

You have to be somebody before you can be nobody
Or, why do great masters still mess themselves up
by Piya Tan

One difficulty a Buddhist writer often faces is that of finding the right words for expressing Buddhism in everyday language. Very often we would simply cannibalize the ideas of others and stick our name on them. But I think our ideas can gain much more currency if we are generous and grateful enough to own up our inspiration.

If we do meet an intellectual or spiritual giant, it is a privilege to stand on his shoulders. Recently, I found one such giant in Buddhist psychology, one of my favourite fields. I'm speaking of Jack Engler, a leading Buddhist psychotherapist who famously said, "You have to be somebody before you can be nobody" (1981), a catchphrase of Western Buddhism and an adage of transpersonal psychology.

Engler's spiritual journey started at 16, with his reading "The Seven Storey Mountains," the autobiography of the Zen Catholic Thomas Merton. Then, he went on to the University of Notre Dame, and to the Benedictine and Trappist monasteries of Europe, and to Merton's monastery in Kentucky, USA. He was drawn to Catholic monkhood, but Merton strongly discouraged him. He continued his studies in England and Germany, where he got a degree in theology, and then a doctorate in biblical studies at Oxford.

Then it happened: a "personal crisis—a personal and spiritual dead end." He returned to America in 1969, became a social activist and began teaching religious studies. Eventually, he decided to "start graduate work all over again" in psychology and religion at the University of Chicago, where he got his MA and PhD. One day, at the end of his search, he entered a bookstore and found a copy of Nyanaponika's *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*. "I got about thirty pages into it," he said, "and I knew that I had found what I had been looking for all my life. It was instantaneous."

For his doctoral dissertation, he went to India to study Buddhist psychology and practice meditation. He studied for a time at the Nalanda Institute and did extensive research with practitioners from the Calcutta Buddhist community. The data he compiled from this research was groundbreaking, endeavoring to "establish cross-cultural validation of the psychological changes at each major stage" of Buddhist meditation practice. Back in the US, his aspirations changed, and he decided to go into clinical practice because "I had finally seen not only my own suffering but everybody else's. India just profoundly changed me that way."

This reflection is very much inspired by reading Andrew Cohen's interview of Engler (2000). In his interview, Engler said that while in Calcutta, he met many Indian practitioners who had suffered extreme trauma, just like many Western students. Some of them "had reached deep levels of enlightenment." No one claimed themselves to be fully awakened, but

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they had attained fairly deep levels. Even then, it was clear that, there was still a lot of personal suffering in their lives that had not been addressed.

And, noted Engler, we see this in a lot of Western students and Western teachers (and I might add in Asian students and Asian teachers). They've had kensho (enlightenment) experiences, but "they're going down like flies," still misbehaving, sometimes outrageously so—money, sex and power. So there's still a lot of personal work to be done, noted Engler: Do more practice! In principle that's what should happen, he said. But there aren't too many such people around.

Engler then used his technical lingo to explain the stages of awakening according to Theravada, which I can relate to quite comfortably. So I have adapted some of his ideas into my own understanding of spiritual development as reflected in the Udakupama Sutta (A 7.15).¹

According to the Sutta, three fetters—self-identity view, attachment to rituals and vows, and doubt—prevent us from the first step to awakening. Psychologically, these three fetters are *cognitive* in nature. As streamwinners, in other words, we have completely given up what cognitive psychologists would call "maladaptive cognitions" or "core beliefs." When these unwholesome ways of looking at things are given up, our basic understanding and perspective of ourselves change for the better. We have a better sense of selfhood—not in the sense of an unchanging soul (*jīva*) or connection with some universal self (*attā*), but as a liberated being, in the sense that we are no more the product of how we perceive the world, but that we are living in true harmony with the world within and without.

However, although both the streamwinner and the once-returner may have abandoned "maladaptive cognitions," they have only given up basic beliefs and assumptions, they do not automatically sublimate or correct their latent tendencies, that is, emotions and drives triggered by lust, aversion and ignorance. Cognitively, we may relate to our sense-experiences more wholesomely, but we may continue to act in the same neurotic ways.² That is why religious dignitaries, even those who are branded with all kinds of status and titles, still badly mess themselves up and hurt others. The point is that they are not even streamwinners yet. For, if they are, they would have the strength not to break even the five precepts.

¹ A 7.15/4:11-13 = SD 28.6: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/28.6-Udakupama-S-a7.15-piya1.pdf>

² Take the case of the streamwinner, **Ānanda**, who, traumatized by the Buddha's impending death, declares, "Bhante, I have seen the Blessed One in comfort, and I have seen the Blessed One enduring it. And, bhante, my body has become weak [unwieldy] as if drugged [drunk]. I'm disoriented and things are unclear to me as a result of the Blessed One's illness." See **Mahā Parinibbāna S** (D 16.2.24/2:100) = SD 9: <http://sites.google.com/site/dharmafarer/home/digha-nikaya>; see also S 47.13/5:162; Tha 1034.

The arhat, on the other hand, has overcome not only the first five fetters, but also the five higher fetters.³ This second set of fetters are rooted deep in the unconscious, powerfully influencing our feelings and motivations. It is relatively easier to transform cognitions and beliefs, making them wholesome, than to change our feelings, motivations, and impulses. Understandably, the core of this deepest group of fetters is “conceit” (*maana*), the remnant of the tendency to compare and measure self with others—this is the root of *narcissism*, self-love. The higher fetters, as such, have to do with rooting out the residues of narcissistic attachments, of finally freeing the mind from self-idolization and from idolizing others.⁴

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³ On the fetters, see **Udakūpama Sutta** (A 7.15/4:11-15) = SD 28.6: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/28.6-Udakupama-S-a7.15-piya1.pdf>

⁴ See Jack Engler, 2000: 3 (online), 7 (print). www.enlightennext.org/magazine/j17/engler.asp.