

Last chance to breathe

Imagine (some still remember) how we first lived in the beautiful open country with tall shady trees and low colourful vegetables and plants. Our cats and dogs ran freely after each other in the open range, and strange little animals appeared occasionally to our delight in the bushes and trees, even at our door-steps. Sunbirds built their nests in our potted plants.

The air was fresh and cool, the water clear and gurgling in nearby streams. The misty mossy hills and clouded rocky mountains, not too far away, we could walk there and back in just a day. And neighbours were friendly and generous. Life was very simple and healthy.

Then, came the Big Highways, with Big Vehicles, bringing well-dressed Wealthy Developers and Investors. They made us promises and vows to turn our remote haven into an instant Paradise, with Recreation Grounds, Swimming Pools, Roofed Cinemas and Casinos with Piped Music -- just by saying the word: Money!

Many of our good neighbours believed and left. Their homes and farms were levelled and from the emptiness grew Tall Towers surrounded by Trees with Sparkling Jewels.¹ All we needed to do was believe what the Developers and Investors told and taught us. Everything was measured in Money, including ourselves. We didn't have to give or share anymore, just buy and sell with Money. Life became more exciting, more sophisticated, more noisy, more crowded.

Early Buddhism is like a simple rustic life. It's still there, hidden by the big buildings, by bigger temple walls, shunned by the euphoric crowds. But we can still get there if we get off the Big Highway, and take the small byways, the paths less taken. We can see the ancient mountains, singing hills, the fresh air, the clear waters, and nestling in all this green and other colours are the cosy little huts, peacefully sitting under shady trees, by the gurgling streams, even in cool caves.

The older folks, wiser with age, live in the largest building there, a two-story house, located in a pleasant spot, a delightful forest grove where a river flows through a pleasant ford, with smooth banks of white sand.² There they study, discuss and teach the ancient texts. These are the teachings of simple joys of peace and wisdom.

The wise and happy ancients are still there, living their sweet simple happy healthy (sshh) lives, with their good natural food, nourished by the joy of a clear mind and still heart. In the day, they bathe in the light of the warm sun; in the night they sleep in a chamber of misty calm. Whenever they need to rest or heal themselves, they just close their eyes in a spacious silence.

While Big City Dwellers hold their Breaths with Big Fishy Eyes at impressive Crowds of City Leaders praising Money and Modernity, the simple country folks free their breaths and, closing their eyes, see true joy and peace. In Big City, the Citizens enjoy themselves on high luxurious Seats in sprawling Stadiums with numbered Seats and huge Clocks that tell them what and when to do.

The country folks simply sit in a secluded dwelling: a forest, the foot of a tree, a mountain, a glen, a hillside cave, a charnel ground, a jungle grove, the open air, a heap of straw. There are rumours that the Big City is not big enough and is spreading, eating up more country land. So in no time, there will be no more forest, no foot of tree, no mountain, no glen, no hillside cave, no charnel ground, no jungle grove, no open air, no heap of straw. Only Big City.

¹ Mahā Sudassana Sutta (D 17), [SD 36.12](#).

² Ariya Pariyesanā Sutta (M 26,17), [SD 1.11](#).

So the country folks work hard, extra hard, to teach the sutta teachings and pass on the Dharma, so that it is not forgotten. The Big Citi-zens make fun of the old teachings, charging that they are out of date and inferior, and they don't work, not as well as the powerful Big City mantras, hymns, and vows recited by Big City Crowds so crowded that it sounds like a thousand thunders.

The only thunder the country folks hear is the one in the sky. There's a story that such thunders split the heavens, but the Buddha sits on in his meditation, undisturbed by any sound!³

Big City Dwellers complain that early suttas are repetitive and boring. Yes, here they are right. However, it is strange that the country folks simply love these repetitive boring suttas. The repetitions remind and help them to avoid bad speech and bad actions, so that they are always without remorse over things done or undone.

The country folks make sure their hearts are unsoiled, so that gladness arises in them. When there is gladness, zest arises. When there is zest, tranquillity of body and mind arises. When there is tranquillity, they live in happiness. A happy mind is easily stilled. And a still mind sees the rise and fall of all things.⁴ So powerful is their vision of impermanence, that they do not fear even death.

The Big Citi-zens lived luxuriously, with imports from China, Tibet, Japan, and overseas, doing whatever they liked, in their eternal bright lights, making day of night, and night of day. The country folks stick to their daily routine, rising before the sun to welcome it with their peaceful hearts, joyfully working through the day, eating when they are hungry, resting when they are tired. Just before the sun sets, they bid it farewell again with a peaceful heart. They sleep happy, they dream happy dreams, they wake happy.⁵

The country folks know that they would not be around forever, may be not even for long. There are rumours that some Big Citizens are becoming disgruntled, even disillusioned, with all the good things they are used to. Life can become really boring, merely by chanting a name or making a vow, they get what they want. They feel they should work for it, like in the old days, like what the Buddha teaches us. It is such fun to be able to do things ourselves.

But it is not easy to go against the Developer and Investor Gurus: they are legion, and we must respect them. We must believe in ourselves, these Gurus teach. Life is so uncertain, full of doubts. Only the proper rituals and vows will keep things right and the Money flowing like wind and water.⁶ After all, the Gurus have been certified enlightened (that's why they wear impressive clothes and have more impressive titles), they are perfect and must be obeyed.

There are rumours that a growing number of Big Citizens, especially the younger ones, are questioning all this. But they cannot really do anything about it; they have been told that the Big Way is the only way, the One Vehicle. They begin to tire of the tall dark buildings; they miss the skies and clear night heaven of stars. Stifling haze is suffocating the City; neither chants nor vows could clear the air, except perhaps to stop breathing it. They hear that the country folks know the secrets of the breath, of earth, water, fire and wind.⁷

³ **Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16,4.30-4.32), [SD 9](#).

⁴ **Pamāda Vihāri Sutta** (S 35.97), [SD 47.6](#).

⁵ On the 11 benefits of lovingkindness, see **(Ekā,dasa) Mettānisaṃsā Sutta** (A 11.16), [SD 2.15](#).

⁶ On the 3 fetters, see **Emotional independence**, [SD 40a.8](#).

⁷ On the 4 elements, see **Mahā Rāhul'ovāda Sutta** (M 62,8-11), [SD 3.11](#).

They are caught in between heaven and happiness, and left in limbo. They feel a strange hunger for a different kind of food – not the expensive imported stuffs they are so used to. They sometimes hear whispers that country folks feed on joy, and wonder how this is done.⁸ How can joy be simple?

What they do not yet know is that the country folks actually know about their predicament, but they seem to be doing nothing at the moment because country folks are not allowed in Big City. But the country folks are doing something about it. They have written down the wonderful suttas, inscribing them with metal stylus on durable palm leaves. Then, they rub soot over the words so that they stand out clearly. Then, they give it a layer of good clear lacquer. When the sutta leaves are dry, they run two threads through them to hold them together, to keep them safe for the right time.⁹

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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⁸ See Reflection, "[Not by food alone, but by joy, too](#)," R197, 2011.

⁹ See Piya Tan, [History of Buddhism](#), Singapore, 2002, 2013: 2.7: Tamil invasions.