

On turning 65

In August 2014 I turned 65, and received so many online greetings that I was unable to respond to all of them, since they were mostly old students, friends and acquaintances. Some years back, I would usually have replied every email I got, mainly because people felt good when we responded to them positively. This is a simple act of charity we can do as Buddhists, as caring people. So, this reflection is dedicated to all my students, friends and well-wishers, and of course, you. We all have our birthdays every year: so, let's celebrate together, with wisdom and compassion. Imagine you are reading this on your own birthday.

A birthday for me is a powerful reminder that we have a year less to go. I feel similarly when I gave away Dharma books or sutta gifts, or wrote a reflection like this, and you read it. It is as if I've lightened my burden of care a bit. For, then I knew that there was someone out there who loved Dharma, and who cared for what others thought. So, too, as I look back over each year of my life, I rejoice in the suttas I've translated, and how my wife, Ratna, and others have caringly proof-read them and make them more readable.

Looking at my sutta translation schedule, I saw that I had been translating suttas and writing related essays for 12 years running now. Since 2002, I had translated over 900 suttas and written over 120 essays in the Sutta Discovery (SD) series.¹ This means that I had managed to complete an SD volume every 3 months, or 4 SD volumes a year. To date, the work had been more than 3 months ahead of schedule. This is possible for two main reasons.

Firstly, every sutta is interesting in itself and are connected with other suttas, and secondly, I worked at my own pace, even going as slow as I like (for some difficult passages or when more worldly issues have to be attended to). As long as I spent even a few minutes in a day, finishing just a single paragraph, I was able to keep to the schedule of completing 4 SD volumes a year. Dharma joy in the suttas sustains such an effort, so that there is always the time for it. Love makes time.²

At the time of writing this, I've just completed SD 46. Before writing this reflection, I noticed that I had earmarked SD 113 for the year 2031. In other words, I've a clear idea of the waiting-list of suttas to translate and essays to write for the next 17 years! If I were still living and lucid then, I would be 82. If not, enough groundwork has been done for what can be known as "Singapore Dharma" (SD) for others to continue the translation work if they are willing and able to.

Our task then is to stay hale and hearty for Dharma work, especially when we exercise our mind and keep it healthy in a spiritual way. The Dharma, which I'm learning and will continue doing so, as I translate and teach the suttas, keep me on an even keel in a world of challenges and uncertainties. Again, who knows, the hand of time will seize us prematurely. To know we are running out of time helps us treasure it more and to live wisely. This is my contemplation on death.

A closely related meditation is the perception of impermanence, habitually reflecting that everyone and every thing are impermanent, changing and becoming other. Whether done with faith or with wisdom, the Buddha assures us that we will attain streamwinning in this life itself; if not, at the very last breath.³ We only need to aspire to this end. There's every-

¹ The SD series to date totals some 10,000 A4 pages, all of which are freely available on their website: <http://dharmafarer.org>. Users have commented that this is the "most detailed" sutta translation available.

² More famously, it is said in **the (Devatā) Samiddhi Sutta** (S 1.20) that "sense-pleasures take time" (S 1.20,13-14), SD 21.4. Above, however, "love for Dharma" is meant.

³ See **(Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1), SD 16.7. Also see any of the 10 suttas in ch 25 of the Saṃyutta.

thing to gain here. For difficult is human birth:⁴ otherwise, we are more likely to be reborn into a subhuman state (as violently exploitative asuras, addictive pretas, predictable and ignorant animals, or painfully violent hell-beings).⁵

The Buddha has wisely and compassionately taught us that we can awaken, or at least take the first step, in this life itself. When I was much younger, I learned Dharma, and often tried to change and adapt it to suit myself and to please others. A lot of us today, in fact, are still trying to change and adapt the Dharma to suit ourselves and please others, instead of bettering ourselves.

One of the things I'd learned over the decades living as a Buddhist is that we have to let go of our views, just as we, having taken in a breath, must let it go. Often enough, this happens naturally, but we need to be aware of this. For, there is great wisdom in seeing letting-go: we see true renunciation in action.⁶

Only in giving up old views, when they have served their purpose, do we learn and grow with deeper self-understanding. Otherwise, we are no better than the views we hold. We have not seen all the sides of the mountain, and not even climbed it to enjoy its peak.

If we love the Dharma, even as we age, we become aware of how time changes us, and often takes away what we treasure greatly. Yet, we notice that Dharma changes us, too, for the better. Recently, I gave a Primary 6 boy a copy of *Simple Joys 2*. Back home, he read one of the reflections on the 5 elements (earth, water, fire, wind and space), and excitedly told his mother about it.

Such real-life events inspire **the weekly reflections** that I have been writing since January 2007, mass-emailed every week without fail (so far) the last 7 years. Each reflection is prefixed with an "R," and this reflection is "R361," Reflection no 361. There are two kinds of reflections: the first is inspirational (as R360, "Don't try to stop changing"), and the other is visionary (such as the forthcoming R363, "On religion, off religion"). This particular reflection, R361, has elements of both.

If the suttas are the Buddha's challenge to me to live with wisdom and compassion, to know what to do about suffering, and to help even those who do not deserve it, my weekly reflections (like this one) is an invitation to you to feel happy for the moment, to count our blessings, or better to be unable to count them all, and, through them to brighten the lives of others. Through the internet, this can be done, is being done, globally. We are part of this joyful network of radiant hearts.⁷ Love keeps us close with Dharma despite the distance.⁸

The visionary kind of reflections tries to look at some human condition or issue that is troubling many of us, whether we know it or not, or will do so in time. Such a reflection can sometimes be itself troubling for some of us, especially if it addresses, or perceived to address, our own weakness or lack.

Once, for example, a well known scholar and activist, despite our knowing each other well enough, as I often attended his talks, unsubscribed from our mailing list, saying that he had no time to read such reflections, "but we can still be friends," he emailed! Another person who unsubscribed wrote that he would rather read the suttas in Pali and Sanskrit than such reflections.

⁴ Dhammapada 182. See also Reflection, "[Becoming human: It's easier than you think](#)," R95, 2008.

⁵ See Reflection, "[Who are the hungry ghosts?](#)" R97, 2009.

⁶ See Reflection, "[Let go, get it](#)," R309, 2013.

⁷ See Reflection, "[Still centre](#)," R320, 2013.

⁸ See Reflection "[The greatest love](#)," R148, 2010.

Learning the Dharma is looking into a mirror and seeing ourselves as we are. If we notice we do not look well, it is not the mirror's fault. Indeed, it is an occasion to wisely act to heal ourselves. Wounds can get worse if we do not heal them at once. We are 65 for only a moment. So much time has passed since I first felt about writing this reflection.

Please take this reflection – and others like it – as our mirror. Sometimes it arises from irrepressible joy, sometimes from a pain that must speak itself. If we feel the joy, it comes from within us (for these are only dead dry ink or groups of pixels); if we feel troubled by a self-truth, it comes from the desire to be better.

Turning 65 should remind us that we are moving deeper into the evening of our lives. The world around us remains just as it was, as it is, and will be.⁹ We now know better, should know better. Then, we have not merely grown old, but also become better at it – at living and loving. Then, we understand better and rejoice in the words of Sāriputta, the wisest monk after the Buddha:

I delight not in death, nor do I delight in life;
I shall cast aside this body fully aware and mindful.
I delight not in death, nor do I delight in life;
I await my time as a servant his wages. (Thera,gāthā 1002 f)¹⁰

R361 Simple Joys 260
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⁹ See [Nibbedhika Pariyāya Sutta](#) (A 6.63) §3.4 @ SD 6.11.

¹⁰ See Reflection, "[Living well, dying well](#)," R109, 2011 (in *Simple Joys 2*, ch 9).