⁵ refusing to try any other, especially where there are better ones.

The bottom line seems to be that we don’t really have a choice in such matters, that is, if we are drawn more by our desires than our spiritual needs. “Desires” arise from seeing a lack in ourselves, a lack conjured up by envying what others have. We (including religion) tend to measure others by what they have (looks, clothing, money, status, titles, power, etc).

The arhat monk Lakuṅṭhaka Bhaddiya, a sweet-voiced dwarf, concerned at being misjudged by his deformed looks, and at others’ being captivated by his sweet voice, declares:

Those who have measured me by appearance and who follow me by voice,
overcome by desire and passion, they know me not.

The foolish one, surrounded by mental hindrances, neither knows the inside
nor sees the outside—he is indeed misled by voice.

Who knows not the inside, but sees the outside:
seeing only external fruits, he, too, is misled by voice.

¹ See David Desteno, “The morality of meditation,” <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/07/opinion/sunday/the-morality-of-meditation.html?smid=go-share>. A bowdlerized version appeared in The Straits Times (Saturday 20 July 2013: D19).

² According to the Boston Consulting Group, in 2011, Singapore had 188,000 millionaire households, or slightly over 17% of its resident households: <http://blogs.wsj.com/searealtime/2012/06/01/singapore-no-1-for-millionaires-again/>; <http://www.bcg.com/media/PressReleaseDetails.aspx?id=tcm:12-77753>.

³ Singapore, the 2nd smallest nation in Asia, is 714 sq km, about 1/5 the size of Rhode island in the US.

⁴ <http://www.straitstimes.com/breaking-news/money/story/singapore-usurp-switzerland-top-finance-hub-2015-study-20130704>.

⁵ One of the most famous of commercial advertisement must surely be that marketing Pears’ soap, where in a *Punch* (26 Apr 1884) cartoon, a tramp writes: “I used your soap two years ago, and have not used any other since.” (Partridge & Beale, *A Dictionary of Catch Phrases*, 2nd ed 1985:164).

Who knows the inside, and sees the outside:

seeing without obstructions, he is not misled by voice. (Tha 469-472; also A 4.65)⁶

Every teacher has his teaching. No matter what we desire (or hate) in life, if we look long and far enough, we will find just the guru who will endorse these very things. If we desire wealth or fear something, there is a religion that will preach the holiness of wealth and succour in some imaginary power-figure! Look and you will find.

Still, we only see the “outside” here: we do not really know the “inside,” that is, what these preachers and preachings are really about, or what we really need for our own betterment. We can worship anyone or anything we want, but what does that make us? We need to see what appearances are really about, and to understand what really lies below the beguiling surface.

Looking thus both ways is not easy. It means that we have choices to make. Many of us are simply not used to this, or do not know how to make a right choice. Isn't it easier if someone told us which is the best soap?

We are given such choiceless scenarios in insightful writings as George Orwell's “Nineteen Eighty-four” (1949), where the protagonist, Winston Smith, lives daily on black bread, synthetic foods and Victory brand gin, and everyone is watched by “Big Brother” (a shadowy almighty figure who rules “for the greater good”).

Aldous Huxley's novel “Brave New World” (1931) envisions a futuristic world (AD 2540 = 632 AF, After Ford) where humans live centralized, regulated and mind-controlled lives through operant conditioning.⁷ These are scenarios where we have given up our choices, where we hand over our remote controls to someone “bigger” or “higher.” Today, this something bigger or higher is our view of wealth.

If we look carefully at our own religion (whatever it might be) or read our daily papers, we would surely be surprised, even shocked or disillusioned, by the fact that it has become another marketing strategy and wealth management. While funds are necessary for any organized activity, they need to be properly raised and used.⁸ The impression we often get is that funds are the key and only project: religion is seen as being merely a means for herding and harvesting, crowd-control and attracting wealth. This, in a word, is moneytheism.

Here's a simple truth which, if we accept it, helps to keep wealth in proper perspective. Wealth is the “outside,” what we *have*, so that we can live healthily. Health is wealth. Happiness is the “inside,” what we are, which cannot be fully measured: it is a feeling. Above all, it is a means to a higher end, which is meaningful happiness.

Meaningful happiness means the joy of living now. If we understand this, then we are making happiness a living habit. No matter how great our buying power is, we can never buy true happiness. However, if we believe that happiness can be bought, then there will be those who would try to sell it. The price we pay for such counterfeit is more than a loss of wealth: we do not get the real thing, and the true Dharma, liberation, is out of our reach.

True wealth lies buried deep within us, always there. We gain this inner wealth by joyful breathing. Joyful here means accepting ourselves just as we are, and seeing others as mirrors of ourselves: this is called lovingkindness. When we have love and peace, we are able to

⁶ See **The teacher or the teaching**, SD 3.14 (6).

⁷ **Operant conditioning** (sometimes, instrumental conditioning) is a method of learning that occurs through receiving rewards and punishments for behaviour. Through being rewarded, a habit is reinforced and through being “punished” (negative feedback), a habit is discouraged. This is a basic tenet in behaviourism.

⁸ See **Right livelihood**, SD 37.8.

put what we have, little or much, and whatever we are, which is immeasurable, to the greatest benefit. Then, contentment is our greatest wealth.

R301 Simple Joys 116

Piya Tan ©2013