

Outsiders

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This is based on a true story that happened in the 1970s in Penang (an island in north peninsular Malaysia), where Buddhists were truly devout (still are) and knew the teachings (still do). Buddhism teaches generosity and compassion, and monks, we were told, were good and compassionate. To test such assumptions, a Penangite disguised himself as a beggar, acted as one and went to a local Sinhala temple to beg.

The beggar

Upon seeing the “beggar,” the Temple High Priest at once shooed him away. The beggar acted even more pitifully with more sob stories; this only made the annoyed monk more determined to be rid of this beggar.

Then, suddenly, the beggar switched to a more dignified and pious tone: “Bhante! Don’t you know me? I’m one of your regular members and supporters!” Now angry at being duped, he forcefully bundled the failed actor out of the holy place. (I may have dramatized this last part a bit, but that is the essence of the true story.)

It just makes me wonder if Jean Valjean at the start of Victor Hugo’s magnum opus *LES MISÉRABLES* (1862), a French novel on the role reversals between good and evil, and how we perceive them. The protagonist, Jean, has just been released from prison after 19 years (for stealing a piece of bread for his starving family)—5 years for stealing bread, and 14 more for his numerous attempts to escape.

He has an ex-convict’s yellow passport; he is turned away at every inn, and has to sleep in the street, angry and bitter. The kind Bishop Myriel offers him shelter. In the night, in a moment of weakness, Jean runs off with the Bishop’s silverware.

He is caught by the police and brought to the Bishop who, however, pretends that he has given them to Jean, and hands him two more silver candlesticks. The police accept the story and leave. The Bishop advises Jean to use the money from the silver to start a new life, which he does.

The rest of his story is well worth reading: the original 2,783-page book, or its numerous adaptations for film, TV and the stage (including a musical). And yes, it is one of the longest books ever written! Its lessons are well worth knowing, so that we have a clearer view of life, and are better prepared to act, and to act rightly. Understandably, it is one of the most read novels and best-known book in literary circles, even outside of it.

So long as our customs, laws or religions create an artificial hell on earth and deny us of our true potentials—a polite relegation of the lowly and poor to the margins, looking up to status and power as defining us, and an insidious inability to see the true nobility of human worth and divine potential—so long as ignorance and suffering exist, such a book teaches us a valuable lesson to be put to life.

Hugo wrote *Les Misérables* as a lesson for all humans to read, to find ways of overcoming poverty, and correcting, better, preventing, crime. The publication was delayed, it is said, because the workers were crying over the proofs.

Such a great writing also reminds us how we have strayed from the Buddha's noble lessons, how we are simply ignorant of all that is really good in faith and life. We are taught to laugh at such teachings as being dated and frivolous, to follow the ways of clever entertaining Teachers rather than keep to the Buddha's ancient path of renunciation and true happiness.

Buddhists, oddly, are a crowd divided by beliefs, superstitions, status, gurus and buildings. We are attracted to any large building, especially religious ones. Buddhists, oddly, are open to almost any influence except, oddly, the truth and beauty of the Buddha's early teachings. We are enamoured with the Teacher but reject the teaching.

Such a loss of vision is powerfully portrayed in the dark characters of *Les Misérables*; our humanity, goodness and resilience are depicted in Jean Valjean and other heroes and heroines of that novel.

A good book, a good teaching, opens our eye to see reality and act in truth. Will you?

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