

Time for “monks” to pay income tax?

“Monks face foreign pressure of foreign competition. Income from prayer sessions down as foreign monks charge lower rate” (Straits Times, 18 Nov 2011 page B2). Most serious Buddhist practitioners would be shocked – not at what is being reported, but the matter-of-fact-way in which it was reported. The impression a non-Buddhist or foreigner might have is that “Buddhist monks” routinely charge fees for last rites. This is far from the truth, but a religious demand attracts supply that is simply embarrassing to those who take Buddhism as a noble teaching of awakening.

Firstly, it must be stressed that these “professional” funeral ritualists are hardly monks of any colour. Certainly not Buddhist monks. Traditionally, the canonical teachings clearly record that Buddhist monks should not waste their time in such rituals. In the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta (D 16), recording the Buddha’s last days, we see the Buddha as instructing Ānanda not to bother about his last rites, as other wise and capable lay men can perform them.¹

Monastics have been instructed by the Buddha to avoid rituals (these actually prevent them from even attaining the first stage of sainthood). They are to direct their energies to Dharma training and meditation to overcome their desires, negative emotions and delusion, and to awaken in this life itself. If we accept this as the definition of “monk,” then surely these professional ritualists are more correctly called “priests.”

The Straits Times reported that the local priests were unhappy because they generally charge about \$1200 for each funeral ritual, while foreign priests (their competitors) charge only about half their rate! As far as silver linings go, many of us would have good reason to thank the foreign monks for such healthy competition. Lay Buddhists, bereaved of their love ones, often complain to their leaders and teachers, that they cannot afford such exorbitant costs for the last rites (which also include fees for the undertakers, entertaining and other expenses). On the other hand, with such priests earning thousands a month (to put it conservatively), and basically living just like any other lay person who earn even less, but pay income tax, it is time that these ritual priests pay tax, too. Then the country might have all the more valid reasons to keep out the foreign competitors.

The good news is that, over the years, responding to such persistent simony in popular “Buddhism,” concerned Buddhists and centres have quietly started their own bedside and extreme services (“extreme” here is a special adjective relating to last rites). Such groups comprise of lay Buddhists who do their own group chanting of meaningful Pali or Chinese sacred texts (depending on the tradition), and also instruct and guide the bereaved on the simple rituals for the wellbeing of the deceased as well as the welfare and wisdom of the living.

Many concerned Buddhists are working hard to educate their students and followers that the deaths of loved ones, even one’s pets, are crucial moments for learning the “hard” truths of reality that the Buddha teaches. The key element in helping the sick, the dying and the dead, is that of lovingkindness, a wholesome state of mind that unconditionally embraces the sick, the departing or the deceased, as we would accept ourselves. When family members, loved ones and friends gather with one heart to extend such a precious space of love and acceptance to the sick, the dying and the deceased, they can all truly benefit from its vitality. This is just like having all our good friends and well-wishers gently touching our

¹ See **Mahāparinibbāna Sutta** (D 16.5.10/2:141) = SD 9: see section 5.10 (D 2:141):
<https://sites.google.com/site/dharmafarer/home/digha-nikaya/SD9MahapariniibbanaSd16piya.pdf?attredirects=0&d=1>.

shoulders and telling us: “You’re OK, we love you and accept you just as you are. We wish you well!” Of course, it is much more than this.²

The tragicomedy of engaging “professional” ritual priests is one of the truly pathological symptoms of a dead religion, a fear of death, superstitions about luck and personal purity, or simply putting up a public face so that people do not gossip about us. Nothing here seems to benefit the dead!

Firstly, the reciters have mostly only memorized their texts without really knowing their meaning and significance. Secondly, most family members of the bereaved find such meaningless rituals to be an unsavoury drudge which they want to get over as quickly as possible. Thirdly, such rituals are often merely tolerated because some strong-willed or worried sibling or relative demands it, so it is done for the sake of family harmony, not as anything religious. Thirdly, the ritualists are merely performing a “magical” ritual, as it is centred around the words and sounds, and not their moral virtue or lovingkindness. In fact, at the end of the ritual, when payment must be made, the ritualist would, as a rule, openly check the “red packet” of fees to ensure that the money is correct. If not, they would demand the difference!

The loss of loved ones is too sacred and meaningful to be left to money monks. If we truly love our dearly departed, we should begin by constantly keeping them in our meditation, our heart of loving-kindness.

When our own final moment comes, surely we would prefer our loved ones warmly bidding us farewell, and not some unloving rented and dubious priest making strange loud noises for an exorbitant fee to an uneasy and distant crowd. Simply put, such a state of affairs is symptomatic of a deeper sickness. Yet, we do not see this amongst informed Buddhists or in western Buddhism. We can heal all this if we really care and have some moral courage. To begin with, we need a healthy local Buddhism.

When we were born we cried, while others around us smiled on at us. When we move on, let us smile, while the people around us cry. Cry if you like, if this is good for you. But better it is to meaningfully gather in the name of our beloved deceased, and to remember his or her goodness. And touching our own inner peace and clarity, let us dedicate the goodness to the deceased. Let us distance ourselves as far as possible from the dead priests, leaving them with their dead. Buddhism is about living well, and dying is just a dot, a period, before we begin a new story, where we will all live happily ever after.

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[AN OCCASIONAL RE-LOOK AT THE BUDDHA’S EXAMPLE AND TEACHINGS]

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² See eg **Tiro,kudda Sutta** (Kh 7/6 = Pv 1.5/4 f) = SD 2.7: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/2.7-Tirokudda-S-kh7-piya.pdf>.