

Teaching a parrot new words

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“December 1948. A man sits at a typewriter, in bed, on a remote island, fighting to complete the book that means more to him than any other. He is terribly ill. The book will be finished and, a year or so later, so will the man.

January 2017. Another man stands before a crowd, which is not as large as he would like, in Washington, DC, taking the oath of office as the 45th president of the United States of America. His press secretary later says that it was the “largest audience to ever witness an inauguration — period — both in person and around the globe.”

Asked to justify such a preposterous lie, the President’s adviser describes the statement as “alternative facts.” Over the next four days, US sales of the dead man’s book will rocket by almost 10,000 per cent, making it a number-one best seller.”

Not Orwell today?

This is the opening of Dorian Lynskey’s *The Ministry of Truth: The biography of George Orwell’s 1984* (2019). My wife Ratna told me about George Packer’s review of Lynskey: “Doublethink is stronger than Orwell imagined” (*The Atlantic*, July 2019). This reflection is inspired by both Lynskey and Packer.

The rise of the 45th President spurred a rush of cautionary books like Timothy Snyder’s *On Tyranny* (2017) and Madeleine Albright’s *Fascism: A Warning* (2018), which were being sold alongside Orwell’s *1984*. These books pointed back to the early 20th century: it happened in Germany with Hitler; it could happen again today.

Unfreedom

The collapse of democracy: yes, the people voted a dictator. The heart of darkness was not the state or system, but the person. The problem was not that the person might abolish democracy, but the voters had put him in a position to try. UNFREEDOM today is voluntary (writes Packer), it comes from the bottom up.

As a sutta person (a student of the historical Buddha), I have little interest in politics. My main interest is in human behaviour, which helps explain my own behaviour. Political history is the drama of how power ebbs and flows between the people (the state) and the powerful (the government or the party), but today it is the Person that is the Power. This interests me, since it reflects a very similar situation in Buddhism today.

Enslaving the truth

During the 2016 US Presidential campaign, propagandists at a Russian troll farm used social media to disseminate a meme: “‘The People Will Believe What the Media Tells Them They Believe.’—George Orwell.” But Orwell never said this. The moral authority of his name was used as a lie for a most Orwellian end: the end of belief in truth. The Russians found allies in

the millions, especially among America's non-elites, the working-class, called "proles" in 1984.

Two + two = what you think?

Lynskey, in his book, points out that Orwell did not foresee "that the common man and woman would embrace DOUBLETHINK as enthusiastically as the intellectuals and, without the need for terror or torture, would choose to believe that two plus two was whatever they wanted it to be."

In Buddhist terms, this means that the Buddhist layman and laywoman, despite the teachings of karma and its consequences, would allow themselves to believe that "samsara is nirvana; nirvana is samsara." Or, that 2 Buddhas can exist in the same universe (going against common sense and the teachings of the early suttas).

Progressive doublethink

To this add progressive doublethink (the right-wing or mainstream reaction), which creates a more insidious reality because it uses, misuses, confuses, all that is good: this key word is JUSTICE or DHARMA in our lingo. Post-Buddha theologians began to categorize enlightenment or awakening, differentiating the Buddha's awakening as being "superior" to an arhat's awakening. This is like saying when the leader and his disciples are freed from prison (*samsara*): the leader's Freedom is complete, but the disciple's freedom is still not complete until each of them becomes a Leader himself!

One way this happens is when Buddhism is enslaved to promote culture and politics, as often happens when Buddhism becomes the State Religion or is defined by the powerful and the elite, or even the Elite (the one Guru, whoever he may be). The worst brainwashing is when we keep on repeating a falsehood until we believe it is real; Propaganda becomes SELF-DECEPTION. A lie that we accept becomes a lie that we forget.

A lie we accept, a lie we forget

A lie then becomes a truth, a holy truth. Nonself or no-Soul becomes Soul. Nirvana is displaced by some directional, eternal Paradise. The historical Buddha who awakens and then dies, finally proving impermanence, is turned into a Cosmic Bodhisattva, an Eternal Buddha. To believe otherwise is branded as false. This ORTHODOXY is enforced by social pressure, a Confucian ethic of bowing to authority, status, power, holiness for the sake of order in the Crowd.

Those who think and teach otherwise, who declare or re-declare their inspiration and loyalty to the one true historical Buddha, are regarded not only as "inferior" (*hīna*) but also as wrong or deluded. The THOUGHT POLICE then write new Sutras (like the Lotus Sutra) to subtly and intellectually debunk the "old school" and "thought criminals."

Parrots

The unthinking masses in the Cages are easily led to say, repeat and believe the Words of the Cage Masters. We become Parrots in the Master's Cages. They say the New Words of the Great Cage, and we simply parrot them. Then, we parrot them on our own, day in, day out. What we parrot makes us Parrots, cages us. Sometimes, we fly free from a Cage, but not used to the free open space, we look for another Cage, and follow another Cage Master, we parrot the New Words all over again.

After all, there are so many Parrots, colourful Parrots, talking Parrots, repeating Parrot Talk in loud and musical unison. It must be true; it is great and grand, anyway. Moreover, when we Parrot the same Words, we get to have our own Cage, and earn the Smile of the Cage Master and his Minions.

[This is, in fact, what happens when we follow a Guru: we become only A Buddhist; a statistic accepted and approved by other Parrots, the Parrot Crowd. When we follow the Buddha's teaching, we BECOME Buddhist, we awaken out of our Parrot ways, Parrot talk, Parrot mind.]

Mind the mind

The Buddha knows that the Parrot Master is in our own mind. We have created him by our own desire for approval of others, by hate and fear of others saying we are wrong, by the notion that "sanity is statistical." But truth is NOT what we keep parroting; reality is not mere belief. Truth is the direct experience of our own mind, seeing it for what it really is. Truth is the most fragile thing in the world: it can only be really seen, known and held up in our own mind. When we do not use our own mind, we will soon be out of mind: others will fill it.

Our mind: use it or lose it.

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

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