

Do we really know what we are saying?

When we have done something wrong or think we have done something wrong, we often either apologize or tell a lie about it (or try to divert attention from it). Actually, there is another way out without being apologetic nor lying. Two real-life stories will illustrate the consequences of such an approach, the wisdom of which I leave to you.

The first story I will call “The Flapjack.” Once, decades back, when I was living with a Buddhist community in the UK, I tried to make some flapjacks for the community. The recipe called for flour and honey, both of which had run out. So I resorted to the closest ingredients that were available: oats and molasses.

Having put together all the ingredients, I mixed them well. Then taking a ladle-full I poured it onto a hot frying pan. When the “flap-jack” was done I tried it. When I bit it, to my horror, the perception, “Rock cake!” arose in me. It was as hard as a rock! I thought no one would eat such a teeth-cracking disaster.

But I was not one to waste food. Or, rather, at that time, a part of me was wondering how to hide my embarrassing mistake. In between the mental jabbering, I decided to pour the rest of the mixture into a large baking pan, and bake it in the oven for all it’s worth.

When the oven timer rang, I carefully took out the “flapjack” to check it. Placing the pan on the table, I examined it like a surgeon remorsefully looking at his dead patient. It was as hard as a rock. There was no dustbin big enough to hold it. I could not break it into pieces, anyway. So if you can’t solve a problem, just leave it at the table! Then I went to bed to forget about the whole unpalatable incident.

The next morning when I came into the kitchen, I was greeted with a grateful voice:

“That was really good stuff you made, Piya! What is it called?”

I looked at the pan: it was as empty as Mother Hubbard’s cupboard, except for a few tiny crumbs.

“Is it a kind of national cookie?” the voice continued.

“Oh...,” I replied, almost intuitively, “It’s called Singapore Rock Cake!”

“Do make some more some time, OK” the voice pleaded.

One moral of this story is that a mistake is what you think it is, but if you look at it in another way, it could be a windfall.

I’m not sure of the moral of the second story, but it is one I love telling, on account of its intercultural humour. As a monk, I once spent my rains retreat in a small Thai Buddhist centre in Holland. The eve of the rains entry was Asalha Puja, a festive day with lots of spicy Thai food.

Harold, a young Dutch friend of mine, was there, too. A dish of jam-coloured spread at once caught his eye.

“Is this nice?” he asked me.

“Oh, yes, I love it.” I replied, and then walked away to attend to something else.

Before I knew it, I heard a horrific scream, “Ahhhh! I’m burning!” The next thing I saw was Harold, after throwing the fiery spread into a refuse bin, opening the fridge and guzzling down a bottle of cold milk.

“You told me it was nice!” he complained.

“I’m sorry! But I said that I love it!” It was Thai sambal (hot chili mixture), which he had generously spread on a slice of bread.

Apparently, what’s sauce for the goose, is *not* always sauce for the gander.

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