

Untitled

In my early years (1980s) in Singapore, I was at first somewhat at a loss, even embarrassed, when friends told me *not* to address them by their title, such as “Dr,” and so on. I had just emerged from a society that thrived on titles. We were likely to be left out of the long queue of red-tape, or served last (if ever), if we failed to address a person by his title. It is as if we existed in a nameless realm, where we could not be called by our true names.

My Singapore friends who did not stand on ceremony, I realized, wanted to be treated simply, but warmly, as friends. This was a great new start to a Buddhist life for our family in Singapore. But this is not always the case, especially when I have to meet “money” priests. There was this highly placed priest who was looking for an editor of a planned prestigious magazine, and I, needing a job, was recommended for the task. (I was going to be employed by a priest!)

When I introduced myself as a “full-time lay worker,” which I thought would have pleased him, instead saw him abruptly turning icy cold. He stopped looking at me in the eye, and started light talk with his employees in his office, and they heartily laughed in unison. Then, a cold wave crept through me: was he seeing me as a competitor for funds? Years later, I realized this was a matter of wealth, title and status.

In time, the conduct of titles and status, like the right to own building strata, became clearer to me in certain circles. We must know our place before the elite, and to practise right speech before some of our religious leaders. They are the “venerable ones,” I was sternly reminded by a young professional social activist, so we must respect them in every way. My logic suddenly left me so that I was at a loss.

Delightfully, I have a home with cats to return to and to simply call them Munchie and Tikki. They return me with warm purrs, furry rubs, a cool nosy touch, unconditionally looking at me in the eye (as often said in the suttas).¹ They come when I call their names. Animals are so undecceptive and straightforward, an elephant trainer in a sutta once said.² We love animals because they easily accept us just as we are. This is something we classy humans can learn from humble animals.

Personally, I do have people who call me “teacher,” or more rarely, “shifu” (Chinese) or “sensei” (Japanese). Usually, I made no effort to “correct” them, partly not to embarrass them, partly out of reticent embarrassment myself (perhaps an ancient emotional remnant from our migrant past), but more so because it does reflect what I love doing (teaching Dharma). I realized that they had been conditioned to address others by title rather than by name. I take all this as a reminder of my avowed task: to learn and teach Dharma.³

A great culture shock for me, however, is the observation that we tend (to a significant extent) to be so achievement-oriented and status-conscious, that anyone with some kind of title (academic or otherwise), even without proper Buddhist tutelage, is deemed sufficiently qualified to speak on Buddhism.

The (Kassapa) Ovāda Sutta 3 (S 16.8) sounds very familiar today, where the Buddha declares to Mahā Kassapa:

“But now, Kassapa, the elders are no longer forest dwellers, nor almsfood eaters, nor rag-robe wearers, nor triple-robe users, nor are they with few wishes, nor are they content, nor do they love solitude, nor are they aloof from society, nor are they exertive or energetic -- nor do they speak in praise of these qualities.

¹ See eg **Dhamma, cetiya Sutta** (M 89,11/1:120 f), SD 64.10, or **SD 8.1 (6)**: Like milk and water: [link](#).

² See **Kandaraka Sutta** (M 51 section 4), SD 32.9: [link](#).

³ For a related reflection, see “How to address a Dharma teacher,” R100, in *Simple Joys 2*, 2011: ch 3: [link](#).

Now, it is the monk who is well known and famous, one who gains robes, almsfood, lodgings and medical requisites, that the elder monks invite to a seat, saying, “Come, monk. What is this monk’s name? This is an excellent monk. This monk is keen on the company of his brothers in the holy life. Come, monk, here’s a seat, sit down.”

Then the newly ordained monks will also strive to emulate him, and that leads to their harm and suffering for a long time.”⁴

If we broadly include “teacher” under “monks,” and “wealth and titles” under “robes, almsfood, lodgings and medical requisites,” the familiarity today deepens and widens. Perhaps, this is just a personal rambling, until the clouds of blind-side lift so that we directly see the true reality of the situation. Buddhism is not destroyed by outside forces, says the Buddha:

It is not the earth element, Kassapa, that causes the true Dharma to disappear, nor the water element, nor the fire element, nor the wind element. **It is the spiritually empty people who arise right here (in this religion) who cause the true Dharma to disappear.**⁵

Such comments might not make sense to many of us now: perhaps it is too early to tell people that a tsunami is on the way. But when we the sea-waters are receding far back into the horizon, the signs are clear. If we wait to speak out what is evident, even if not yet obvious, then it might simply be too late.

We might blame the disappearance of Buddhism from India, Central Asia, even China, on outside militant religious zeal or political fortune, but one really significant underlying condition was that well before the tide of history swept Buddhism away from these ancient sites, it had already become mostly a dark shadow of its deep spiritual past, now crushed under its own weight of wealth, prestige, buildings, materialism, superstition and worldly learning.⁶

On the other hand, Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand has thrived ever since its arrival. Despite the unrelenting and massive efforts of foreign, and now local, Christian missionaries, Buddhism still remains strong in these places. However, even in these lands so familiar to Buddhism, there are clear signs of its waning, like those that significantly contributed to its disappearance in central and east Asia.

Now, for example, we see the monastics becoming more political and worldly, and loud in voice and action. Those monastics who speak with the voice of politics and wealth lose their authenticity as the voice of peace and love. But such events are really symptoms of a deeper pathology: Who really were these militant monks (obviously, they were not meditating monks). Why did they become monastics in the first place? Was it a desperate economic gesture? Is this a desperate sign of a psychological defence of reaction formation⁷ to stay relevant as these monastics became more secular?

There’s nothing wrong with making proper political statements, but the monastic robe must be respected as being above politics and the world, as it is meant to be. Our universal responsibility, whether as secular individuals or religious people, is echoed by then Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Kuan Yew in the 1987 National Day Rally, when he said: “Churchmen, lay preachers, priests, monks, Muslim theolo-

⁴ S 6.18/2:208-210 @ SD 88.5. See **Dharma-ending age**, SD 1.10: [link](#).

⁵ S 16.13/2:223-225, abridged.

⁶ See eg the Saṅghāṭa Sūtra, **How Buddhism became Chinese**, SD 40b.2 (2.8.3): [link](#).

⁷ **Reaction formation** is an unconscious tendency to turn an impulse around, acting in an apparently opposite way, ie, defending an unacceptable situation by showing what is the opposite of our true desirable wishes. For example, if we are secretly violent, we unconsciously (or out of guilt) but ostentatiously speak against it.

gians, all those who claim divine sanction or holy insights, take off your clerical robes before you take on anything economic or political.” (Lee Kuan Yew, National Day Rally, 1987)⁸

Let’s close on a happy note. A few years back, I was appalled by a western Buddhist addressing a certain contemplative monk by his name. When I voiced my concern to that name-caller, he retorted by saying that the monk did not mind being called by name rather than a title. When I asked the monk himself, his reply was most comforting: Call me what you like; as long as I know I’m being addressed, I will respond. By that I understand that names and titles do not really matter, but our actions do.

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

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⁸ Quoted in Ng Tze Lin, Tania, “The rule of law in managing God: Multi-religiosity in Singapore,” *Asian Journal of Public Affairs* 3,2 2010:98, <http://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Issue+6+full+version.pdf>. See **Money and monastics**, SD 4.19 (9): The purpose of the spiritual life: [link](#).