

## Piya Tan's New Year Message

### **BE YOUR TRUE SELF**

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This morning, in our local daily, I read that “Michael Sheen returned royal honour so as not to be a hypocrite.” The Welsh actor said that, in 2017, after preparing a lecture, he learned of the “tortured history” that his native Wales shared with Britain. He realized that he must either not give that lecture and hold on to the OBE, or lecture and give back the title. He returned the title.

Recently, a Buddhist elder titled me “Achariya” in a global sutta series we co-organized. (I take it that he did this with good intention, so I’m only sharing my thoughts on the action, not blaming the person.) After some reflection, I realized that many others who are “titled” Buddhists are either professional or public monastic figures. I’m neither, and never have need for any such title. My friends have loved me for what they have learned from me. And for a greater reason, too.

I started my Buddhist life seeking to understand what the Buddha teaches, and how I can practise it. At first, this was to honour my parents who suffered a painful loss of my eldest brother to Christianity. Having studied the Christian Bible in some depth and being tutored by them, I turned to Buddhism. There, I saw a new freedom beyond earth and heaven even while here and now.

For nearly 5 decades, I have sought the suttas (ancient records of the Buddha’s teachings), studied its language, Pali, and trained in traditional monasticism and meditation (in Thai), in Thailand. In 1990, I left monastic life, and 1996, married Ratna. Together, we continued without distraction to do the Dhamma work that we both love.

Through her dedication, I’m able to translate full time the Pali suttas as our practice and mission. After nearly 2 decades of daily work with the suttas, it grew into a translation series with perhaps the most detailed and varied modern sutta commentary available today.

The sutta project started as my lecture notes for an on-going sutta class (since 2003) in the NUS Buddhist Society and the Buddhist Fellowship (since 2004). In 2006, we launched the Minding Centre (TMC) as the basis for our right livelihood project. Over the decades, the Sutta Discovery (SD) series, with constant revisions and updates, is today perhaps the most contemporary commentary on the Buddha’s ancient teachings.

The SD series is not only a commentary on the early Buddhist teachings, but also teaches their modern application in our daily lives. The later part of my monk years (late 1980s), I often spent in the UK living and learning with local Buddhists who wrote some of the most compelling Buddhist prose in English. Then, in the early 1990s, as an invited visiting scholar of the UC Berkeley, I was able to further hone more academic discipline into the sutta work.

All such training would have been purely academic and professional if not for the purpose to which it is directed. How can I best prepare myself to study, translate, write and teach early Buddhism? On account of the benefits of these monastic, academic and social experiences

amongst the Buddhist, monastic and lay, in the East, the West and the US, I feel better prepared to communicate with the larger world.

But it is what I communicate that makes it all worthwhile. And this is the historical Buddha's teachings. I do not see myself as a scholar or preacher (that would make me a professional), but a sutta seeker with deep faith in the Buddha after years spent with his teaching. For this, I am totally grateful to the Buddha for his compassion and wisdom in ensuring that the records of his awakening are sufficiently well preserved down to our times.

A great sculptor would envision an image of profound beauty, and sees his task as that of freeing it from its marble prison. My heart leaps up at the coded teachings of the Pali suttas. "Coded" refers to the prison of words and views that are the vehicle conveying to us the Buddha's awakening experience.

He relates these in lessons, metaphors, stories and myths—these are the provisional teachings whose sense must be teased out—and in key words, defining ideas, technical terms and loud silence: these must be directly known after our journey through the gardens and fields of lesson, metaphor, story and myth.

It's like when we are in love: we see our beloved in terms of lessons (learning about her), metaphors (seeing her in larger perspective), stories (telling others about her) and myths (personal aspects about her we imagine and are surprised by in time). Then, with marriage and partnership, we are able to look truly into each other's eyes to see our lives as more than a biological match and mating, but directing our love to higher things that embrace and uphold our lives with a divinely spiritual purpose. This is the meaning and purpose of full time Dhamma work of a lay couple.

For, all this is no small blessing—we must be grateful to him who has taken 45 years to ensure that the true teachings are preserved and perpetuated down to us today. These teachings—the suttas—have survived despite trials and threats of pirating, counterfeiting and commercializing of Buddhism. It is the Buddha who has freed and filled our lives with truth and beauty.

The goodness that touches us through the teachings arises from our efforts to carefully, yet joyfully, hear the Buddha's voice through the walls and windows of words that is the sutta. When we feel the joy or see the light, it is our own vision of the Buddha and his teaching. Don't thank me; I'm nothing if not for the Buddha. Let us together celebrate and thank the Buddha who teaches us to look and see within ourselves and be free.

If you came to me for my Title, then, you have come for what I am not, but for the Title, which is of this world. When I use Titles, it means that I have not tasted the true Dhamma: I'm merely making a statement without having felt the real state of love and light. Yet, I claim to own them. When I accept such a Title, then, its giver is entitled to me: I am neither a free nor real person. Deep inside I am still dark and lifeless.

But you come to me for the Dhamma. This is because the Dhamma already in you speaks with the Dhamma in me. We meet in Dhamma like two mirrors facing one another. For that

moment, our minds are, as it were, measureless. Love and wisdom are measureless, timeless, radiant.

The essence of the Dhamma-life is **renunciation**: the freedom to grow, the growth in freedom, on the path of awakening.

A blessed new year 2021 to all.

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