

Good and right¹

Instead of equatorial heat, it was a well-timed and propitious downpour. The heavens seemed to weep over the loss of the world's greatest statesman of our own times. LEE Kuan Yew, Singapore's first prime minister and the architect of the new nation passed on peacefully at 3.18 am local time (UTC+0.800) on 23 March 2015.

In recent times, Singapore had its share of water supply problem. The rain that fell for much of the funeral parade on 29 March apparently assured us that there will be plenty of water. It was as if he were showering his blessings upon his and our beloved nation. LKY (as he is often lovingly referred to) passed away just short of Singapore's 50 anniversary celebrations (SG50) in August 2015.

The whole nation, it seemed, had queued up on the Padang² for hours to pay their last respects to LKY as he lay in state in Parliament House. The spontaneous presence and visible grief of countless citizens, gathered to mourn his death, testified to the fact that, despite – indeed, because of – his iron will and ways, he was dearly remembered and missed by those who knew they had somehow benefitted from his ways and works.

LKY was Singapore's prime politician, now he died as our greatest statesmen. We pride in the fact that all his life he had done the right thing, though not always good in the eyes of some. (He himself regretted having to throw some troublesome dissidents into jail without trial in Singapore's formative days). We can now look back and accept that all he had done was for the greater good for a nation that we pride in today.

The point remains, and will echo throughout our history and future, that LKY was unswervingly incorruptible, to a proverbial level, an example for all of those who lead and serve the nation, and for us as her citizens. On his account, Singapore is able to move from the third world to the first world within one generation.

This quantum leap can only be attributed to one factor. We have neither natural resources nor political talents (many countries have them and yet remained backward). We have little land, no mountains, no huge lakes, no long rivers; we are surrounded by seas; and our population is only 5.4 million, about half that of the city of Paris. But the vital factor that most other political leaders lack, LKY and his successors take it as their first principle – the moral courage to be corruption-free.

What does it mean to be “corruption-free”? According to Buddhism, this means to do what is right and good. “Right” here means “in keeping with the law”; “good” means “benefitting the greatest number of people.” Nothing is done merely for the benefit of only one person or an elite group. Such a principle brings the notion of “a government by the people, of the people, for the people”³ to a new level of wholesome reality.

Moral courage (*vesārajja*)⁴ is a key quality in Buddhism today, especially where Buddhism has been hijacked by business preachers and leisure lazy elitists, and aggravated the reticence and fearfulness of the general laity, who, though intelligent and schooled, do not voice their objections against the diluting and distorting of the Buddha's teachings in our own times. Hence, we effectively have an on-going

¹ Thanks to Geonga Kuan of Singapore for sharing some of his ideas here.

² The Padang (Malay for “field”) is an open playing field (a sprawling cricket pitch during the British colonial times) located within the Downtown Core of the Central Area in Singapore, where a number of National Day Parades (NDP) were held.

³ These are the closing words of the Gettysburg address (19 Nov 1863), at the end of the Battle of Gettysburg, at the height of the American Civil War, by Abraham Lincoln, 16th president of the United States of America.

⁴ On moral courage, see [SD 28.9a \(3\)](#).

corruption of Buddhism that misleads those who are new to Buddhism and confuses those who follow such teachings.

“Business preachers” (mostly successful businessmen who make Buddhism their business), as a rule, belittle, even denounce, the historical Buddha and proclaim imaginative and eternal Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and teach serious wrong views such as that arhats still have to attain Buddhahood.

According to **the Sārajja Sutta** (A 5.101), lack of moral courage (or simply, “fearfulness”) arises from lack of faith, from immorality, from little learning, from laziness, and from lack of wisdom. Conversely, then, moral courage arises from wise faith, moral virtue, deep learning, industry and **wisdom**.⁵

“**Wise faith**” means confidence in the truth and usefulness of a teaching through our own understanding and experience. We know for a fact, for example, that everything in this universe is impermanent. This is a useful fact as it prevents us from being shocked or traumatized when we break or lose things, when things don’t work our way, and when there is disaster or death. Such an understanding gives us the moral courage to speak up because we know it for a fact.

“**Moral virtue**” means being wisely restrained in body and speech, especially in keeping with the 5 precepts.⁶ It also means speaking the truth (not dogmatic views), what is unifying (not attacking the historical Buddha), pleasant speech (not invoking curses), and useful words (not imaginative myths and superstitions). Being morally virtuous means that our body and speech are safe and guarded, so that we have no fear of any criticism from others, especially when we have done no wrong.

“**Deep learning**” means that we are well-founded in the early teachings of the Buddha, and not promoting merely personal views of later writers and theologians that do not help us to understand the true Dharma. Such teachings tend to externalize and ritualize Buddhism, when we should be looking within into our own hearts and minds for self-understanding, and not legitimize or find excuses for our own weaknesses, craving or ignorance. Then, we will fear others criticizing us, or even disagreeing, with us.

“**Industry**” or effort means that we relentlessly persevere to master the true Dharma, and to continue spreading it no matter what the odds we face. When the wise and good are silent, then the false and bad are heard loudest, so that they are mistaken for what is good and right. This is the beginning of the end of the Dharma for such people. Without such wisdom and effort, we would lack the courage to speak up against what is bad and wrong.

“**Wisdom**” is the awareness of the universality of impermanence, which empowers us to discern and choose the good from the bad, the right from the wrong. We may know a lot of teachings, and sound like an expert, but when our own lives have not been transformed by goodness, how can we change the lives of others? Unable to see the true teaching, and blinded by false views, we simply lack moral courage to warn others against the excesses of religion and beliefs, because we are ourselves caught up in them.

The business preachers and false gurus often speak of imaginative beings and fabulous dogmas to win us over, to believe and follow them. We do not even need to make any effort, they claim, but simply recite some words, or, simply believe, or just follow, and be saved!⁷

⁵ **Sārajja Sutta** (A 5.101), [SD 28.9a](#).

⁶ On [the 5 precepts](#), see R29, “[Say yes, say no, be silent](#),” 2009.

⁷ One explanation for this approach is that such preachers are reacting to the “colonial hangover,” after centuries of oppression of the country by a foreign Christian power. Or, this may be a defence mechanism of “identifica-

They may use impressive sophistry⁸ and casuistry,⁹ such as claiming that “the unbelievable is not always the improbable; the inconceivable is not always the impossible.” Let us remember what a great French philosopher’s warning against just such casuistry: **“Those who can make you believe absurdities, can make you commit atrocities.”**¹⁰

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tion,” ie, unconsciously emulating a socially dominant and mega-wealthy Christian presence in the community or country.

⁸ Sophistry is argumentation that is specious (plausible but false) or excessively subtle and intended to mislead others. See **Bhaya Bherava Sutta** (M 4,21)+n, [SD 44.3](#); also [SD 35.2 \(2.3\)](#) & [SD 48.1 \(9.1.3.3\)](#).

⁹ Casuistry is a clever use of reasoning to trick others, using arguments that sound correct, but are actually false. Eg, it is better to kill one big animal, than to eat a lot of fish or smaller animals, which is killing more beings; or, you cannot take your wealth with you, so why not send it ahead by donating it to the temple or monastery. See [SD 35.4a](#) Comy, §3.1(7)(4); also [SD 40a.10 \(6.3.3\)](#).

¹⁰ Voltaire, alternative translation of a passage from “Questions sur les miracles,” 1765. See also Reflection [R389](#), “Kind of right,” 2015.