

Rich humility

A new year message of love and learning.

[Previously published as fb190131 piya]

It is rare that an upper-class Buddhist leader is honest, even rarer, humble. The entitled try to stand above the dust and mud of the commoners by platitudes and pretences. Often, in this case, to be humble is also to be honest. And it is always pleasant, heart-warming, even inspiring, when there is such an occasion.

Over the years, the elite and entitled Buddhists have often approached me for assistance especially when the foreign elite and entitled were unable to solve some significant local problems (coming to think of it, they never have). They know I will never say no when it comes to propping up Buddhism and holding up the Dharma in safety out of the way of difficult challenges.

Once the issues were settled, I would happily, and to their relief, return to the bookworks where I come from and go back to safely bookworming the suttas. If this were a world of worms, I must say that infesting books and suttas are palaces sublimer than the highest heavenly mansions. Humble worms fear no fall; those on high fall hard when they forget to flap their wings hard enough, or worse, lose them.

During a Buddhist gathering (which I could not find any imaginable excuse to avoid), I met an old elite Buddhist leader. As usual, Ratna magnanimously (and enthusiastically, too, I must say) passed him a copy of one of my latest Buddhist books. The elites usually reflexively glare or huff at such flagrant audacity of a commoner, an unsalaried lay Dhamma worker, to offer a sacred fetish like a book to those on high. (Buddhist books, too, are titled, it seems, authored only by the entitled to be worshipped unopened and unread by pious fans.)

One such higher-upper darkly once spurted, “What is this?!” when I tried to give her one of my latest works. A Dhamma book, I replied with a smile. They often hate us more when we show no fear or Confucian deference for the occasion. We should at least cringe in polite silence; if not, they see it as a personal affront, an act of *lèse-majesté*.

Anyway, I digress. I’m reflecting on a most happy occasion. For a moment, as I helplessly watched Ratna’s enthusiasm, I had an “uh-oh” reflex, like when watching helpless young orphan Oliver Twist going up to Mr Bumble, asking, “Please, Sir, may I have some more?” (some more thin broth, that is). Only here, it is the reverse: she was giving him spiritual food, a Dhamma book.

Surprisingly, happily, he graciously accepted; he even opened it and skimmed through some pages. For a moment, I might have wished I had disappeared into the plate of food before me, safe amongst the vegetables. Even if I were to be eaten, it would be by a kindly vegetarian, not a lusty carnivore or lascivious omnivore.

Then, he thanked Ratna for the book. I was utterly relieved; more than that, I was amazed that he actually spent time looking through the book. Then, he turned to me (for, I was the book's author)—I'm facing my deserts now, I thought!

"You know," he said in a most conciliatory, gentle tone, "I've tried for years to do what you are doing." (He meant working for Buddhism, of course.) "But I've failed. Yet, you've worked for longer than me, and you have never given up!"

I could have happily responded and lectured on how sutta-study inspires Dhamma-joy in us and empowers us to practice effectively; even talking about aspiring to streamwinning, and so on. His reply was most surprising, and amazingly humble, and deeply inspiring. For that, I was most happy. I remained silent to the precious moment, smiling the inner smile, so that I fully remember it as a reflection on how the Dhamma brings the best out of us.

A blessed lunar new year to you.

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