

## **Why good people go bad**

One of the great benefits of Greek philosophy is that it inspires us to examine our lives constantly and carefully. Plato records Socrates (during his trial and death sentence) as saying, “The life that is unexamined life is not worth living,” but a fuller, although a little awkward, translation, is: “The unexamining life is not worth living for a man.”<sup>1</sup>

To be truly human is to think things out, at least, we should try to: our thinking process gets better with practice. Let me here give a Buddhist response to the word “**examine**” (*exetastos*).<sup>2</sup> This is clearly synonymous with the Pali, *vīmaṃsana* (which would be *exetasis* in Greek), but better known is the noun *vīmaṃsā*, “investigation.” In this connection, the Buddha exhorts us to be constantly mindful, watching the rise and fall of things, that is, the impermanence of all our actions and things around us. And more broadly, how our bodies change, how our beliefs, opinions and views change. How we grow – or not.<sup>3</sup>

Plato, in *The Republic* (c 380 BCE), records another interesting philosophical problem known as “**the ring of Gyges**.”<sup>4</sup> The protagonist Glaucon, expresses a widely and deeply held ethical viewpoint known as egoism, a view of Antiphon, a sophistic<sup>5</sup> contemporary of Socrates.<sup>6</sup> Egoistic theories are based on the view that everyone, without exception, acts only from self-interest. For example, argues the egoist, we help others for the benefits we can get: “If I help you, what do I get in return?”

*Once upon a time, an ancestor of Gyges the Lydian was tending sheep of the king of the land. A great storm and earthquake opened a chasm in the earth, where he saw many wonderful treasures. He found a magical ring that had the power to make its wearer invisible. The shepherd, using the ring, murdered the king, committed adultery with his wife, and usurped the throne. Glaucon asks his audience whether they would act any differently if they wore such a ring.*

Invisibility, here, represents secret desires. The point of the story is that since most people would exploit such an invisibility, they must already believe that they have no reason to act justly in the absence of social restraints. Even when justice merely rewards the just and punishes the guilty, it is not always good for everyone. Eventually, everyone thinks respectability is the basis for morality. Once this view is widely held, people feel cynical about respectability and

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Apology* 38a: ὁ δὲ ἀνεξέταστος βίος οὐ βιωτὸς ἀνθρώπῳ (*ho de anexetastos bios ou biotos anthrōpōi*). The first translation is by Benjamin Jowett (1891).

<sup>2</sup> This is the positive form of *anexetastos*, “unexamined.” For a discussion on *exetasis*, see Harold Tarrant, “*Elenchos and exetasis: Capturing the purpose of Socratic interrogation*,” in Gary A Scott, *Does Socrates have a method?* Pennsylvania State Univ Press, 2002:68-77.

<sup>3</sup> For a basic teaching, see, eg, *Dīgha, jānu Sutta* (A 8.54,15), [SD 5.10](#). For a longer study, see *Vīmaṃsaka Sutta* (M 47), [SD 35.6](#), a classic in personal verification, which reminds us that we should investigate even the Buddha himself, so that we verify for ourselves that what he teaches reflects his own life.

<sup>4</sup> Plato. *The Republic*, bk II, 358d-361d: translated by Benjamin Jowett, 1871; R E Allen, *Plato: The Republic*, Yale Univ Press, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Of a reasoning that is subtle but often specious, even dishonest.

<sup>6</sup> This view, neither representative of Plato’s nor of Socrates’s philosophy, is presented here by Glaucon as a stalking horse for the sake of a more thoroughly developed ethical theory. Although Socrates held that everyone attempts to act from the motive of “self-interest,” his interpretation of that motive is quite different from the view elaborated by Glaucon.

evade the call of justice, or manipulate the law, whenever they can. Or, they try to *appear* respectable so that they receive the respect and benefits of society.

This may explain why in recent years, a number of prominent local young Buddhist priests in Singapore were embroiled in embarrassing legal cases over misappropriation of funds.<sup>7</sup> They owned various properties locally and in Australia. In a 2009 scandal, the priest even owned a race-horse (“I love horses,” he explained) and at least one condominium, and went for diving holidays, amongst other worldly pursuits.<sup>8</sup>

In 2015, another ambitious young priest was monitored by a private eye, employed by a suspicious temple committee member. The young priest, with degrees in Buddhist philosophy, psychology, and sociology, an abbot of a local temple, even has a “Chan master” title, and a long list of achievements in his Wikipedia entry. He even spoke about his own “enlightenment” experience in an online video.<sup>9</sup>

He was caught wearing a cap and civvies (lay clothes), going to a local casino, spending the night in the hotel with a couple of other men. When confronted, he responded that he had not broken any Vinaya rules. Moreover, he claimed that there are many kinds of Vinaya. Earlier on, he even used funds he had received as loans and donations, to buy properties in Australia. In short, he was not in the least remorseful for his actions.<sup>10</sup> These two cases are only the tip of the iceberg, the religious shadow, only too well known to concerned Buddhists.<sup>11</sup>

Why do good people go bad? There are least two reasons for us to reflect on. The first is that Buddhism, in our community at least, is going through **anomie**,<sup>12</sup> a social situation where traditional and religious values have broken down, or that Buddhist values are being redefined by secular and worldly Buddhist authorities, especially wealthy and entitled laity and clergy. Money and pleasure are now our Buddhist ring of Gyges.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Such cases often involved sexual misconduct, too, but such offences were not seen as relevant to the cases mentioned. Technically, a monastic who indulges in sex, even with the same sex, or with an animal, immediately and automatically, is “defeated” (*pārājika*). This is a common rule in the extant Vinayas.

<sup>8</sup> <http://news.asiaone.com/News/The+New+Paper/Story/A1Story20090719-155690.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Compare such claims to those of disgraced and derobed Thai “monk” Ajahn Yantra: see Piyasilo, *Charisma in Buddhism*, Malaysia, 1992:113-137, <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/Charisma-in-Buddhism.-piyasilo.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> A troubling trait that runs through scandals and court cases involving Buddhist priests and Christian pastors in Singapore (see Reflection: “Moneytheism,” R424, 2015) is that none of them appeared remorseful, but even tried to justify their misdeeds. It seems that they saw themselves as being above the law: are these signs of a latent [sociopathy](#)?

<sup>11</sup> For a study of various religious scandals in the West (especially of Tibetan gurus and Zen masters), see **Bad friendship**, [SD 64.17](#) & **The Three Roots Inc**, [SD 31.12](#).

<sup>12</sup> **Anomie** (from Greek *a-nom-os*, “lawless”) is an important term used by early sociologists (esp E Durkheim in *Suicide*, 1897) to describe depersonalising changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution, by a pervasive social situation where there are no norms or they are disregarded, that is, there is a breakdown of social norms, rules and restraints, conducing to meaninglessness and purposelessness in life, to the extent of causing suicides.

<sup>13</sup> Singapore is going through rapid economic growth with a rising number of younger millionaires, and the affluent tend to patronize the larger temples and “well-qualified” clerics. A special sociological study of this development (such as “The Wealth of Clerics”) in local Buddhism would surely present some very interesting insights.

The second reason is simple enough: *those who go bad are not really happy in the first place*. To be truly happy begins with accepting oneself just as we are, and not comparing oneself with others: this is lovingkindness or simply, love. Even when we see those we love or who love us as being “failures” or not as “good” as others, we still accept them as they are: this is compassion or simply, ruth.

When we see others as being “better” than us, we show neither envy nor conceit (not measuring oneself against them), but feel *happy* for them: this is gladness or joy. And when things do not turn out right for us, despite our best efforts, we simply move on calmly and humbly, asking oneself, “What shall I do next?” This is equanimity or peace.

These are the 4 positive emotions or better known as **the divine abodes** taught by the Buddha. This is how we think, feel and live – like the gods – the angelic life of boundless love, ruth, joy and peace.

Our spiritual curiosity and investigation should mold us into ever better humans. The vision and wisdom arising from such an investigation helps us to accept oneself and others unconditionally. We begin to be kind to others even when they do not deserve it. We rejoice in the goodness of others with one heart, as it were. And when things do not work out the way we had hoped, we continue to look on calmly, with a clear mind, to investigate further how people and things can be better.

We are, then, cultivating the divine qualities of love, ruth, joy and peace in the world and for the world.<sup>14</sup> We have raised heaven on earth.

R483 Revisioning Buddhism 171

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

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On the Buddha’s forbidding monastics from any dealing with money or economic activity, see **Money and monastics**, [SD 4.19](#).

<sup>14</sup> See also Reflection, “Moneytheism,” [R424](#), 2015, where the “ring of Gyges” is mentioned by a Singapore judge in connection with City Harvest Church multimillion-dollar scandal.