

Status or state?

How to really be a true person

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Traditional Buddhists tend to address one another as “Brother,” “Sister,” “Uncle,” “Auntie,” and so on. This is a good habit when the words are well warmed with true fellowship. But, then, teachers or anyone with some title or status, too, are often addressed as if we were in feudal times. And, of course, we have Venerables, Doctors, and Datas or Datuks (“Lord”), sometimes all rolled into one, like a colourful coat of impressive karma.

Over the years, I notice that when others address us with some kind of high title, it may seem that they “respect” us. The reality is often darker: they expect to see us feel at least mildly euphoric at it and thus be amenable, even obsequious, to them. This is one of the teachings of Dale Carnegie’s “How to Win Friends and Influence People,” a favourite book of a Sinhala Chief High Priest in Malaysia, who also had all the 3 titles.

Buddhist syllabus

In the 1980s, I was the key consultant and lecturer to the Buddhist Studies Team, preparing for the Buddhist knowledge curriculum for Secondary Schools in Singapore. The Singapore Buddhist leaders had submitted all the well-known Buddhist books in English written by famous Sinhala missionaries as the texts for the Buddhist syllabus to the Cambridge Examination Syndicate in the UK.

Later, the Syndicate replied that none of the books was suitable as textbooks or upon which examination questions could be set. It was then that they asked for permission to use my Integrated Syllabus and its class notes that I had prepared for the Seck Kia Eenh Dhamma School (SKEDS) in Malacca, Malaysia. From the start, local Buddhists have shown a keen interest in proper education, not merely following cultural beliefs of others who wish to dominate us.

Learning as experience

Learning of my guidance and lectures in the Buddhist knowledge project, and its overwhelming popularity and success in the schools (1980s), Professor Lewis Lancaster (one of the project consultants) invited me as a Visiting Scholar to the University of California at Berkeley (UCB), USA. When I told him that I am basically monastic trained and self-schooled, he replied that the work I had done in this connection was equitable to a PhD. And so I spent over a year happily and beneficially with the UCB academia, refining my academic discipline which helps in my translation work.

When some of the local Buddhist leaders heard of this, they jubilantly started to address me as “Dr Piya.” I explained to them that I was not awarded any such title. The good Professor meant that my decades of Dhamma work up till then was “as good as a PhD.” In other words, it was in recognition of my pioneer work in Buddhist education. It was in cognizance of my Dhamma **state**, not Buddhist **status**.

By the grace of others

Our state is what we really are, especially the good we do and live for. This idea of self-reliance is beautifully taught by the Buddha, even during his last days. God-religions tell us that we are “saved by the grace of God.” We don’t deserve it but are given it from outside, this is status. Others act like God and pretend to grace us. In other words, we are their mere creatures, it seems. Not a very Buddhist idea!

Everyone we meet can be a mirror of our own self, of what we are really deep within. We often behave before others in a way that we perceive that they would perceive us. We crave approval of others, of the crowd. But why? One quick explanation is that we had strict parents, and we need to be worthy of wearing their shoes. But wise parents know that “green comes from indigo,” an ancient saying, meaning good parents make us better adults.

Master yourself

Some traditional Buddhists call me “Master.” Please don’t, I explain: we should be our own master; who else can our master be? If you treat me as a “Master,” then, I will become a “Money-Smile Guru” (MSG), which we well know is not healthy for the many. Then, I may tell you the doctored truth, not the whole truth, even lie to you, and you will still believe me. This so common amongst those who neither know Dhamma nor love it. They see Buddhism as a means of gains, power and success.

The Buddha teaches **renunciation**. We begin by renouncing what is not ours: the titles that people give us. That is how they perceive us, but they don’t know really know us; they may, in fact, think they are better than us. When we have good sense, we are embarrassed by this misjudgement; if we are foolish, we use it like stolen loot, in the end harming ourselves. What we must renounce, then, is our greed, hate, pride and conceit.

Exist or live?

When we are caught up with a status, we are stuck in it like a prehistoric insect in amber. Nice to look at, but that’s about it. We are not able to see Dhamma, nor hear it, much less feel it, grow in it. We are not even alive; we only exist.

When we truly live, we are alive, in the Dhamma. We breathe renunciation: we take in air, we give it back. Even our life is not ours; it is conditioned by everything around us. Renunciation teaches us to let go of self-view so that we see others as they truly are, we feel all around us as it really is. We see impermanence, we learn to value life; we see suffering, we learn to love; we see non-self, we learn to be free. This is living Dhamma.

When we truly seek Dhamma, we are really happy. What more when we know Dhamma: we benefit others by just being their friends. This is no status symbol, but a joyful state. We can’t steal this; we can’t borrow this; we can’t wear this; we can’t print this on a namecard; we can’t feign this. We can’t even hold on to this. It arises from constant love for Dhamma, from dedicating our deeds and speech to self-respect, discipline and wisdom. This is what the Buddha teaches us.

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

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