

## **Air on the G-string**

The burden of knowing the truth

[Previously published as fb200910 Piya Tan]

When we truly know people over the years of close association, we are often burdened with seeing them as they really are. When the scales have fallen from our eyes by our knowing and loving the Dhamma of the suttas, we celebrate the best in people, despite their worst and darkest qualities. We wish they would and will be better.

Most people think that we do not really see or know their dark sides. Even when we do, we hide them behind our social masks of decency and nicety for a pleasant social intercourse. When it all ends or even earlier, we retreat to the seeming safety of our homes to laugh at the pretences that we have pretended not to see. And others do the same with ours.

Status above state

Even in a Buddhist gathering, it is likely that status counts well above the actual state that we really are. Since we rarely, if ever, even know our own true state of mind, status helps to project an almost immediate acceptance by others so that we get our way.

The more we lack a wholesome state, or worse, we mistake our negative state for something remarkable, we are more likely to put on airs. We often project a sense of self-importance, of learning, of wealth, of power, of beauty, of attractiveness, even of sexuality, so that we are looked up to in society or before another.

The Emperor's New Clothes

Like the Emperor in his new clothes of air, we, too, monk-like, often put on airs. Fortunately, we do have the G-string of Buddhist decency, despite our airs. And so we love the crowd where we can air ourselves in our G-string. We can even hear strains of the majestic strings and continuo of Bach's Air of the G-string.

Anyone who speaks out of line—such as asking why people put on so much air despite their G-string—will be treated like the little child who naively but truly pointed out that the Emperor is actually naked! But ours is a polite society where we do not look below the waistline, and definitely never utter that unspeakable phrase: we are only wearing a G-string.

So little children are kept away, out of sight of the G-strings and related things, until they themselves learn how to air theirs when their time comes. So we are a G-string culture supported by air, moved on by air. The air on the G-string.

Little children

The suttas often relate to us how Māra is revealed and dispelled by rightly knowing him (for example, in the Māra Saṃyutta, S 1.4). Whenever we try to do good, such as wishing to listen to a sutta teaching, or study the suttas ourselves, or meditating, or aspiring for stream-

winning, we are somehow hindered or distracted from doing so. That distraction is personified as Māra. Know Māra, shame Māra, dispel Māra. Then we are on the right track. As our understanding of the suttas deepens, our love for Dhamma brightens, our wisdom widens, our eyes see airs and G-strings. This is very unflattering: the suttas describe such a situation as our being “troubled, ashamed, disgusted” like a well-dressed young person ready for a social gathering suddenly seeing a snake carcass, a dog carcass or a human carcass hanging around the neck! (as the Vitakka Saṅṭhāna Sutta, M 20, SD 1.6, puts it).

From adult to child

Sadly, those who love to gather and party on airs in the G-string do not see it this way. They see us as ignorant, misplaced little children for saying such unspeakable things. The good thing is that the Dhamma does at times reach out to a few in this G-string crowd. Then, we see these status-conscious Adults suddenly realizing that they are little Kids, too.

Not knowing what to say of the situation which is more complicated than the parade led by the Emperor in his new clothes. So these little children flee from the G-string parties for a more decent ambience.

The Buddha knows

Imaginative as this sordid tale may sound, it is difficult to truly speak of reality in any other way. This reminds me of how the young Siddhattha saw his version of the Airs on the G-string in the form of an aged man, a diseased man and a rotting corpse. He was simply “troubled, ashamed, disgusted.” He fled the plenty, the powers, the pleasures of his palaces to find some proper clothes and covering for himself. We know him to become the Buddha.

The Buddha sees all, knows all. Far from being burdened by true knowledge like us, he is freed and awakened by his self-realization. We must imagine that he had been preparing for this in countless lives before. He is undaunted by our shameless nakedness. He simply teaches us to clothe our body decently in moral virtue, to dress our mind radiantly in calm and clarity, and to free ourselves from the airs of lust, hate and delusion with the wisdom of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and non-self.

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

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