

## Tikkun olam

Frankly, I am at a loss as what to write about this week. Some events of the past week in Singapore have been very traumatic to me, so that I feel as if every goodness I know have been taken away from me. It was a feeling of complete powerlessness to help anyone, that I would like to turn into a rock somewhere in some high mountains and be at peace all alone there.

Of course I am reminded of the Buddha's "hesitation" immediately after his awakening. How deep the Dharma is, flowing against the world. How can beings steeped in craving and ignorance ever understand it, much less even want to listen to it. They would rather listen to their handphone, even in a Dharma hall right in the midst of a Dharma talk.

It is said that the High God, Brahma, himself came down and beseeched the Buddha to teach the Dharma because there are those like us who would benefit from it, and who would be lost otherwise. But I am not a Buddha. Yes, I am confident that I will work for streamwinning in this life itself, but I don't think I am there yet, even though my faith in the Dharma is very strong.

What were so dramatic this week that had spiritually troubled me? Firstly, it was the third time that I had to tell an elderly student not to use his handphone right in the middle of Sutta class. When the gentle and respectful allusions to present-moment awareness and the like fell on absent ears, I had to tell him so directly. The problem is that he is not the only one under the handphone's power. Technology is a good servant, but a bad master.

Then, on 29 September 2010, the Straits Times reported that the local high-profile priest who had been in jail for four counts of fund mismanagement had served his sentence, and was now back as abbot of his temple. In May 2004, he was to serve 10 months for his crimes. On appeal, the term was lessened, and finally, he had to serve only four months.

If we go by the traditional Vinaya rules, even if a monastic were to take "in a way which is not given that kings [the authorities], having arrested a robber, would beat or would bind or would expel him...", such a monk "becomes defeated, not in communion." (Parajika 2).<sup>1</sup> Sadly, no Buddhist authority made any statement on this important matter except for a couple of concerned lay Buddhist leaders, who have been silenced into political correctness.

What are we to make of all this, as Buddhists, as thinking individuals? What are we to say if such scandals happen again? Or is this the status quo? Perhaps some in-depth ethnographic studies of the distribution of power and wealth, and people's attitude towards Buddhism today in Singapore, might help us understand the situation better.

The plot thickens. A few nights ago, a "monk" phoned my wife Ratna asking to meet her to "discuss your meditation courses." Since she did not know him, she handed over the phone to me. When I asked him how many years (vassa) he was as a monk, he replied, "Four years."

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<sup>1</sup> Vinaya 3:46 .

“Shouldn’t you be spending the first five years under tutelage with a proper teacher,” I asked. “Too complicated,” he replied.

He said he wanted me to be his “teacher,” but I replied I only mentor those recommended by other bona fide monks or lay practitioners. Anyway, after some insistence from him, I agreed to meet him the next day at a temple around 4 pm. “Sorry,” he said, “I plan to take the MRT to go around Singapore all afternoon”! He insisted that I look at his website, which I did, and there was a fund-raising project complete with his bank-account details, where we could send money! Furthermore, it was the midst of the rains-retreat, and monks should not be travelling about.

The responses that I’ve been describing are what the Buddhist teachings call *samvega*, a feeling as if the floor has been pulled away from under us. There is a powerful sense that things are really wrong, and we are helpless about it (like prince Siddhattha seeing the old man, the sick man, and the dead man). Yet, a tiny voice in me, whispers that something good must come out of all this (like his seeing the peaceful recluse).

Then it happened. This morning I woke up from a dream about doing some Sutta translation. Just as dreams fade with the morning dew, all I could remember of it after that was only one word: *tikken* or *tikkun*. After googling, I found that it is a Hebrew word, meaning something like “repair the world.” Now it’s all coming back, as I remember reading about this some time ago.

It is from the phrase “*tikkun olam*,” well known in the Kabbalah, a Jewish mysticism made famous by the 16<sup>th</sup>-century rabbi Isaac Luria. Basically, this teaching believed that when the earth was created it was unstable and the early universe (figuratively represented by a crystal or earthen vessel) could not hold God’s holy light and it shattered. To put the shards back together again, we need to do good deeds to others. It is like the Buddhist “skillful means,” one Jewish Buddhist scholar friend told me.

It rings a very clear and joyful bell. In the *Sabba Sutta* (S 35.23), the Buddha declares that we are the world. Our eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind, and what they each sense, and their respective consciousnesses (or attention) – they are the world: we are the world. In other words, it is best to learn to understand ourselves, to be at peace with ourselves first, so that we can really solve or be a part of the solution of the problems around us.

What better way to repair the world than to prepare and use a comprehensive manual on how to do this. I am again reminded of the urgency of working with the early Buddhist Suttas. The more we understand their message, the less we would be dragged away by the drowning currents of the world. We have safe dry land to stand on, and to send out boats and rafts to reach out to others. Not only should we be life-savers, but most importantly, we need to teach others to swim well, too.

In other words, we should learn to hold no greed, no hate, no delusion towards others and the world. Above all, this is really about clearing away our own greed, hate, and delusion.