

## Seeking Dhamma

Better to suffer seeking Dhamma than enjoy seeking hell  
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Often I wonder how many of us are really ready to be Buddhists. When we are born into a religion, we can often take things for granted. Hence, we do not really see the value of the teachings that we have.

My first organized study of religion began with the Bible. Encouraged by my caring elder brother, the late TAN Beng Tee, a local Brethren Church elder, I enrolled with the Emmaus Bible School. I started off with the staples: the 4 Gospels (John, Matthew, Mark and Luke), Acts of the Apostles, Romans, and one Old Testament book, Isaiah.

## Hell!

These Bible books were very interesting since I could understand what I studied, especially when I was assigned a special tutor, who answered all my questions. It was the last question that profoundly troubled me. When I asked him about my non-Christian relatives and friends, he simply said that I should dissociate with them since they are headed for hell!

That meant my parents, sisters, cousins, and a host of really great friends of different religions in Melaka, Malaysia would go to hell for difference in faith! I was taught about **love** above the law, salvation by **grace** through faith. Where is the love when it excludes our family and friends? Where is the grace when we do not accept them unconditionally?

## Alien religion

The Old Testament basically speaks of a God that favoured one nation above all else. But the New Testament broadened this choice to all mankind. All we have to do is accept that there was this Man who died for us (that we might live eternally). As in other religions, Christianity, too, speaks of Hell and Heaven. Believers (depending on which Church) go to heaven; everyone else goes to Hell.

While in secondary school, I read about the universe and its vastness. We had the Star Trek TV series in B/W then, and watched them. I wondered, then, if aliens were to come to earth, they would surely find most of our religions primitive, superstitious and false. These aliens have come from distant quadrants of the universe, and there is no heaven there. No one, in their right mind, has really seen hell. It seems to be a convenient place to deposit all those we hate or disapprove of!

## Defined by others

One good lesson I learned from my secondary school years and from the Bible tuition is that of **organized study** in whatever that usefully interests us. When I turned to Buddhism, I was told then that Buddhism rejects God, heaven, hell, sin, faith, and so on (we should not use words that "they" use).

What, then, does Buddhism teach? It took me over a decade to discover some meaningful answer when I became a Theravada monk in Thailand, but more on this later.

### **Protestant Buddhism**

Having given up Christianity, I went to the Malacca Buddhist Association (a lay-run Temple) in the next street after my house. The Temple then practised a mish-mash of mostly Chinese Mahayana and a smattering of Theravada.

The Temple was not full-fledged Mahayana because it was founded and run by a close-knit family of Babas, well-to-do upper-class landed “Straits-born” Chinese who do not speak Chinese. Sinhala Theravada was convenient because we could communicate in English with them. Later, I read in some academic writings that this was called “Protestant Buddhism.”

### **Free-lancers**

When the Buddhist Sunday School started in the Temple, I was delighted—here’s my chance to study Buddhism systematically. I still remember my first Sunday School teachers. We studied from a book written by an American priest named Sumangalo (who I later learned had ordained in the Mahayana, Japanese Shin Buddhism, and Thai Theravada, but never observed the 5-year tutelage). Understandably, his book was mostly some do-good stories with no mention of Dhamma or suttas. Looking back, I recall practically nothing—even though I rarely missed class!

As a young boy, I recall our elders were very excited when Sumangalo visited the Temple. They were excited not so much because he was Buddhist, but more so because he was white! Understandably, to this day, he was addressed as “Father,” a common term used by local Catholics. Now, we have our own **Father** Sumangalo! This may, perhaps, be a case of Pinkerton syndrome.

### **Vinayaless**

A new generation took over the running of the Temple. Then, a charismatic socially-engaging fair-skinned Ananda Mangala (AM), became its resident-monk. According to his writings, he was a student of Weubu Kyaukse Sayadaw. However, by his own admission, he did not complete his tutelage (nissaya), claiming that he was such a good student that his teacher let him go well less than the stipulated 5 years of training!

Either he thought I was too young to learn meditation (I was in my late teens then, and often served as his personal attendant), or he was too busy teaching it only to a small group of well-heeled locals. Throughout his residence in the Temple, he formed close relations (I cannot think of a better word) with a number of women, even young girls. He allowed them to touch him. It was only later than I learned most Sinhala monks (especially those overseas) are Vinayaless priests!

## **Personal attendant**

As a mature teenager, full of religious questions, AM was the only person then who could answer them. Now, he had a library of books, including the Pali Text Society translations of the suttas! And Malalasekera's Dictionary of Pali Proper Names (DPP). I recall patiently waiting for his quiet time when he was not coaching the Temple youths to sing, dance and act (he was well known as the "Dancing Himi" in Sri Lanka), especially for the Vesak public stage productions.

During those formative years, I asked him all the questions I can muster about Buddhism. Intellectually, this was a good start. His knowledge of the suttas was appalling, but he was excellent in public speaking, debating and rhetoric. (He told me he was also involved with the Indian politics in the time of Gandhi, Nehru and the young Indira Gandhi, whom he knew well).

## **Buddhist books**

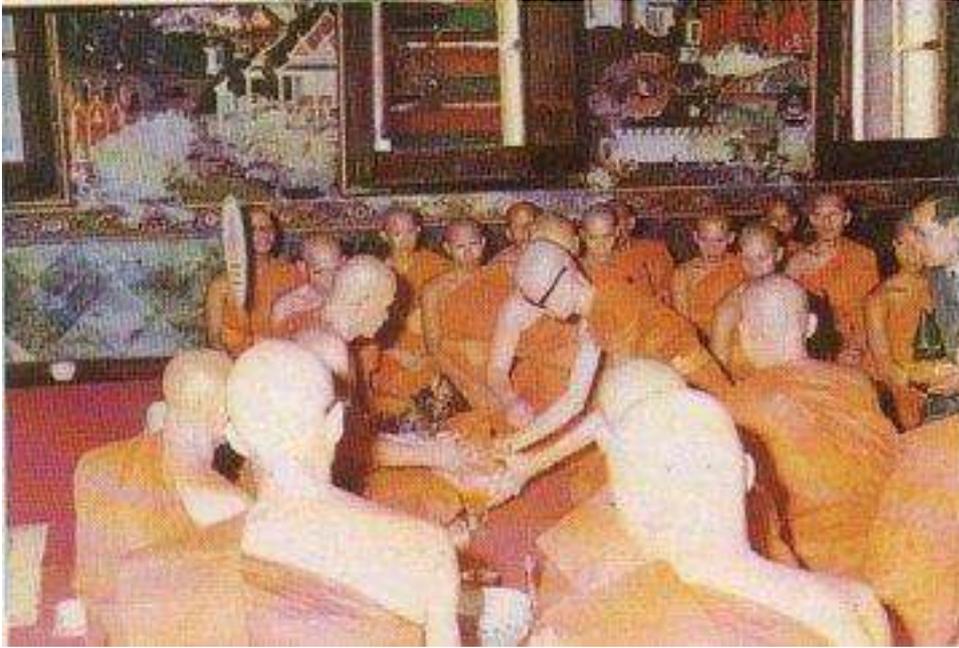
I had good reason to win his favour as an exemplary personal attendant. In between serving him, especially when he was away, his quarters with his library was my Tusita heaven. I recall wanting to type out the whole of the DPPN. Anyway, he generously gave the 2-volume set DPPN and a number of other Buddhist books to me.

When he left Malaysia for his hernia operation in Sri Lanka, some Temple elders surreptitiously voted to stop him from returning. Unable to enter Malaysia, he went to Singapore and resided in Wat Ananda Metyarama, whose abbot, Phra Maha Somkuan, he had sheltered which residing in a Sinhala Temple years earlier. This was the temple where I first became a Thai novice (*sāmaṇera*) (1970), bound for the Vidyalankara University under the sponsorship of the Prime Minister, Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike.

## **Sutta work**

The student riots during Bandaranaike's time prevented my going to Sri Lanka. AM told me: "Go to Thailand. They will take better care of you than the Sinhala monks." And I lived in Thailand for 5 happy years, when I learned Thai, Pali, Dhamma-Vinaya, the suttas and meditation. There, too, I met the young Ajahn Sumedho, and became the novice Brahmavamsa's interpreter on the abbot's request.

Those happy years with the suttas continue to this day with the Sutta Discovery series. It seems as if the work has only just begun (which was 18 years ago). Sadhu.



Ordination as Piyasilo with Somdet Poon Puṇṇasiri (later the 17<sup>th</sup> Supreme Patriarch of the Thai Order), 1972. Receiving the almsbowl (sponsored by Khun Banchong Sowapruks, far right).

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

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