

Right moves

We all grow old, but do we grow up, too? The same question applies whether we are a lay person or a monastic. A monastic does not automatically mature upon “renouncing.” The problem of being an immature child in a monk’s body is even trickier than that of a child in a lay adult. This problem is *bigger* than it seems when we tend to see monastics as being “bigger” than us, simply on account of status and looks. (Dh 260)

Firstly, we tend to see monastic robes, or venerable age, or high title, but not really know the person in it. We seem to think that the robes make the monastic. Yet underneath the robes, we are all naked. A French saying goes: “The robe does not make the monk”; in English, we might say, “Judge not a book by its cover.” This is the first challenge of a monastic: Does the robe define the monastic, or the monastic define the robe? What do these questions mean anyway?¹ (Dh 266)

Informed Buddhists well know that the robes are reminders for both the monastic and the laity that their wearers have dedicated themselves to live morally virtuous lives of mental cultivation for awakening in this life itself. Those who have faithfully (or otherwise) served monastics over some period will often tell us how human they are, just like us. However, where monastics value their spiritual training and live accordingly, we can learn and benefit from them profoundly,

However, when we see the robes as symbols of power, the delusion begins, festers, and spreads. The problem is aggravated when we are not even aware that we see the robes as uniforms of power, especially when we have been culturally conditioned to worship them, or, at least, to show them respect, even fear. Here, ethnic Buddhism, or ethnic aspects of Buddhism, are likely to be more problematic than Buddhism without any cultural baggage,² that is, “mere” Buddhism.³

As a monastic or a lay person, we can be deeply deluded when we confuse power with love.⁴ For our purposes here, we can say that **power** is the ability to move things, while **love** is the ability to move people.⁵ On a more dramatic, but very meaningful, level, we can say that we should not attribute power to a monk even when he could literally “move” things (as in telekinesis) or some other seemingly “magical” feat. We should not confuse the ability to perform “miracles” (or even claims of some deep meditation) to be a person’s spirituality, or even moral virtue.

Let’s say a Dharma speaker suddenly radiates a brilliant light or floats up into the air while he is talking. Does this mean that whatever he says would be right view? (For all we know, the speaker could be Māra in disguise!) The two – the speaker and the truth of his words – need not be related at all. Miracles are clearly things we have not yet understood. Hence, we see them as miracles. The point is that if a “miracle” happens, it is because it *can* happen; hence, there are really *no* miracles!⁶

People can be falsely perceived as statistics or “things,” and we often swear by numbers. We see a famous monastic preaching to a large crowd, telling them what they like to hear. People are “moved” – by what they think they lack and what he seems to have and to offer. Or, we find him simply “entertain-

¹ These twin questions have not been answered here, as you are invited to think about them and discuss them.

² On some of these serious problems, see **Bad friendship**, [SD 64.17](#).

³ “Mere Buddhism” is a non-religious profession of early Buddhism, esp the suttas, and a quest for the historical Buddha, and a commitment to aspire for awakening, at least as a streamwinner, in this life itself.

⁴ By “love” here is meant the “heart” aspect of spirituality, esp lovingkindness.

⁵ Or, better it is to say “move the heart,” but here we will look at the situation more broadly.

⁶ The Greek orator **Cicero** said that “Nothing happens without a cause, and nothing happens unless it can happen. When that which can happen does in fact happen, it cannot be considered a miracle. Hence, there are no miracles.” (*De Natura Deorum* bk 1, ch 33). See **Miracles**, [SD 27.5a \(1.3\)](#).

ing,” like some stage performer or stand-up comic. A popular monastic attracts huge donations and great patronages, but they may still worry about money (as before). Such monastics may not touch money with their hands, but they may be fettered to it in their minds. In psychology, this is called “reaction formation.”⁷

Of course, we may not really know this. We ourselves feel a thrilling sense of power and bigness just to serve or be connected with such a big person. Psychologically, this is called a defence mechanism of “identification.”⁸ This is also known as “attributing charisma” to someone.⁹ The reality is that we should be practising the Dharma to see the truly greatest miracle of all: the miracle of self-conversion. This is when we see ourselves changing for the better and understanding things as what they really are.

When a monastic associates too closely with the laity, he is very likely to lose his spiritual roots, and endanger, at least dilute, his monastic life. We might argue that monastics need to “modernize” (which is actually a euphemism for our inability to practise the teachings). But when a monastic lies on the Procrustean bed of modernity, much of his spirituality is sadly cut off or inflated.¹⁰ It often follows that such monastics begin to worry about worldly things, such as money and women. The problems and controversies then grow, which may be the beginning of a sad and nasty end.

For this reason, a good monastic invariably and happily goes through *at least* 5 years of mentorship or tutelage (*nissaya*) with a suitable teacher. This is to ensure that the neophyte leaves behind all traces of lay habits and views, and truly becomes a monastic and spiritual practitioner. If the tutelage is rushed, or not properly done, or forgotten (through worldliness or socializing with the laity), or worse, he absconds and attempts to live off his charisma or his robe, then even though the monastic may grow in years, in fame and popularity, in wealth, and in learning, he is still a raw lay person under the robes.

Why are we so easily moved by famous monastics and great personalities? This is probably due to the child in us reacting in the power-mode towards a parent-model or saviour-figure, the most developed and problematic case of which is that of God-belief. We have transferred our respect and security needs from our parents or those who have been a source of love and comfort onto such monastics.

Apparently, this attraction is more common between women and monks, mainly because the monks (being male and single) are, often unconsciously, perceived as eligible. Apparently, women who are power-driven are likely to feel this transference need more acutely. If the monk is blindsided, or worse, he counter-transfers his own emotional needs to the women,¹¹ then his monastic robes begin to burn up, as a popular Thai saying goes. The suttas refer to such a monastic as having a “second” (*dutiya*), a partner, that is, having emotional attachments.¹²

When the robes are perceived as symbols of holiness or power, then their wearer, too, is deluded into a false security of his seeming virtue, status, class, and is intoxicated by crowd adoration. The monk has become a high priest, seeing himself at the head of a crowd, the top of the power chain. His accessibility or our closeness to him is likely to be defined by our wealth, power and usefulness as patrons and servants, but the “smaller” people of little consequence to him are relegated to some safe distance or

⁷ Reaction formation is a latent or unconscious defence mechanism through which unacceptable feelings or impulses are controlled or accepted by the establishing of behaviour patterns which are directly opposed to them. See *Cambridge Dictionary of Psychology*, 2009: defence mechanism; reaction formation.

⁸ On defence mechanisms, see **Samaṇa Gadrabha Sutta** (A 3.81/1:229), [SD 24.10b \(2\)](#).

⁹ See Piyasilo, *Charisma in Buddhism*, Petaling Jaya, 1992:59-112.

¹⁰ On the Procrustes myth, see [SD 21.6 \(1.2.2.3\)](#); [SD 36.1 \(4.3\)](#).

¹¹ See **Ambaṭṭha Sutta** (D 3), [SD 21.3 \(5.1.2\) \(8\)](#).

¹² See eg **Miga,jāla Suttas 1** (S 35.63), [SD 44.6](#).

margin. Even though this measuring (*māna*) is not at once apparent, this is how it all actually works psychologically.¹³

The wiser and emotionally mature would keep away from such monastics. Some may even be disillusioned with Buddhism. Such monastics, then, would attract those who have emotional needs, the eccentric, the groupie,¹⁴ the deluded, and the gullible. Here, it is better for us to be a rhinoceros walking alone, then to follow a crowd that is going the wrong way¹⁵ (Dh 330).

We renounced the world with noble aims and spiritual hopes. However, for many of us, as our robes grow onto our skin, we tend to forget its presence. We learn that by presenting ourselves with a calm or cultured exterior – cool airs, dulcet voice, polite face, and ready answers – we will win respect and funds. We have been domesticated.¹⁶ But the repressed desire and ill will hungrily rumble on (Dh 264).

As the power robes take on stronger and stranger colours, we feel more distant from other monastics, and we even forget or forego the basic respect for our morally virtuous seniors. Indeed, the alienated monk even criticizes his elders in various ways, and breaks precepts that even the laity keeps¹⁷ – further cutting off his spiritual roots that have been feeding his monastic life. (Dh 142)

With domestication, comes a Janus face, a Jekyll-Hyde personality.¹⁸ We appear nice and compassionate before an adoring audience, but elsewhere our true colours glare and growl at and about those we do not like, even our elders. This is an unconscious defence mechanism of “isolation,”¹⁹ or colloquially, “religious schizophrenia.”

Then, we easily forget our Vinaya tutelage and Dharma-faring: we have lost our mindfulness, despite all our learning and meditation. One of our feet is back in the lay world. We need to pull it back into the Dharma life before the ground gives way. It’s never too late to turn back to the Dharma – if we start right now. If we have fallen from the elephant, it may be too late.²⁰

The Buddha’s Dharma-Vinaya (teaching and discipline) remind us that monastics are renunciants, and that we, the laity, too, should practise renunciation (letting go) in our own way. We have to let go of being attached to monastics, and monastics to the laity. We must allow monastics to live their spiritual lives to the full fruition in this life itself. This is true respect for monastics.

¹³ On *measuring* (*māna*), see **(Māna) Soṇa Sutta** (S 22.49), [SD 31.13](#) & [SD 3.14 \(10\)](#).

¹⁴ A neologism for “one who follows crowds.”

¹⁵ See **Khagga,visāṇa Sutta** (Sn 1.3).

¹⁶ See Dh 266. On the domestication of monastics, see **Ambaṭṭha Sutta** (D 3), [SD 21.3 \(5\)](#).

¹⁷ We see monastics today playing music or dancing openly, or watching stage and dance shows. These are part of [the 8 precepts](#) that a lay person observes on precept-days, during retreats or for personal practice. On the precept to “abstain from dancing, singing, music, watching unseemly shows, and from wearing and adorning themselves with garlands, scents and cosmetics,” see **(Tad-ah’) Uposatha Sutta** (S 3.70,15), [SD 4.18](#). On the Buddha’s practice, see **Brahma,jāla Sutta** (D 1,10), [SD 25](#). Vinaya rules against such activities are at V 2:108 (*dukkaṭa*, wrongdoing) for monks & Bhī Pāc 10 (V 4:367) for nuns.

¹⁸ Cf “Just as the Tathagata speaks, so he acts; just as he acts, so he speaks”: see **(Tathāgata) Loka Sutta** (A 4.23,3.1+n), [SD 15.7](#).

¹⁹ On the defence mechanism of *isolation*, see **Samaṇa Gadrabha Sutta** (A 3.81/1:229), [SD 24.10 \(2\)](#) & **(Aṭṭhaka Assa) Khaluṅka Sutta** (A 8.14,13), [SD 7.9](#). See also **Cult Buddhism**, [SD 34.5 \(1.2.1.1\)](#).

²⁰ This is Buddhaghosa’s analogy (MA 4:165): see **Dhamma,vinaya Gotamī Sutta** (A 8.53), [SD 46.15 \(2.7.1.3\)](#). **(Arahatta) Susīma Sutta** (S 12.70) calls such a monastic a “thief of the Dharma,” because he is false recluse living on the goodwill of others ([SD 16.8](#)).

Then, we are wisely ready to learn from them, and to live as spiritually inclined and effective lay followers and Dharma missionaries who are “independent of others” (*apara-p, paccaya*).²¹ The figure of the lone radiant Buddha can be seen under the Bodhi tree, and we need to quickly row or swim to that island, our only true refuge. Then, we will see that we are not really alone: numerous others have moved away from the crowd, and have awakened to true reality before us.

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

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²¹ This is often said of a streamwinner: see **Emotional independence**, [SD 40a.8 \(5.6\)](#).