

## **An elephant in the room**<sup>1</sup>

“An elephant in the room” is an English metaphor<sup>2</sup> for an obvious truth that is being ignored. This metaphor also applies to an obvious problem or risk that no one wants or dares to address. It is based on the idea that an elephant in a room would be impossible to overlook. As such, those in the room who pretend that the elephant is not there, either have chosen to avoid dealing with the looming issue or are unable to deal with it.

A vital test for practising Buddhism as a living religion is how we, as a Buddhist community, group, or even as individuals, solve or, at least, act on a real problem hindering Buddhist social and spiritual progress. Most Buddhist groups (especially those of ethnic Buddhists) tend to ritualize Buddhism, seeing it merely as a calendar of “activities” and “meetings,” and fulfilling our “roles and duties.”

Such activities and meetings lose their way into unrelated issues that tend to be merely “professional” or worldly in scope. Often, inexplicably, we (mostly ethnic Buddhists) then to compare ourselves to other dominant religions, often forgetting the Buddhist spirit. Instead, we should be working towards viable visions and actions of self-improvement in a Dharma-moved and sutta-based spirit.

We are often easily impressed by the proverbial emperor’s “new clothes” by way of academic titles, professional qualifications, wealth and social status, which we deem as defining a worthy Buddhist teacher or speaker. Yet, despite such clothings and disguises, no matter how “new” or elegant, we still stand naked, unwitting, even unashamed and oblivious before the Dharma.

The problem is that even if an observant child were to point out our nakedness, we would cleverly retort or trivialize it with a bad joke, or keep up a conniving silence. After all, he’s only a “child,” what does he know? And then in our nakedness, we catch a terrible chill in due course, which might just prove fatal, or perhaps merely, disillusioning, for us.

The truthful and innocent child in the fairy tale of the Emperor’s New Clothes represents our unconditioned self or higher mind that is capable of seeing true reality. This is our wholesome nature that sees both good and bad, so that we are able to discern them and choose the right one. This happens naturally, unless we have been swept off our feet by some external flood of greed, hate, delusion or fear.

Young children, as is well known, naturally love animals. This reflects our natural love and respect for life and to be in harmony with others and our environment. A truly happy child, in other words, is close to the Dharma, only perhaps he is still unable to articulate this goodness, but naturally lives this goodness until complicated by adult sentiments and loveless religiosity.

So we need to be humbly and comfortably dressed in the Dharma, and return the elephant in the room to his natural habitat. Buddhism is not an activity or a building; it is not about how much or how many we have, much less comparing ourselves with others and other religions. What we need to do is to cultivate inner peace and outer harmony. The best way to do this is to know the Buddha, study the Dharma, and live the Sangha spirit.

### **Polite fiction**

When we do not know the Dharma well enough, or are not moved by it, or worse, we reject it, we are likely to be motivated by **fear**, that is, a fear of failure, a fear of being rejected by others, a fear of offending the rich and the powerful, a fear of those we perceive as being better than us, a fear of fear

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<sup>1</sup> Source: **Nānā Tīthiyā 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>

<sup>2</sup> On metaphorical language, see **Dh 97 Two levels of religious language**, SD 10.6: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/10.6-Dh-97-Religious-language-piya.pdf>

itself. Of course, as good people and better leaders, we try not to show our fear to others, perhaps fearing that they might feel the fear, too.

Often enough, we have become part of a Buddhist group not because we want to grow as individuals (we might not even be aware of such a need), but that it promotes our social status, or even provides us with some kind of economic gain. Or Buddhism is just one of many shiny buttons on our coat of many colours. We prosper on the fiction that everything is or will be all right. No one has any problem, not in our community, anyway, we think. Moreover, we self-righteously claim that it is not polite to openly talk about problems, not openly anyway. Ours then is a veil of polite fictions.

A **polite fiction** is a social situation where all involved are aware of a painful truth, but pretend to believe in some alternative virtual reality to avoid conflict or embarrassment. Polite fictions are closely related to euphemism, in which an idea or an event, viewed as impolite, disagreeable, or offensive, is replaced by a pleasant or less offensive expression understood by both speaker and listener to mean the same thing. Academically, “polite fiction” has been observed way back to at least 1953.<sup>3</sup>

A common example of polite fiction is when a couple has just had a bad argument, after which the man absents himself from a prearranged social gathering. When asked about his absence, she gives the excuse that he is “not well” or is detained by a more pressing matter. There is nothing seriously immoral or problematic about such a reaction. Perhaps, we value pride of face and social harmony by avoiding open embarrassment or conflict.

Another example would be that of a man who goes out drinking, but tells his family that he is merely going for an evening stroll. Even though everyone in the family knows he will be going to the bar, and will come home drunk, they all pretend that he has actually gone out for a walk, and pretend not to notice his drunkenness when he returns. Psychologically, this is also known as *co-dependence*.<sup>4</sup>

A polite fiction then is usually a form of psychological defence mechanism of denial.<sup>5</sup> It can be very mild, such as when it is meant to fool insignificant observers, such as outsiders or children judged too young to be told the truth. Such a truth may then become “an elephant in the room” (albeit a small baby elephant), so that no matter how obvious it is, those most affected pretend to themselves and to others that it is not so. This curious human weakness is often used as part of a humour motif in literature and drama, where one party tries to maintain the polite fiction while another tries to expose it.<sup>6</sup>

In real life, however, polite fiction is hiding the truth from others, and even from ourselves, so that we might actually accept the problem as being non-existent, until it is too late. We must see that the truth that a polite fiction tries to hide is often *a symptom of a bigger problem or recurring pattern of problems*. As such, we need to see it in its broader context. A polite fiction tries to hide the proverbial elephant with his whole body with limbs outstretched, but the rest of the elephant is clearly in public view.<sup>7</sup> We need to return the elephant to its natural habitat.

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

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<sup>3</sup> Tom Burns, “Friends, enemies and the polite fiction,” *American Sociological Review* 18, Dec 1953:654-662.

<sup>4</sup> On *co-dependence*, see SD 24.10b (2.4): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/24.10b-Gadhabha-Samana-S-a3.81-piya.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> On *defence mechanism*, SD 24.10b (2): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/24.10b-Gadhabha-Samana-S-a3.81-piya.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> A classic example is that of the comedy *Tartuffe* (1664) by the greatest of French playwrights, Molière (1622-1673).

<sup>7</sup> See also Piya Tan, “New clothes and nakedness,” R267, 2012: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/R267-121121-New-clothes-and-nakedness-99.pdf>