

Wanderers of Today

When a teacher is placed above the teaching
Theme: A reflection on the Anubaddha Bhikkhu Sutta (S 47.3)
and a significant phenomenon in popular Malaysian Buddhism in the late 20th century
by Piya Tan ©2008

A wanderer [wayfarer] is troubled by suffering—therefore, let one not be a wanderer.
(Dh 302de)

“Bhikshus, even if a monk should hold on to my outer robe’s corner, following closely behind me, step for step; yet, if he were covetous, strongly lusting after sense-pleasures, with a mind of ill will, with a mind of corrupted intentions, muddle-headed, without full awareness, lacking concentration, scatter-brained, loose in faculty, then, he is really far from me, and I from him.”
(**Saṅghāṭi,kaṇṇa Sutta**, It 92.1/91) = SD 24.10a

1 Wanderers of our day

1.1 A STUDY IN CHARISMA. Just after I started working on **the (Anubaddha) Bhikkhu Sutta** (S 47.-3)¹ and related texts, I received an email² that the charismatic monk, known to his followers and admirers as **Abhinyana**,³ had died. I knew him in my early years as a monk in Malaysia, where he became a monk two years after me. That was the 1970s, when a growing number of Westerners were becoming Ajahn Chah’s pupils, and it would be a couple of decades more before these western forest monks completed their training and went out into the urban world with higher standards of Dharma-Vinaya. It was the tail-end of a post-colonial period, when anyone wearing saffron robes and a shaven head, especially an English-speaking white man, would easily raise local religious fervour to near-fever pitch. For, it was difficult to find English-speaking Buddhist monastics then⁴ and, as such, were highly regarded.⁵

¹ S 47.3/5:142-144 = SD 24.6a.

² From one Philip Thornton (pthornton@jadoporn.cable.nu), dated 19 Apr 2008.

³ **Abhinyana** (monastic name Abhiñāṇo, lay name Michael George Houghton, 1946-2008) was born in England to a Protestant family. In 1970, during summer holidays in India, he made his first contact with Buddhism and identified his spirituality with it. In 1972, he became a Buddhist monk in the Malaysian Buddhist Meditation Centre, Penang, Malaysia. In due course, he freely switched between wearing the robes of a Theravada and of the Chinese Mahayana. Within years of his ordination, he was already an itinerant teacher travelling world-wide, but mostly in SE Asia and Australia, teaching basically a free, almost hippie-like, vegetarian Buddhist philosophy of life, attracting many to his personal philosophy and charisma. He died of cancer on 14th April, 2008 in the home of his nearest family at Parklands on the Sunshine Coast, Brisbane, Australia.

⁴ A few reasons for this apparently were that (1) local Buddhists were persistently harassed and challenged by English-speaking evangelists, and often (tacitly at least) take them as the standard of religious success; (2) the local English-speaking Buddhist population were significantly influenced by the life-style and much of such funds either benefitted the missionaries personally or were siphoned back to their home countries; and (4) academic status (esp a “doctor” title) or heraldic title (eg datuk, etc) were often taken as a licence in Buddhist knowledge, and hence, such individuals were respected as Buddhist speakers and teachers, often on such qualifications alone! We should also wisely discern is a person is using Buddhism to promote himself, or he is, on his cognizance, promoting Buddhism.

⁵ That is, not to mention that Malaysia (1824-1957) and Singapore (1819-1963) were ruled by the British before their respective independences. In the 1950 and early 1960s, there was **Sumangalo** (Robert Stuart Clifton, 1903-1963), the son of an Alabama (US) devout Christian family, ear-marked for the evangelist ministry, but had doubts about his family religion. On completing a Doctorate in Literature, he began to lecture on Buddhism. On a tour of East Asia, he became a Shin priest of Nishi Hongwan-ji (the first westerner to do so). In 1951, he founded the Western Buddhist Order (a name later appropriated by Sangharakshita, another cult guru figure in western Buddhism). In 1957, he joined the Thai Theravada order, and received the monastic name by which he was best known. In Jan 1959, the Poh Ern Shih (Pasir Panjang, Singapore) invited him to be their honorary abbot ([http://www.pohernshih.org/VenerableSumangalo\(E\).htm](http://www.pohernshih.org/VenerableSumangalo(E).htm)). He died in Penang, Malaysia, in 1963. The next best known English-speaking monk in Malaysia-Singapore was **Wattala Ananda Mangala** (1917-1986) (AM), a Sinha-

Abhinyana makes a fascinating study in Buddhist charisma. For one, although he is practically self-taught in Buddhism and a self-propelled “merchant of words” (his own words in his funerary oration),⁶ but in some way touched the lives of many who met or listened to him. What is even more interesting is *what kind of people and why are they drawn to him*. Here I can only briefly write some comments for the sake of a better understanding of how we tend to be attracted to certain figures in some powerful ways,⁷ and what we can learn from all this for the sake of a better future for Buddhism in our own lives.

1.2 A VIEW OF ABHINYANA’S MIND.

1.2.1 Unsubstantiated statement. In my study of *Charisma in Buddhism* (1992h), I present an analysis of Yantra Amaro’s personality as a charismatic Thai cult guru, based mainly on his own works and words. Within a few years, high-profile scandals about him were publicized worldwide.⁸ I will here use basically the same method to analyze, albeit briefly, the cultish aspects of Abhinyana (though, of course, he had his own idiosyncratic differences from Yantra Amaro).

Like many self-propelled gurus, Abhinyana had written profusely, often in an intimate manner which generally reflects his personal world-view. This excerpt from his writings is a classic example of his style of writing.

Some Buddhists maintain that the Buddha never said we should be vegetarians, and that monks (who the bulk of the Buddhist rules apply to), may eat whatever is offered to them, as long as they do not see, hear, or suspect that the animals, fish or fowl were killed especially for them; if they so see, hear or suspect, they are forbidden to eat the flesh. But this standpoint is totally indefensible, as anyone who looks at things a little objectively can see. And to say, as some people do, that by eating meat, they are helping the animals with their spiritual growth, is too ridiculous and transparent to be seriously considered for a moment.

Firstly, the Buddha never called anyone to believe or follow Him; instead, He urged people to see for themselves and find out what is true. Even so, many Buddhists become prisoners of books, repeating things like parrots or tape-recorders, without investigating, thereby missing the great value of the Buddha’s Way, which is a Way of self-reliance.

(Abhinyana, “Taking a Stand,” 2005:1)⁹

la monk of the Amarapura Nikāya, a pupil of Weubu Sayadaw of Myanmar, but was better known as “the dancing monk” in Sri Lanka, as he often staged his own productions of Buddhist plays and musicals. A cigar-smoking fiery orator, he was notorious for his uninhibited anger. While living in Melaka (Malacca), Malaysia, he was known to have especially enjoyed the company of young females. That AM was fair-skinned clearly was a factor in the locals attributing charisma to him. It was only after this period that we see local born English-speaking monastics trained in and practising the traditional Dharma-Vinaya and teaching locally. On these three monks, see Piyasilo, *Charisma in Buddhism*, Petaling Jaya (Malaysia): Dharmafarer Enterprises, 1992h. Download pdf from <http://pali.house.-googlepages.com/Piyasilo.CharismainBuddhism.pdf>.

⁶ <http://udharma.tripod.com/download.htm>.

⁷ For a more detailed discussion, see **The Teacher of the Teaching** = SD 3.14.

⁸ “In Thailand until now, to criticise the Buddhist clergy was to reap bad karma. Few dared to do so until last year when the laughable sexual antics of Phra Yantra Amaro B[h]ikku were exposed. Probably Thailand’s best-known monk, Phra Yantra counted among his 150,000 devotees cabinet ministers, princesses and an MP who swore by the curative effects of drinking the monk’s urine. But it emerged last year [1995] that when Phra Yantra was supposed to be meditating in the wilderness of New Zealand, he was sneaking off to the massage parlours of Auckland. The ladies there nicknamed him ‘Batman’ since he refused to remove his monk’s robes during sex. He also made one of his followers pregnant and made love to a nun on the icy deck of a ferry going to Finland. ... Phra Yantra was defrocked and disgraced last April [1995] by the country’s religious leader, the Supreme Patriarch...” (Tim McGirk, *The Independent*, London, 16 Jan 1996): http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4158/is_19960116/ai_n9637069. For a pre-scandal profile, see Piya Tan, **Charisma in Buddhism**, 1992: 113-137, http://www.bud-dhanet.net/pdf_file/charisma6.pdf.

⁹ http://members.tripod.com/anatta0/bic27-taking_a_stand.htm; also http://www.shabkar.org/download/pdf/-Taking_a_stand.pdf; & also http://dktan.multiply.com/photos/album/71/Ven._Abhinyana_KMBS.

Here, I do not intend discuss the merit or demerit of the views expressed, as this topic has been more fully discussed in **the Amagandha Sutta** (Sn 14).¹⁰ Rather, I would like to examine how he presents his views. First, he mentions the mainstream Theravada and canonical view on meat-eating, and a well known (though not universal) Tibetan view. He clearly and strongly disagrees with both of them.

However, in the second paragraph, he makes an unsubstantiated statement that Buddhism is a sort of carte blanche do-it-yourself religion: you pick and choose from a buffet table of Buddhist teachings, as it were. Of course, he is not alone here, but a very good example of one. In fact, one reason for his popularity was that he often expressed this sort of pet view of a majority of “vague Buddhists” in Malaysia and Singapore.¹¹

We should think carefully whether such personal or popular opinions work better, or whether the substantiated Sutta statements of the Buddha Word work better in our lives. Sometimes the Sutta statement may not be very clear (or rather, we are not sure what to make of it) due to translation difficulties. Hence, it is good to compare the available translations. Or, better still, check the original Pali, and (where feasible) even with cognate texts in Sanskrit, Chinese and other Buddhist languages. Where a wise and compassionate Dharma practitioner is available, he or she should be consulted. Finally, this statement should be tested and tasted to see if it is conducive to mental cultivation and inner stillness, balancing wisdom and compassion within us.

1.2.2 The guest is sacred. Next, let us direct our attention to an intimate and interesting observation of traditional cultural behaviour of a Malaysian Chinese family (apparently nominal Buddhists or Chinese traditionalists),¹² and Abhinyana’s own perception of its actors.

Some years ago, in Malaysia, I was invited to stay in someone’s home, where I was served nice vegetarian food. One day, I went into the kitchen to get some water, but my way was barred by the son of the house; his mother was there eating her lunch. She knew I knew she was not vegetarian, but was embarrassed that I should see her eating meat. However, it was *her* house, not mine; I was only the guest there. If she wanted to eat meat, she should have done so without being ashamed; the fact that she was ashamed was a sign she had reservations about it.

(Abhinyana, “Taking a Stand,” 2005:1)

The native hospitality to guests, especially foreigners, is proverbial. In fact, in this case, to be able to house and feed a white monk is deemed by locals to be very prestigious, if not an act of merit. Abhinyana was vegetarian, but the house mother was apparently not. So her son “barred” Abhinyana from seeing her having her meal. But Abhinyana’s reaction was surprisingly liberal: “If she wanted to eat meat, she should have done so without being ashamed.” But in the same breath, he tried to psychologize the problem—to read the person’s mind, as it were—by admitting “the fact that she was ashamed was a sign she had reservations about it.” Some might even say that he was being judgemental. Anyway, being caught in such a situation can be quite embarrassing for both sides, and he was probably simply voicing his own chagrin, tinged with subtle sarcasm.

Having been a Malaysian for nearly 60 years of my life, I can well explain why the son “barred” Abhinyana from seeing his mother having a non-vegetarian meal. Quite contrary to Abhinyana’s conclusion, local Buddhists as a rule had no qualms about meat-eating, since being vegetarian was more of a

¹⁰ Sn 14/2.2/239-252 = SD 4.24.

¹¹ One troubling development with the Abhinyana clique (some might say, cult) is that, in the 1970s, it comprised mostly of teenagers (students) and youths (with the occasional girls), who somehow preferred not to fit into the regular activities and voluntary work of the local temple, despite frequently using its facilities. Often, they would show hostility towards those they regarded as “authority figures” (such as the resident monks and temple elders). The group habitually sauntered the local streets, and occasionally had overnight picnics on Pulau Besar, a nearby island, singing songs around a campfire, chatting and having a good time.

¹² By “Chinese traditionalist,” I mean those local Chinese with values and practice based on a motley of nominal Confucianist, Daoist and Buddhist beliefs.

ritual done on auspicious days, and often in a sacred place, especially a temple. Most local Buddhists were never committed vegetarians at home.

The son had barred Abhinyana from seeing his mother taking her non-vegetarian meal *simply out of respect for Abhinyana*, so that *he* would not be embarrassed as a guest in their own home. Indeed, as a monk, Abhinyana *should have had some reservations about staying in a layperson's house*, and as a guest, he should restrict his movements in such a place, or should be chaperoned by a kappiya.¹³ Or, better still, stay in a monastery or temple of which there were quite a few in the locality. On a lighter note, this is like after having an anthropologist as a house guest, he goes on to ungratefully give us a bad press in his writings. To traditional Asians, the guest is sacred; the knowing guest, as a rule, reciprocates.

1.2.3 Funeral auto-service. Abhinyana was reported to be suffering from cancer towards the end of his life.¹⁴ Suspecting his impending demise, he penned his own funeral service, complete with selected music.¹⁵ Just after the opening, he makes this open confession:

Although I accept the concept of the continuation of life after the body's death, I must confess that, at the time of recording this, I know no more about it than the majority of people; it remains a concept, but it is not something that has had a great influence upon my living ~ that is, I do not live in fear or hope of the afterlife.

Years ago, I had a glimpse of what I took, and still take, to be Reality, a vision of the essential unity of all things, and of how self, in the sense of separate existence, is an illusion. Since then, I have tried to live with this vision in mind, as a guiding principle, even though I have had little success.

Then he played a recording of the 1967 Beatles song, "Within You, Without You."¹⁶ This was followed by his reading of a popular version (translator unknown) of the Kālāma Sutta, presenting it as "a charter of free inquiry." Then, he played another favourite song of his, the Moody Blues' "Lovely To See You Again" (2005), after which he read a self-questioning passage "from one of my books" (actually an article), "Because I Care." And he closed with playing a recording of John Lennon's "Imagine" (1971).

For a monk, Abhinyana can be said to have had a warm taste in popular music. Of course, those who are better informed of monastic rules would shake their heads disapprovingly. I think that Abhinyana was very much the same man when he died, as he was just before he found Buddhism, and he lived it in his own private way, and left this world basically little different. To be fair, such comments are based only on his writings and my personal knowledge of him. But it is not difficult to know such a person's mind as they are usually prolific in recording their own thoughts.

Here is part of the passage from "Because I care," that he read in his own funeral message. After reflecting on his self-doubts and personal failings, he continued:

But, through all my pain and frustration, I persisted, often with no conscious goal or purpose, and managed to reach the present. How I managed, I do not know, but I'm glad that I did, I'm happy that I have discovered something of my potential, something of value which, by sharing it with others, is not diminished, but only increased thereby. I cannot explain it, but must stand, unashamedly, with my mouth open, speechless in wonder at the way I have come. And was not your way also wonderful?

I leave the intelligent reader to make out the mind behind these words. An important reminder here: I am writing this neither as a tribute to nor a judgement of anyone, but as part of my own observations of

¹³ "Kappiya," ie a *kappiya, kāraka*, an attendant who makes things suitable for a monk: see Mv 6.15 = V 1:206 f.

¹⁴ Email from Philip Thornton (pthornton@jadoporn.cable.nu), dated 19 Apr 2008.

¹⁵ "My Funeral Service," <http://udharma.tripod.com/download.htm>; MP3: <http://www.freewebs.com/chayy013/>.

¹⁶ The song was written by George Harrison, who sought out Indian musicians to help him in the track's recording, but all of them were uncredited.

local Buddhist behaviour patterns. For example, I wonder if his local disciples and admirers ever asked him (and they have the right, even duty, to do so):

- Did he complete his tutelage (*nissaya*) and was properly released from it?¹⁷ Or,
- Why did he not find a good meditation teacher to train him or become a forest monk? Or,
- Why he did not at least complete his basic years of monastic training before wandering the world Christ-like? Or,
- Why did he continue to don the monastic robes although he was living by his own principles throughout? Or,
- Was it because the robe attracted a better audience, greater respect, and patronage?

These are not rhetorical questions, but real and painful ones. I believe in the decades to come, those who read these passages would have a better idea how to show greater commitment towards Buddhism as an integral part of their lives: to weed and toil the ground that hold them, so that they truly enjoy a rich Dharma harvest. Admire the falling stars and passing comets, but be not distracted: let passing comets pass, you can never catch a falling star. Otherwise, we may be stuck with the Buddhism we deserve; and without proper understanding and living the Dharma, we remain as wanderers in samsara.

2 The word is *not* the thing

2.1 Our perceptions are often coloured by our desires, our loves, our hopes, our fears. We tend to filter out those experiences that do not fit into these moulds. We are easily attracted to people that perceive as endorsing our beliefs, our likes and dislikes, our dreams. We then project those qualities we desire onto such figures. We attribute love, compassion, and wisdom—we attribute *charisma*—onto them. Yet, we ourselves remain what we are even more so, caught in a rut of idolization and guru-worship, unable to really change for the better or to relate to others in a healthy manner. For, we are not ourselves, but mere shadows and reflections of those that we worship.

2.2 We should not resign ourselves to a routine of church-like Buddhist-hall talks, being entertained by our favourite religious performers. We could learn something about *oratory and reality* from Robert Menzies' observation of the great orator Churchill, when he wrote, "...his [Churchill's] real tyrant is the glittering phrase—so attractive to his mind that awkward facts have to give way."¹⁸ I think that Menzies was actually complimenting Churchill, as the British Isles were facing the huge German military might, and yet could drive hope into the minds of the British against such overwhelming odds. That was a world war, and against a common enemy.

Such words in the context of religion often have more diverse and complex effects on the audience. The point is that people who are easily moved by words, tend to live and remain on that level. Words are always only a medium of communication and do not always reveal the true nature of the speaker's mind. We need to reflect on *why* we are moved by such words, and in due course *how* we can ourselves move on to better ourselves.

2.3 Guest speakers come and go, but we are left to put back the chairs, and clear and clean the halls, and attend to the spiritual needs of the locals. Such talks should positively relate to our local Buddhist situations and problems. Otherwise, we might forever remain as satellites and tribute-payers for alien religious masters and foreign missions? Our local Buddhist community will then remain as outposts in the frontiers and wilderness of the Buddhist world.

2.4 For our Buddhist journey, we need a good map, the ability to read such maps, and to use them whenever we need to. And yet, we must always look out that we are on the right track, that we read the

¹⁷ The monastic tutelage (*nissaya*) is a minimum of 5 years that a new monk must spend under training with a suitable teacher, but if he has difficulty in this, his tutelage may be extended indefinitely (Mv 1.53+73 = V 1:79 f, 91).

¹⁸ Menzies was the Australia's prime minister during World War II. From "Menzies' 1941 Diary," dated 2 March: <http://www.oph.gov.au/menzies/churchillandthewarcabinet.htm>. Churchill was British prime minister during World War II.

road signs correctly, that we make correct turns, and above, all we must make the journey ourselves, and perhaps help others along the way, too.

2.5 Our most reliable map is the Dharma, which the Buddha, the spiritual cartographer and guide, has bequeathed us in the Suttas the best instructions on how to use them effectively. The Sangha members may often serve as our guides, and often enough we need to guide them, too; for, we are all fellow travelers in this inward journey. The point is, no matter how instructive or entertaining talks on maps may be, we still have to make the journey. No matter how good talks on recipes and prescriptions may be, we still have to taste the food or take the medicine for ourselves. Or, when pointing to the moon, we should never take the finger for the moon itself.

3 “Going native”

The phrase “going native” was first used by the British Foreign Service during colonial times to refer to agents who assumed the customs, values and rights of the foreign country they were assigned to deal with. And they did so to the point that they no longer represent the best interests of the British Empire, but rather those of the natives.

On the other hand, this is good for the natives, *for us* (wherever we are located). The point is that if a foreign teacher were to come within our midst in the name of Buddhism, he or she should *go native*, that is, benefit us in every way, especially training us to be *culturally independent*, and in due course, to be *emotionally independent*.¹⁹

The antithesis of this is that the teacher is a globe-trotting religious colonizer with I-pods of adoring groupies hungrily waiting for the return of the lord or lady. Instead of bringing the liberating Dharma to the natives, he uses Buddhism as a bait and fetter to round up loyalists and funds for himself. Foreign aid and social work have their proper place in Buddhist work, and should be done by qualified and Dharma-inspired laity, especially where funds are involved. I am limiting my discussion here to *spiritual training*.

The Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta (D 16) has an interesting passage showing how the Buddha “goes native” wherever he teaches, so that his audience—known as the eight assemblies—completely identifies with him, thus:

²⁰Now, Ānanda, there are these eight assemblies.

What are the eight?

- (1) The kshatriya [noble class] assembly,
- (2) the brahmin [priestly] assembly,
- (3) the houselord assembly,
- (4) the recluse assembly,
- (5) the assembly of the Four Great Kings,
- (6) the assembly of the Thirty-two Gods,
- (7) Māra’s assembly, and
- (8) the assembly of brahmas.

Ānanda, I recall having approached a kshatriya assembly of many hundreds, assembled with them before, and conversed with them before, and engaged in discussion with them before.

Whatever their colour was then,²¹ so was my colour, too. Whatever was their voice then, so was my voice, too. I instructed, inspired, roused and gladdened them with Dharma talk.

But even as I was speaking, they knew me not, wondering, ‘Who could this be who speaks? A deva or a human?’

¹⁹ On “emotional independence,” see *Atammayatā* = SD 19.13(7.6).

²⁰ This whole passage also in **Parisā S** (A 8.69/4:307 f) and nearly identical to a passage in **Maha Sīhanāda S** (M 12.29/1:72).

²¹ “Then,” *tattha*, lit “in that place.”

And having instructed, inspired, roused and gladdened them with Dharma talk, I disappeared. And when I have disappeared, they wondered, ‘Who is this who has disappeared? A deva or a human?’

Ānanda, I recall having approached a brahmin assembly of many hundreds,...

...I recall having approached a householder assembly,....

...I recall having approached a recluse assembly,....

...I recall having approached an assembly of the Four Great Kings,....

...I recall having approached an assembly of the Thirty-two Gods,....

...I recall having approached Māra’s assembly,....

Ānanda, I recall having approached an assembly of Brahmas of many hundreds, assembled with them before, and conversed with them before, and engaged in discussion with them before. Whatever their colour was then, so was my colour, too. Whatever was their voice then, so was my voice, too. I instructed, inspired, roused and gladdened them with Dharma talk.

But even as I was speaking, they knew me not, wondering, ‘Who could this be who speaks? A deva or a human?’

And having instructed, inspired, roused and gladdened them with Dharma talk, I disappeared. And when I have disappeared, they wondered, ‘Who is this who has disappeared? A deva or a human?’

These, Ānanda, are the eight assemblies.

(D 16.3.21-23/2:109 f) = SD 9

This teaching here concerns Dharma missiology, the discipline and art of effective teaching and spreading the Buddha Word. From the Buddha’s statement here, it is clear that he is capable of blending with the crowd and effectively communicating with his listeners at their level.²²

The Buddha is an astute critic of the teachers and teachings of his times. Yet he is not an armchair critic, but someone who is quick to accept what is wholesome for spiritual growth.²³ This is of course not wholesome duplication, but an intelligent adaptation of words and ways that facilitate his teaching and his followers’ training. In our own times, for more effective propagation of Buddhism, we may need to learn from the great visionaries of other religions. We need to learn new and effective ways of packaging Buddhism and organizing Buddhist institutions that would be effective in *self-growth* and in *Dharma outreach*.

John Nevius (1829-93) was one of the great visionaries of Christian evangelism who, in his famous “Nevius Plan,” followed the Venn-Anderson principles of “self-propagation, self-government, and self-supporting.”²⁴ Although his ideas were not accepted in China, they were applied in Korea with great success.²⁵ Rephrased in Buddhist terms, we have the following the Local Plan for the propagation of Buddhism today.²⁶

²² Cf the 6 qualities of an ideal Dharma speaker given in Alam S (A 8.62/4:296-299) = SD 46.5, Udayī S (A 5.159/3:184) = SD 46.1, and Piya Tan, *The Teaching Methods of the Buddha*, 2001 (unpublished MS): access from <http://pali.house.googlepages.com/TeachingMethodsoftheBuddha.pdf>. Also to be seen here are the roots of an omnipresent and protean Buddha or Mahāyāna Bodhisattva ideal.

²³ For example, on terminology borrowed from Brahmanism, see *The Buddha & His Disciples*, 2004: ch 4.6.

²⁴ These principles were named after Rufus Anderson (1796-1880), an American Congregationalist pastor, and Henry Venn (1796-1873), hon secretary of the Church Missionary Society of England that sent missions to evangelize Africa and the East. The “indigenous church mission theory” was developed by the colonial missionaries in response to the extreme paternalism exercised by western missionaries of the early 19th cent, particularly in Asia. Opposition arose to the making of “rice” Christians who were completely dependent on missionaries and loyal to the church only as long as they were receiving free food. In exchange, missionaries expected complete loyalty from the “natives” but resisted giving up authority and control. The system was thought to foster an unhealthy parent-child relationship between the missionaries and native believers. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indigenous_church_mission_theory.

²⁵ He presented his ideas in a series of articles in the *Chinese Recorder* journal in 1885, later published as a book in 1886, *The Planting and Development of Missionary Churches* (see Hans-Ruedi Weber, (2000), *The Layman in Christian History: A Project of the Department on the Laity of the World Council of Churches*, London: SCM Press,

- (1) Dharma workers should continue to live in their areas and pursue their occupations, being self-supporting and be exemplars to their co-workers and countrymen.
- (2) Dharma workers should only develop programmes and institutions that local Buddhists desire and can support.
- (3) The local Sangha should network with and support the local lay Dharma workers.
- (4) Viharas should be built in the native style with funds and resources given by local Buddhists.
- (5) Intensive Sutta and meditation instructions should be provided for Dharma workers on a regular basis, at least once a year, in a centralized fellowship gathering to promote networking.

4 Please do not misrepresent the Buddha.

4.1 The Buddha is very clear in admonishing those who hold wrong views. In **the Mahā Taṇhā,saṅkhaya Sutta** (M 38), for example, where the monk Sāti, who holds the view that our same present consciousness that is reborn and wanders in samsara, is admonished thus:

“Misguided one [You hollow man],²⁷ to whom have you ever known me to have taught the Dharma in that way? Misguided one, have I not stated in many ways that *consciousness is dependently arisen*,²⁸ that without a condition there is no arising of consciousness?

But you, misguided one, have misrepresented us by your wrong grasp and injured²⁹ yourself, and stored up much demerit—for, this will bring you harm and suffering for a long time.”

(M 38.5c/1:258) = SD 7.10

4.2 In the main simile of **the Alagaddûpama Sutta** (M 22)—the Discourse on the Parable of the Water-snake—the Buddha uses this parable to admonish us on the proper study of the Dharma, again warning us not to misrepresent him:

Here, bhikshus, some clansmen learn the Dharma—discourses, stanzas, expositions, verses, inspired utterances, sayings, birth stories, marvels and answers to questions—and having learnt the Dharma, they examine the (true) purpose [the meaning] of those teachings with wisdom.

Having examined the (true) purpose [the meaning] of those teachings with wisdom, they are convinced of it [they see its wisdom].

They do not learn the Dharma for the sake of criticizing others, nor for winning debates, and they enjoy the good for the sake of which one learns the Dharma. Those teachings, properly grasped by them, bring them welfare and happiness for a long time to come.

Why is that? Because of the right grasp of those teachings.

Suppose a man needing a water-snake, looking for a snake, wandering in search of a water-snake, sees a large water-snake and catches it rightly with a cleft stick, and having done so, grasps it rightly by its neck. Then, although the snake might coil around his hand or his arm or one of his limbs, still he would not suffer death or deadly pain.

2000:350). See also Alfred James Broomhall, *Hudson Taylor & China's Open Century Volume Three: If I Had a Thousand Lives*, Littleton, CO: Overseas Missionary Fellowship, 1983.

²⁶ On John Nevius, see John Mark Terry, “Indigenous Churches,” in A Scott Moreau, *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000:483-485.

²⁷ *Mogha, purisa*, lit “empty person.” I’ve followed a safe well-tested translation here. However, while *mogha* evokes more deeply a spiritual lack, “misguided” connotes more of psychosocial errancy. Cf TS Eliot’s “Hollow Men” (where “empty men” is also mentioned) which fully brings out the meaning here but lacks emotional connection for those unfamiliar with the poem.

²⁸ “Consciousness is dependently arisen,” *paṭicca, samuppānam viññānam*. Cf **Mahā Hatthi, padôpama S** (M 28): “These five aggregates of clinging are dependently arisen.” (M 28.28/1:191 = SD 3.13).

²⁹ “Injured,” *khanasi*, 2nd p sg of *khanati*: (1) hurts, injures; impairs (V 2:26 = M 1:132; D 1:86; S 1:27; A 1:89, 3:350; Tha 1173); (2) digs; digs up excavates (V 3:48, 76, 4:32; M 2:51; S 1:127; A 4:159; Dh 247, 337; U 15). There is a wordplay here: Sāti harms himself with wrong view, and also dig up his wholesome roots.

Why is that? Because of the right grasp of those teachings.

Therefore, bhikshus, when you understand the meaning of my word, remember it accordingly, and when you do not understand the meaning of my word, then you should question and counter-question either me or the learned monks about it. (M 22.11-12/1:134) = SD 3.13

4.3 The most common ways by which Buddhism is misrepresented in post-Buddha times are through *wealth* and *power*. If we are wealthy or we have access to a pool of funds, we have to use them wisely in promoting Dharma-minded teachers and Dharma-spirited teachings. The worldly wheels of religion turn on money, and temple walls and images are made of cash: we need funds for buildings, facilities and activities, to reach out to great numbers of the religious market to get more cash, more funds, more money.

Those who seek to obtain wealth, power or pleasures through religion always end up harming the religion's name and negatively affecting the faithful.³⁰ This dizzy money wheel can only be broken when we can see a higher purpose for it; when we are Dharma-minded to find good teachers and better teachings. Our collective karma rests heavily with the quality of teachers and teachings we sponsor, promote and practise.

4.4 On the walls and billboards of evangelical religions, and in their discourses, we often hear the imagery of *power*. This is understandable, as these religions are rooted in the tribal system. But when a *tribe*—any kind of tribe—has too much power, it often wants to dominate others or to regard themselves as infallible (the saved) and above everyone else (the sinners).

There is something we can learn from the history of religions. In 1870, the Roman Catholics faced a great crisis over Pope Pius IX's promulgation of the dogma of papal infallibility. Lord John Dalberg-Acton (1834-1902), a renowned Catholic layman, was completely against such a notion. It was in this connection that he famously wrote these words to his friend, the Bishop of London, Mandell Creighton:

I cannot accept your canon that we are to judge Pope and King unlike other men with a favourable presumption that they did no wrong. If there is any presumption, it is the other way, against the holders of power, increasing as the power increases. Historic responsibility has to make up for the want of legal responsibility. Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men.

(Lord Acton, in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton, April 3, 1887)

4.5 The positive greatness of religions is not of the hall- and wall-builders who pronounce comfortable and correct dogmas and platitudes, but Dharma-inspired greatness arises from the faithful who question wisely what is questionable of their faith, and who envision the true light of the faith, that of personal liberation and social harmony.

4.6 The (Anātha,piṇḍika) Pīti Sutta (A 5.176) has a special message for *the wealthy and skilled who sponsor teachers and promote teachings (such as through public events, talks, publications, and the internet)*. In this sutta, the Buddha advises Anātha,piṇḍika and his colleagues not only to spend their wealth on the order, but more importantly, to meditate and enjoy the bliss of solitude (*pīti paviveka*), thus:

You, houselord, have supported the order with robes, almsfood, lodgings, and support for the sick and medical supplies.

But, houselord, you should not feel satisfied just by the thought, "We have supported the order with robes, almsfood, lodgings, and support for the sick and medical supplies."

³⁰ A classic example: in 2007-2008, the Straits Times frequently reported on the police's Commercial Affairs Department (CAD) investigation of Shi Mingyi's misappropriation of funds meant for the Renci Hospital, a Buddhist charity and second largest charity under the Ministry of Health's purview. He had wrongfully directed funds to his own companies. His passport was impounded, pending investigations and his position was replaced. See eg ST 20 Feb 2008: H2. On the Buddha's rules against monastics dealing with money, see **Money and Monastics** = SD 4.19, see esp (9.3).

For, houselord, you should train yourself thus:

“Come now, let us, from time to time, attain and abide in the bliss of solitude.”

(A 5.187.2-3/3:206 f) = SD 44.10

Here, “the bliss of solitude,” or more literally, “the zest arising from seclusion,” technically refers to the attainment of dhyana, but it can generally refer to the practice of meditation retreat, as done by the Buddha and the early saints, usually at dawn and at dusk, or anytime they wish to.³¹

5 Teachers beware!

5.1 GURU FIGURE. No matter how clever we are at merchandizing words, we should never short-change our audience. Our audience tends to attribute charisma to us for as many reasons as there are those in the audience. Many may relate to our perceived profound wisdom or some other desirable quality, and they become followers, devotees, admirers, and dependents, but their lives may remain essentially unchanged. They may never be better than we are, because we spoil them with sweet words, like handing sweets to sugar-hungry children. Understandably, such children will love us, and love us to death, their spiritual death, that is.

Perhaps, some in our audience may even be spiritually ahead of us, but our way with words has led them down the road to false self-affirmation—that “we should only and always think for ourselves.” The sublimated message, which even the “humble” speaker may not be aware of, is that he is really saying, “Think for yourself, but think like me.” We have actually hindered their spiritual growth, and often we have not even helped them resolve some of their basic personal problems. We simply trivialize vital issues with Zen-like jokes.

In the **Khema Sumana Sutta**, the monks Khema and Sumana separately approach the Buddha and make this declaration, which the Buddha approves of:

Venerable sir, a monk who is an arhat, with influxes destroyed, having lived the holy life, with the burden set down, the goal attained, utterly discarded the fetters of existence, liberated by direct knowledge, has no such thought:

“There is one better than I” (*atthi me seyyo*), or

“There is one equal to me” (*atthi me sadiso*), or

“There is one worse than I” (*atthi me hīno*).

Soon after the venerable Khema and the venerable Sumana had left, the Blessed One addressed the monk, saying:

“In this way, bhikkhus, the sons of family declare their final knowledge (*aññā*). The fact is mentioned without reference to a self.³²

But there are some empty persons here who laughingly [lightly] think that they have attained final knowledge, only to find later than disaster have befallen them.” (A. 6.49/3:358 f) = SD 19.2b

They may *laugh* with us, they may *love* us (the guru), but they *hate* those who do *not* love us, or despise those who are not like us, or they fail to connect with others who think differently. We have become a cult figure.

The point is that we should not only *think for ourselves*, but we need also to *think of others*—we should cultivate both wisdom and compassion. We should constantly monitor ourselves, “How are my words and actions affecting others?” “Am I changing for the better?” “Am I deep down, a truly happy person? If not, what am I doing to better myself?” If we regularly fail to do this, we may actually enjoy talking to *ourselves* and addressing *our selves* that populate the audience, turning it into our personal I-pod.

Even the early Christians had a similar problem: *a prophet is not without honour, but in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house.*³³ But with greater social maturity, the Buddhist

³¹ See eg **Mahā Gosīṅga S** (M 32.5/1:213, etc) = SD 44.12.

³² *Evam kho bhikkhave kulaputtā aññaṃ vyākaronti. Attho ca vutto attā ca anupanīto.*

workers of our own place and time, decades, even centuries, after this was written, would have found greater acceptances in the hearts of local Buddhists.

An important Dharma training is that of *breaking out of the group*. Indeed, this vital spiritual process is reenacted in renunciation (*pabbajjā, upasampadā*), that is, the spiritual act of renouncing the conception of a narrow *biological* family for that of a universal *spiritual* family. The renounced monastic is truly a *son* to all families, a *father* to all mankind, whom we may approach for counsel and succour, and for liberating teaching, with even greater confidence than to our own biological parents and family. This training in transcendence for the lay followers is famously found in the cultivation of lovingkindness (*mettā, bhāvanā*), that end with the “breaking the barriers” so that our hearts can accommodate *all* beings, human and non-human, without any exception.

5.2 TRUE RENUNCIATION. Why do we become religious? Why do some of us want to become monks or nuns? There are good reasons and there are bad reasons. Some turn to religion and renunciation with a good reason but in due course turn bad on account of religion; some begin badly, but in due course become good. Some become monastics for the wrong reason and only worsen with religion. Thankfully, there are those who turn to religion for the right reasons and attain spiritual goodness, becoming living exemplars for others.

Some turn to religion out of unresolved sexuality (such as sexual guilt and homosexual tendencies), or wishing to get out of a meaningless and painful life, or simply for the sake of an easy life. Often enough, I notice how western monks (of course, not just them) in the monasteries in Thailand, being given special treatment, so that they gloat and wallow like opium-eaters. In one dramatic case, a western monk from Nakhorn Sawan, in the 1980s, left the order in due course, got into a mess with women, and in the end killed himself.

Such sad conditions are common with urban monks, but very rarely with the forest monks, who generally undergo strict training. The wanderer (*paribbājaka*) tradition of the Buddha’s time is still alive today. However, in the Buddha’s time, if they fully accept the Buddha Dharma and are sincere in becoming monks, they are accepted into the order, where they progress to attain arhathood. However, in many cases, a wanderer has to go through a four-month probation (*parivāsa*), as stated in such discourses as **the Acela Kassapa Sutta** (S 12.17):

³⁴“Kassapa, anyone who was previously a follower of an outside teaching and wishes to go forth in this Dharma and Vinaya, and wishes for the ordination, has to go on a probation of four months. At the end of the four months, the monks who are satisfied³⁵ would give him the going-forth [novice initiation] and ordain him into the state of a monk [higher ordination].

However, I see a difference amongst individuals here.”³⁶ (S 12.17.17-18/2:21) = SD 18.5

The closing line, “I see a difference amongst individuals here,” spoken by the Buddha, means that this rule need not apply if he sees that the wanderer is spiritually mature enough fully commit himself to spiritual practice as taught according the Buddha Dharma; in which case, the five years of tutelage (*nissaya*) still applies anyway.

5.3 THOSE WHO QUESTION WILL FIND THE ANSWERS. Please do not jump into any final conclusions after reading or grasping only a section of this reflection. All words and statements are contextual and provisional. Look at the reflection as a whole. If you are in anyway upset by a word, a line, a paragraph,

³³ Mark 6:4. Christ spoke these words in response to those who, in his own village, who looked down on him, being a carpenter’s son, and not worth listening to.

³⁴ §§17-18 as in **Kassapa Sīhanāda S** (D 8.24/1:176), **Mahā Parinibbāna S** (D 16.5.28b-29) = SD 9, **Acela Kassapa S** (S 12.17/2:18-22) = SD 18.5 & **Sabhiya S** (Sn 3.6/p102). This rule and procedure are found at Mahāvagga 1.38 = V 1:69.

³⁵ “Satisfied,” *āraddha, citta*, ie satisfied that the probate has fulfilled all conditions as stipulated at Mahāvagga 1.38 = V 1:69 (DA 2:363; MA 3:106; SA 2:37; SnA 2:436).

³⁶ *Api ca m’ettha puggala, vemattatā viditā ti*. See **Mahāparinibbāna S** (D 16.5.28b/2:152) n = SD 9 & **Acela Kassapa S** (S 12.17) = SD 18.5 Intro (4).

or even the whole article, ask yourself, “What is I am really upset about? What is it that I do not like here?”

What we like or dislike is not always the result of others. How we emotionally react is the result of our own karmic chemistry—how we think and feel—which frames and colours our perceptions. The answer to our happiness lies inside *here* (our mind), not out there. Happiness when directed inwardly, into your heart, is a great step towards clear and liberating wisdom. The truth is *not* out there: it is in *here*.

An important difference between *gossip* and *critical analysis* is that while for former is a person-centred idle talk (often not based on truth, or is malicious), the latter is an observation of recurrent patterns and their merit or demerit. Observing the foolish and the evil, we can learn what *not* to do, and observing the good and the wise, we can be inspired with what to *do*. Genius can be used for evil or for good, or to keep us in the rut of self-centredness, but when genius is near the Dharma, it brightens up with goodness.

We tend to be blinded and cheated by what we think we *want* in life or by what we think we *are*, and we are easily drawn to others whom we perceive to be *like* us, like birds of a feather. Such emotional transferences and counter-transferences only sustain co-dependent lifestyles that tend to shut off our potential for spiritual growth. We become like children huddling together out of fear of phantoms in the dark, or crowding euphorically around a clown and mindlessly following him around. Someone needs to stand up and turn on the lights. Objectivity is easier when problems are re-examined in retrospect. The past and the present have a lot of teach us when we look at them with a calm and clear mind of compassionate wisdom.

*Appa-s,sutāyam puriso
balivaddo 'va jīrati
māmsāni tassa vaḍḍhanti
paññā tassa na vaḍḍhati*

A person of little wisdom
grows old like an ox:
his flesh [body] increases,
but not his wisdom. (Dh 152)³⁷

*Atta-d-attham par'atthena
bahunā 'pi na hāpaye
atta-d-attham abhiññāya
sad-attha,pasuto siyā*

Even for the good of others,
however great, one should never neglect
directly knowing what is good for oneself:
let one be intent on one's own spiritual goal. (Dh 166)

*Duppabbajjam durabhiramam
durāvāsā gharā dukkhā
dukkho 'samāna,samvāso
dukkhānupatit'addhagu
tasmā na c'addhagū siyā
na ca dukkhānupatito siyā*

Difficult is going forth, difficult to delight in it;
painful it is to live in houses,
painful it is to associate with the different.
**A wanderer [wayfarer] is troubled by suffering—
therefore, let one not be a wanderer,**
let one not be attended by suffering. (Dh 302)

*Attānam eva paṭhamam
paṭirūpe nivesaye
ath'aññam anusāseyya
na kilisseyya paṇḍito*

Indeed, let first oneself [the self]
be settled in what is proper,
and then should one instruct others:
the wise would not be defiled. (Dh 158)

*Sādhū dassanam ariyānam
sannivāso sadā sukhā
adassanena bālanam
niccam eva sukhī siyā*

Good is the seeing of the noble saints,
ever happy it is associating with them.
Not seeing the foolish,
one would always be happy. (Dh 206)

*Bāla,sangata,cārī hi
dīgham addhāna socati
dukkho bālehi samvāso*

One who moves in the company of fools
grieves for a long time.
Painful is associating with the foolish,

³⁷ For the Dh story, see (Anussati) Udāyī S (A 6.29) = SD 24.6b (1.1).

*amitten'eva sabbadā
dhīro ca sukha,samvāso
ñātīnaṃ va samāgamo.*

truly like being with an enemy always.
But the wise is happiness to be associated with,
just like meeting with relatives. (Dh 207)

*Tasmā hi
dhīraṇ ca paññaṇ ca bahussutraṇ ca
dhorayha,sīlaṃ vata,vantaṃ āriyaṃ
taṃ tādisaṃ sappurisaṃ sumedhaṃ
bhajetha nakkhatta,pathaṃ'va candimā*

Therefore,
Being steady, wise, and learned,
engaged in moral virtue, dutiful, noble—
such a one is a true individual, wise,
let one follow like the moon on its starry path.
(Dh 208)

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