

Chinua Achebe (1930-2013)

Chinua Achebe,¹ the world renowned Nigerian writer, was laid recently to rest in his small hometown of Ogidi, in south-east Nigeria, Africa. Achebe's critical target was often the leaders of Nigeria, and understandably he rejected national awards in 2004 and 2011. In recent years, he worked as a professor in the US, where he died on 21 March 2013.

His best known work is *Things Fall Apart* (1958),² a seminal novel on how his people, the Igbo (called Ibo in the book), struggled against colonialism and the Christian missionaries. The book sold more than 10 million copies and has been translated into some 50 languages. It is also one of the prescribed readings for secondary school literature in Singapore and other schools and universities all over the world. South African writer and Nobel Prize laureate Nadine Gordimer called Achebe "the father of modern African literature."

One of the precious gifts of a great writer is that he voices our deepest living concerns. He is able to put into beautiful words and form what only pains us, what we have difficulty expressing, or unheard by the intended audience. What we might see as parochial affairs of our own home, a good writer envisions them as something universal and timeless.

Here are some memorable quotes, mostly from Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, plucked out of their timelessness, as a brilliant and beautiful light to shine on our own state of affairs, especially as ethnic Buddhists. We may not right now have all the light we need to rout the darkness and clear our blindness, but we can still hold up a candle lit from Achebe's light.

"The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart." (Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*)

Buddhism has spread beyond Asia and come to the white man, and come home to us as Western Buddhism. At the same time, we also have the cultural Buddhisms of South Asia, South-east Asia, Tibet, China, and Japan with us. For literary convenience, we shall call them "prefixed" Buddhisms. But the prefix usurps Buddhism, just as the colonials and missionaries had usurped our countries and cultures only a few generations ago.

What is prefixed is surely "pre-fixed": here, it is something different and more worldly than the name it is fixed to. Suffixed to these are even tighter sects, islands of devoted lotus-eaters.³ For vital reasons, the Dharma serves to awaken us. If we do not awaken, samsara holds us captive as its zombies.

We do not propose that Prefixed Buddhisms be exterminated; in fact, it will surely grow where cultural and material needs seem more urgent than spiritual awakening. Yet, we must loudly declare that the Buddha's teachings, pure and simple, rising above and beyond all cultures, even the world itself, is still available. Let us make an informed and wise choice.

"A man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their own homes. When we gather together in the moonlit village ground it is not because of the moon. Every man can see it in his own compound. We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so." (Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*)

¹ Born Albert Chinualumogu Achebe. As a college student in 1948, he rejected his Christian name and shortened his middle name to Chinua and used it as his first name.

² From W B Yeats' poem, "The Second Coming" (1921): <http://wsu.edu/~brians/anglophone/achebe.html>.

³ In Greek mythology, the "lotus-eaters" are an island people who feed on lotuses that have a narcotic (drug-like) effect on them, making them sleep in oblivious apathy: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lotus-eaters>.

On Vesak Day, on holy days, every Sunday, we each go to our Chinese temple, Sinhala pansal, Thai wat, Burmese kyaung, Japanese ji-in and Tibetan ling.⁴ Where do we bring a foreigner who wants to visit a Singaporean or Malaysian temple?

We are not suggesting any “national Buddhist identity,” but that we should work together in greater fellowship. We can see the goodness in these various foreign Buddhisms, but we need to come together as locals and natives because it is good for us to do so.

The Bodhi has taken root in these foreign countries. We need to root the Bodhi in our own land, too. The Bodhi tree does not sprout overnight. If we do not plant the sapling now, the future will blame us for not acting when we could, or at least speak out when we could.

“Mr Brown had thought of nothing but numbers. He should have known that the kingdom of God did not depend on large crowds. Our Lord Himself stressed the importance of fewness. Narrow is the way and few the number.⁵ To fill the Lord's holy temple with an idolatrous crowd clamoring for signs was a folly of everlasting consequence. Our Lord used the whip only once in His life - to drive the crowd away from His church.” (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*)

At almost every Buddhist gathering, its leaders think only of numbers, of new members and of money. We seem disappointed, even terrified, when only a few turned up. The Buddha sits alone under the Bodhi tree. He begins with only 5 monks. He often admonishes us to spend time for ourselves, knowing ourselves, so that we can give the best to others, healing and helping them. Today, there is hardly any meaningful Buddhism in the temples.

“Do not despair. I know you will not despair. You have a manly and a proud heart. A proud heart can survive a general failure because such a failure does not prick its pride. It is more difficult and more bitter when a man fails alone.” (Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*)

Those who have left the churches, seeking true peace, come to Buddhist temples. They find us conducting ourselves just like the churches. So where do we go now? So have we failed? Not at all, but we're trying to do the right things to the best of our abilities. Our failure is not in doing things (we do a lot of this). Our failure is in not clearly speaking up that there's an elephant in the room,⁶ and what to do about it.

“Storytellers are a threat. They threaten all champions of control, they frighten usurpers of the right-to-freedom of the human spirit - in state, in church or mosque, in party congress, in the university or wherever.” (Chinua Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah*, 1987)

We need to tell moving stories: stories the Buddha tells, and stories of the Buddha. Even if the stories are unheard, unheeded in our own life-time, we need to tell them; the future have ears. Even if we enjoy a brief respite from the deafening chants and mantras, a moment to turn away from worshipping idols and gurus, to look at Sakyamuni the Buddha, we might just hear the sweet sounds of true Dharma.

“When Suffering knocks at your door and you say there is no seat left for him, he tells you not to worry because he has brought his own stool.” (Attr, *Chinua Achebe: A Celebration*)

⁴ These foreign terms not in all cases used locally, but they represent local realities of ethnic Buddhism.

⁵ This line, from the Bible (Matthew 7.14), is deeply reminiscent of the opening of **Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta**: “Bhikkhus [Monks], this is the path for one-going [the path where one goes by oneself], for the purification of beings, for overcoming sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of physical and mental pain, for gaining the right way, for realizing nirvana,...” ie the focuses of mindfulness or meditation leading to full liberation (M 10,2), SD 13.3): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/13.3-Satipatthana-S-m10-piya.pdf>

⁶ For details on “an elephant in the room,” see **Nānā Tittiyā Sutta** (U 6.4), SD 40a.14 (3.1.5-6): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/40a.14-Nana-Titthiya-S-1-u6.4-piya.pdf>

There is a very good reason that “suffering” is taught as the first noble truth. It is our first and foremost teacher. When we think we are suffering, we have not really learnt about the conditions that brought it about in the first place. Not understanding these conditions, we do not know where solace lies. So we are left helpless. Welcome suffering with a comfortable armchair, and listen well to him for his lessons.

“Writers don't give prescriptions. They give headaches!” (Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah*)

There seems to be no solution here because the real problem has not been identified or accepted. If we do not listen to the stories or teachings but only follow story-tellers and teachers, we are but an unthinking crowd. We need to place the teaching, the Dharma, above the teacher, as the Buddha does.⁷ We need to return to the Buddha Dharma.

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

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⁷ See **Gāraṇa S** (S 6.2), SD 12.3: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/12.3-Garava-S-s6.2-piya.pdf>