

When the sitting gets tough¹

In August, a young Buddhist in our sutta network for some 10 years now, wrote from southern Chile an inspiring email regarding his meditation experience. Here is the email:²

“Dear Teacher Piya,

First, I want to thank you for your teachings, and showing me the path of the suttas, which are the living word of the Buddha. Recently, the 21-day Vipassana retreat in Mexico has ended. Here people follow the method of Ajahn Tong Sirimangalo of Thailand. The instructor is Chakkaratani (Vicky Gurza), a disciple of Ajahn Tong. She is very strict, but a great person and teacher.

The retreat taught us the method of Ajahn Tong Sirimangalo of Thailand (Mahasi method). I had the blessing of being invited to this retreat, where we must observe eight precepts, noble silence, and not to eat after 12:00 noon. We had to meditate almost the whole day (up 9 hours of formal meditation -- series of prostrations, walking and sitting meditations) -- and it was hard.

But the experience was priceless. The first days were the hardest. After a week, I was tired and wanting to give up. So, I took from my bag the only book I had (at that moment I didn't know it was forbidden) and read some lines from it. The book gave me strength and courage, and filled me with energy, and it was an inflection point at that moment.

The book was "Simple Joys 1."³ Then I put all my effort into the retreat, and even getting congratulations for the good job. So thank you for this!

There are things I don't understand, such as the veneration of relics, and the politics of no-samadhi, but this method shows me many things about myself that I have to work with. I have more important problems than thinking if I need or do not need jhanas to be an arhat.

This group invited me to join them, and help myself. I accept their help, but I will absolutely not leave the suttas on the shelf, since they give me peace, and simple but powerful methods (such as the perception of impermanence) to deal with our hindrances.

The real power of the suttas is underestimated today. Once, when I was giving a sutta class in Valdivia [southern Chile], there came a woman with bipolar and borderline personality disorders. She told me that she was not interested in Buddhism, and that she just came to the class because reading and reflecting on the suttas was the only thing in that whole week which gave her peace.

The teaching on conditionality and impermanence gave her hope, but I convinced her to seek professional help, too. People stop seeing monsters and begin to see conditions, and their hearts calm down. I've seen this for myself: the suttas are simply healing.

¹ Dedicated to Jorge Contreras Acuña of Chile.

² Slightly abbreviated with minor editing.

³ Piya Tan, *Simple Joys* vol 1, Singapore: The Minding Centre, 2009: [link](#).

I will practise the method I've learned because it helps me. I'm sure time will show me the truth." [Email ends.]

In my reply, I wrote about the growing number of people like him -- many facing big difficulties in life and some thinking of becoming monks -- who shared their personal thoughts with me, and I feel privileged to learn from such precious lessons in great human endurance and Dharma spirit.

Without the suttas, we only hear voices, voices that think they know Dharma, or meditation, or enlightenment, even when we do not. We are all still seeking, and it can be beneficial when we cultivate the Dharma within ourselves.

No matter how great the teachers may be, no matter how good their meditations, even greater is the Dharma, that blesses them and us with all this goodness.

Only when we look deep into the suttas and into our own minds, we will see the Dharma that calms and focus our thoughts, and turn them into clear vision. Only then, we stop hearing voices. Many others are still hearing voices, without knowing how to still their minds.

Having a good teacher (one who is experienced, wise and compassionate) is very helpful to our spiritual progress. The problem is that it is difficult to know how good a teacher really is. If we like a teacher or we are used to him, we learn not to see his faults. In the (Ahita) Thera Sutta (A 5.88), the Buddha reminds us that even famous teachers (especially famous teachers) can have wrong views, especially in our own times.⁴

As Buddhists, we do not need to accept everything a teacher tells us. Our highest guide is always the true Dharma of the historical Buddha. We are reminded in the suttas to check all teachings with the suttas, and to make sure that they really work for us.

We should sensibly question teachers again and again. If they are annoyed at us, then they are not good enough as teachers. If they are really good, then, even if they chase us away, we should choose to remain and learn from them.

Buddhism today has become something so different from what the Buddha has taught. People add or minus from Buddhism as they like (like what Procrustes does to his hapless guests on his iron bed). People have invented, and are still inventing, their own Buddhisms. They are trying to change the Dharma, when they should be changing themselves. This is the price we pay when we do not know the suttas and lack good teachers: we do not get the real thing.

The most important quality we must cultivate here is love, or lovingkindness, to be exact. We must start by accepting ourselves with joy; courageously identify our selfishness, superstitions, and doubts, and joyfully let them go. The older we are, the harder this might get -- so it seems -- but we can and must free ourselves from these limiting fetters that make fools of us without our knowing it. Otherwise, we are simply leading others in the wrong way, heading for life's zoos and painful prisons.

⁴ A 5.88/3:114-116 @ [SD 40a.16](#).

One source of profound joy is to simply and constantly see in our hearts the Buddha sitting radiantly alone under the Bodhi tree. He is always there, never giving up on us even when the world messes itself up. We should not give up just because our teachers, leaders and elders mess Buddhism up.

The lone Buddha under the Bodhi tree is reminding us that even they can change in time. And this is even more possible if we do not give up ourselves. This means that we must diligently learn and spread the true teaching – the Dharma of suttas and the historical Buddha.

The big cities are crowded and noisy, and the highways are jammed with traffic and constructions. But if we look carefully away from the crowds and excitement, we can see the humble pilgrims peacefully and joyfully walking along the safe sure paths away from the cities and highways heading for the fresh air, open space and sweet peace of the forests and hills.

Mahā Kassapa Elder's Verses:

One should not wander led by the crowds:
one becomes distracted, concentration hard to get.
Seeing that it is suffering to seek favours from all kinds of people,
one should not approve of a crowd. (Tha 1051)

With clear waters, wide crags, haunted by monkeys and deer,
covered by dripping moss, those rocks delight me. (Tha 1070 = 113 = 601)

Truly wonderful is the Buddha's own deep pasture,
which we do not understand,
though we have gathered together as hair-splitters. (Tha 1085)

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