

A wishing cow

In the 1980s, Datuk Charlie Chia—then a young enthusiastic Buddhist youth leader and worker—approached me with a strange request. This is now the right time that this true story be told because it has great significance for those who live and work for the Bodhi tree to take root in our own country (Malaysia) and community.

Charlie told me that the syllabus of a certain great foreign Buddhist mission in Kuala Lumpur was outdated and they were unable to find a more suitable replacement than the comprehensive “Integrated Syllabus” for the Sunday Dharma school that I had put together along with its textbooks and teaching methods.

The Integrated Syllabus

Understanding that this foreign mission had blackballed this local Buddhist worker (then a monk) for being a maverick and controversial person in Buddhist reforms, Charlie frankly told him that he (they) wanted and needed to use the Syllabus as it was the only complete and workable one available. However, he was instructed by the foreign mission authorities that he could only use the Syllabus *without* ever crediting its author’s name!

(This same Syllabus also served – with the approval of the Cambridge Examinations Syndicate – as the basis for official textbooks of the Buddhist knowledge elective in Secondary Schools in Singapore in the 1980s.)

Cow’s milk

I still recall that meeting and feeling joyful and a sense of fulfilment that another local Buddhist worker knew the value of studying the Dharma efficiently and effectively, especially through our own efforts. I told him I understand the situation and that he could freely use the syllabus without any credit to its local author. Use the cow's milk, let the ghee take the credit! (Lembu punya susu, sapi dapat nama.) Feed the hungry.

At that time, too, I distinctly remember telling Charlie that the time will come when the truth will out. That is to say, there are local Buddhists who are capable of learning and teaching the Dharma as proficiently as any other Buddhist teachers or centres in the “Buddhist” countries, including the one the foreign mission was from.

The day has come when we can stand up and with jubilation to declare that we have studied the Dharma diligently and worked industriously to spread the Buddha Word in our own country and community. After over 20 years, we recently heard such a voice, a lion-roar.

Award

In July 2017, Datuk Charlie Chia was given a special award by a wealthy local Buddhist organization. During his acceptance speech, Charlie, courageously and with characteristic enthusiasm, thanked me by name for having helped him in the Dharma (with the Integrated Syllabus, etc) in the time of local need for learning and teaching the Dharma. Charlie had attended a number of my national Dharma courses and discussed with me many difficult issues over Buddhism in Malaysia.

Many of the ideas and dreams I had those day were well ahead of its time, and, now looking back, I must say that none of us were really ready to stand on our own before the Bodhi tree. But a lot has changed since then. With its new administration, that foreign mission has become even more inward-looking (some may say more race-based) that local Buddhist workers have to leave the premises and work on their own.

Dharma first

These changes reflect the dynamic growth of local Buddhism. One significant change is that we are now no more cash cows for foreign missions that we used to be. However, two new streams of local movement seem evident. One is the “atas” (upper-class or elitist) group that see their present success (indeed even the success of local Buddhism as a whole) as being mainly the work of the foreign mission and perpetuate that admiration and eternal “gratitude.”

The other, a growing group, comprises local Buddhist workers who are more interested in the Buddha Dharma itself than foreign teachers or missions. Understandably, such "Dharma-first" local groups, toiling on their own, have to work harder than those who see themselves as the benefactors of a race-based legacy of missionary Buddhism.

Of course, if everyone put the Dharma first, then it’s easier for Buddhist fellowship to flourish, which will significantly benefit local Buddhism, with promises of greater future growth and a stronger local sangha and spiritual community.

Surprise: streamers!

However, there is one great surprise in which I deeply rejoice. A small group of local Buddhists (Malaysia), who meet twice a week for Dharma talks and practice, told me (a few years ago) that they had spent decades serving such a foreign mission, and all that they had learned were chanting and “transference of merit” and fund-raising. They were never taught how to awaken in this life, even as streamwinners or "streamers" for short.

Over the years, they have proven themselves to have gone beyond being merely pious devotees and donors of a foreign religion, but Dharma-spirited locals who seek to attain what the Buddha teaches here and now in our own homes. For this alone, I must conclude that my years of Dharma work have been meaningfully fulfilled. There are some of us who do hear and heed the Buddha’s call.

Growing the Bodhi tree

Just as the Bodhi tree has grown in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Khmer and Laos, we fervently wish and work to grow the same Bodhi tree in our own country and community. Our true roots are in the 3 jewels: the Buddha, the Dharma, the noble sangha. All this we do out of love for the Buddha Dharma in the hope of attaining awakening in this life itself.

R521 Revisioning Buddhism 192; earlier as Facebook posting fb170719.

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

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