

Peasant scholar

For the love of learning the Dhamma
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In a modern sense, I am a scholar; in a post-modern sense (which simply means closer to our time), we can say that I am a **peasant scholar**. (Let us suspend the fact that I am a serious practitioner for the moment.) I imagine a time in China (which my ancestors left some 6 generations ago), even today, I suppose that there are still both scholars and peasants there, but rarely are the two in the same person. In the Dark Ages of Europe (following the decline of the Roman empire), too, peasants tilled the earth; scholars toiled the books.

Who is a “peasant”?

Today, we don’t have to toil the earth as peasants did; machines and technology do this better. But considering modern economics and society, most of us are still **peasants**, so long as we have to toil for a living, especially to make ends meet, and must look up to others in that living. Hence, those who earn more than they need, and who instinctively look down upon others from their high, I would not call a peasant.

Traditionally, a peasant was not merely one who toiled the earth for the benefits of those higher up the ladder of classes (the nobles, the priests, the merchants and the skilled workers). There were social conditions created and dictated by those who high to control and exploit the lower. “Nobles” here is a convenient term of the ruling class, those with social influence, and similar elite of our community. The “priests” include religious teachers, actors and talkers.

British English

We see this sort of arrangement in our social milieu, too. Since I do not belong to any of these class, I imagine I am a “peasant,” at least for the moment of this imaginative reflection. As long as they are heard, read and quoted, they have their mileage and earn their keep. Scholars, after all, do not live by books alone but by enrolment and employment, the paycheck. In this sense, I am not a scholar since I have neither salaries nor income. I’m a full-time Dhamma worker which is glamorous if we consider the work-hours: it’s all lifelong as long as I’m compos mentis. (It helps to be a good Buddhist to look up this word.)

Love affair

My love affair with Buddhism started well before my “A” level days (the Pre-University of the colonial British system). My generation was, in fact, the last here to be taught the British English. After that, Malaysia’s education system was nationalized, giving priority to Malay, the language of the predominant local class.

Even as I enjoyed my “A” level class in the Melaka High School, in a class of some 27 girls and only 6 boys, I had already decided to study and teach Buddhism full-time. I realized that I must have a good education, especially in languages and literature. This was in the late

1960s when we hardly had any local English-speaking monastic or teacher who knew the Buddhist scriptures. The north of peninsular Malaysia was dominated by ethnic Thai Buddhism, and the rest of the country mostly Chinese ritualistic Mahayana.

Imported Buddhism

Even in those early years, I held the notion that we must know our own scriptures if we are to understand and practise Buddhism properly and effectively. Noticing that most of the local Buddhists knew little Buddhism beyond a mishmash of religious stories compiled by an American priest, Sumangalo (Robert S Clifton), who took both the Shin and Theravada orders, but actually trained in neither.

Apparently, the fact that he was white was sufficient licence for locals to accept that he was qualified in Buddhism (which seems close to being an elite or professional today qualifying to speak or write about Buddhism). The post-colonial mindset and power of charisma will probably stay with us for a few more generations. My point is it would be good to be properly trained before teaching Buddhism. We can be very much better as individuals and as a community.

Thailand

When we know nothing, or even little, of Buddhism, how would we ever know what authentic Buddha Dhamma is or who the authentic teachers are. Not knowing enough Chinese prevented me from joining the Chinese Mahayana order. Hence, I was left with only the choice of learning Buddhism in English. At that time, too, I decided that I could catch two birds with a single net: be a monk and train academically so that I could study the Buddhist scriptures with all the scholar's tools, abilities and connections.

In 1970, I began life as a novice in Wat Anandametyaram in Singapore. In less than a year, I was in Thailand for 5 years training in Wat Sraket Rajavaramahavihara, one of the oldest royal monasteries in Bangkok. This was when I learned Thai (in the 1st year from Waen NOIGUN, then an undergraduate of Chulalongkorn University).

The following year, I attended the monastic Pali and Dhamma classes and passed the Nak Tham (Dhammika) examination with 1st grade. The experience was pleasant and exciting because Thai and Pali are so closely related. (Catching two birds with a single net, again.)

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Collecting the Canon

It was then that I learned of the progress of Pali studies in the west, especially the works of the Pali Text Society (PTS). Banchong SOWAPRUX was my robe sponsor, and Udomsakdi KOMALARJUN was my lay supporter. They were the key sponsors for most of the English translations of the Pali canon available then that I needed for my study.

Even at that early stage, I noticed most of translations need to be better. Significant sections of the translations were unclear, even wrong. The idea of translating the suttas myself arose to me. I even quipped fatefully to a fellow monk from the US that I might write a

commentary on them someday. I recalled he only loudly scoffed at this peasant monk! He must have noticed that I did not have the looks for it! This was in the early 1970s.

First Pali books

Happily, in 1985, **The Penang Buddhist Association** discovered they had an old collection of PTS Pali texts, mainly the Saṃyutta and Aṅguttara Nikāyas, and some miscellaneous Pali titles. They made a photocopy set of them and they crumbled with age even as they were reincarnated! This was my first set of Pali texts.

However, the Buddhist situation in Malaysia was no better. I decided that once I completed my tutelage (basic 5 years training under monastic teachers), I would seek permission to return and do Dhamma work in Malaysia and Singapore; which I did. During the 1980s, with what I had learned I conducted over 25 national Dhamma residential courses often for more than a hundred or more students each (lasting from 5-7 days) in various parts of Malaysia, and a total of 7 such courses in Singapore.

Philosophy

Even as I ran these courses, I realized I could learn more, especially to present Buddhism more relevantly to our times. LIM Eng Chuan, a devout lay Buddhist from Penang sponsored my **philosophy** course as an external student with London University. However, in the face of the increasing load of Dhamma work, I decided that the time was better spent studying the suttas than earning an external degree.

After all, my purpose was not becoming a wealthy, respected academic monk who could retire in comfort, but a teacher and Dhamma practitioner who knows and loves the suttas. Anyway, those early years were spent, as time permitted, in self-study of western Philosophy. I was learning proper terminologies and concepts that would help me express Buddhist teachings in ways that a modern intelligent audience could relate to.

Local trauma

The rise of a group of young local Buddhists learning the suttas by themselves did not brood well with the most influential English-speaking Sinhala mission, the Maha Vihara. They saw this as a threat, as being independent of their mission field. The image they projected was that they were the only ones directing Buddhist progress amongst the local English-speaking. In 1976, after my talk (as a monk) on the Vinaya to the temporary novices in the Maha Vihara, I was censured: “You talk Vinaya, they will never want to become monks!”

This traumatic turn shocked me into wondering how such a powerful monk viewed Buddhism. Local Buddhists dedicated to sutta study were seen as a distraction and threat, and were ostracized. I was simply confused. It's like a son who had worked hard to serve the family; only, to come home and be riled for behaving like a non-peasant! There was not even a family: we were merely bears and poodles dancing to the pipes of caste-based Buddhism. What does that mean?

Sociology

My bewildered curiosity led me to ask every learned acquaintance questions about this strange situation. This was when I met sociologists Raymond Lee (now Emeritus Professor of Sociology) in the University of Malaya, and his wife, Susan. They introduced me to sociology and academic research. I would spend hours in the University Library, especially after Raymond advised me: "Make sure you read the journals!" Through sociology, I learned how people tend to behave in groups and how we use religion as a mode of social control. This was just a start, there is more to learn.

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

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