

Quality of mercy

Lieutenant Benedict ANG Yong Chuean, 22, excelled in the military and was a Sword of Honour recipient when he graduated from Officer Cadet School in Singapore. He had a bright future as a Singapore government-sponsored navy cadet at the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA).

But in May 2012, it was reported that he entered a fellow cadet's room and forcibly kissed her.¹ He was later found guilty of an act of indecency against her.² *The Sunday Times* (Singapore, 9 June 2013) reported that Ang avoided jail last Thursday. He was instead placed on an 18-month good behaviour order by a Canberra judge.

In granting Ang's request to avoid a conviction, Justice John Burns of the Australian Capital Territory Supreme Court noted that he had already suffered hardship due to the crime. Justice Burns said that the trial had "besmirched" Ang's reputation and brought shame on him, even though he had not admitted his guilt. He had been kicked out of the military academy and suspended on half-pay by the Republic of Singapore Navy. The judge said that he took into consideration that Ang was in a new country and that may have had a "disinhibiting effect" on him.

When I wrote to an Australian Dharma friend, Michael, about my admiration for the quality of mercy shown by the judge, from his reply, I realized that the situation was more complicated than I had thought. Conservative Sydneysiders, says Michael, reading the morning paper, grumble over their flat whites³ and cappuccinos that "this kind of thing would never happen in Singapore."

Indeed, he (and he's not alone) thinks that some of the sentences handed out by courts in Australia are overly lenient. Take the case of [Ricky Nixon](#) who violently assaulted his former fiancée Tegan Gould, but was, in March 2013, let off only with 24 months of community work because he was of "good character" and was apparently remorseful. There are other similar cases.⁴

His point is that compassion, as it is commonly understood, has its limits, while real compassion can be "ferocious," and should be ferocious, especially when dealing with those whose conduct is harmful and dangerous.

A judge's job, Michael muses, is a very tough one. A court interpreter he knows tells him that regularly the judge's face is literally crimson with stress as he deliberates over his cases. Yes, the accused before him has reoffended, and needs to go away for a few years, but he has children, and a wife with severe depression whom the psychiatrist says is suicidal.

If he goes to prison they won't be able to pay their mortgage and they will have to sell the house. Will the wife kill herself? Should the wife be hospitalised for her own safety? Who will look after the children? They have no relatives in Australia, so will they go into foster care? These sorts of moral dilemmas seem to be quite common – when a criminal is punished, his family suffers, perhaps more than he does. It is really unenviable for the judge who has to make decisions like these.

¹ <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/act-news/alleged-adfa-victim-felt-sick-and-powerless-20120809-23w28.html>.

² <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-04-13/singapore-adfa-cadet-found-guilty-of-indecency/4627036>.

³ A **flat white** is a coffee beverage invented in Australia and New Zealand in the 1980s. The drink is prepared, like a latte, with espresso and milk, with a greater amount of espresso. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flat_white.

⁴ "Lenient assault sentences send the wrong message," <http://www.abc.net.au/unleashed/4608998.html>.

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Still, Michael confesses, like many Aussies, he would praise Singapore's laws as there is much to admire about her. Singapore is safe, clean, and industrious, and the people courteous and obliging.

Yet, when it comes to the law, there is always a human cost, and it's not always the perpetrator who pays the highest price. The highest price is often paid by the promising young who are harshly punished instead of being rehabilitated.⁵

Take, for example, the case of [Jonathan Wong](#), 23, a third year history student, a Singapore Ministry of Education (MOE) scholar, at the University of York, UK, who, in 2010 pleaded guilty to 17 charges of making child pornography between July 2008 and March 2009.⁶ Clearly, Wong was "disinhibited," but on a more serious level (he was diagnosed a paedophile who had sex with a minor in his own church).⁷

Amongst others, it means that Ang and Wong have come from an "inhibited" environment, where people learn to hold back their emotions, opinions and conduct, rather than express them meaningfully and freely. So all their youthful exuberance, energies and issues are unlikely to be well expressed, but even repressed.⁸

However, when they find themselves in a more open society, they are simply unable to contain themselves. Some of them become like a deer in front of the lights of an oncoming vehicle.

Such stories are worth reflecting on, what our present social conditions here are like, and what, as Buddhists, we can do, especially for ourselves and those close to us. In this sense, this is a reflector of sorts, like that little red light at the back of a bike or a car, warning others not to crash in one another.

Singaporeans, especially the young, need to be given the space to safely learn to open up to the world, as it were. We are a young nation, and our social and cultural experiences are still formative and limited. I'm fortunate to have spent meaningful time with various academic, religious and social environments, such as in the UK, the Netherlands and Berkeley, California, so as to be deeply enriched by them.

A newly married close friend recently returned from his honeymoon in Italy and remarked that the Italians generally live very laid back lives, freely communicating with one another, even on their chance meeting, say in a street or train.⁹ And, they are amongst the most creative people in the world and have produced some of the best world brands in vehicles (Ferrari, Lamborghini), watches (Panerai) and leather-goods (Prada, Gucci).

In Singapore, there was a case of a 25-year-old family friend (still single) who could not visit us because he was "grounded" by his mother! Exchange students in our local universities, I was told, often express their surprise that local colleagues still live with their parents (expensive housing and cultures are the usual reasons given). We need to reflect on the meaning of renunciation (letting go of negative emotions) and lovingkindness (accepting others as they are) here.

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

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⁵ On a reflection for the rehabilitation of criminals, see **Āṅgulimāla Sutta** (M 86), SD 5.11:

<http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/5.11-Angulimala-S-m86-piya.pdf>.

⁶ http://www.yorkpress.co.uk/news/8749394.University_expels_student_in_child_porn_shame/

⁷ <http://www.asiaone.com/News/Latest%2BNews/Edvantage/Story/A1Story20101211-252184.html>.

⁸ On **repression** as a defence mechanism, see see **Khalaṅka S** (A 8.14/4:190-195), SD 7.9; also SD 24.10b (2).

⁹ I experienced a similar openness when I lived in Thailand. Since I knew the language well enough to communicate with them, I was easily accepted by locals, too.