

## **To have or to be?**

What are we looking for in life?

[Previously published as fb210220 Piya Tan]

Over the decades of teaching Buddhism and working with Buddhists, I notice that there are 2 ways that they see my work or use it. We may even say these are 2 kinds of people whose idea of us and Dharma work are instructive to examine and learn from. It is difficult to say statistically how many of either group there are, but this does not matter. We should reflect on this situation as the attitude of people towards Buddhism and life itself: how they view others, how they view Buddhism, how they view themselves.

### Entitled

The first kind of people are those who see our work or Buddhist teachings as some kind of status symbol or class marker. These are often those from the “upper” class, colloquially called “atas.” They see being rich and powerful as what define people. However, sadly, they lack the wisdom that truly enriches them.

Hence, status-conscious class-minded people are driven by appearances: that they know the right people, the right things, and have all the rights to what they do. In other words, they feel “entitled” to being above us, so they think.

### To have

In terms of Buddhist psychology, it is likely that such people see Buddhism as a “thing” out there: famous teachers, powerful teachings, impressive buildings, crowded societies, and wealthy status. They tend to see Buddhism, even Buddhists, whether monastic or lay, the powerful or the professional, those with titles or means, as those who “have” a life; hence worth connecting with.

For such people—there are many of them—a large impressive temple would receive large impressive donations from them, or the public service they seem to offer should be well publicized, reported and remembered. Their rationale perhaps is that these large institutions have been able to manage their wealth and so deserve more. Or that success is good karma that they deserve but not lesser people.

### Losing nothing

Their view is that we must be seen to do good. Then others will respect us for that. The subtext is that it all will be best for us in the end. Indeed, we lose nothing in giving, since it all comes back in the form of respect, popularity and power we are entitled to.

This reminds me of a rich man who runs his own Buddhist Centre. Periodically, he would piously stand from the high balcony of his majestic Centre, and cast a few handfuls of small change down on the dirty ground below. A small crowd of poor children from the neighbourhood would rush to pick these little bits of generosity like hungry birds pecking at tiny bugs.

## Your right

There were occasions when I offered such people copies of our Sutta Discovery volumes. Surprising, they seemed to be with neither hands nor arms; they glared at me, and grunted: “What is this?” My perception then was that I am unworthy of giving them what they already have, or that I am not worthy of even approaching them with such aplomb. In fact, I was made to feel ashamed to have the hubris to offer something wholesome since I am not of the entitled class.

Once, during a public class, I was deeply fascinated when someone asked me: “What gives you the right to represent Buddhism? You are not even enlightened.” Frankly, I would be delighted if he would ask this very same question to all those self-assured easy-speaking money-smile talkers of religion.

## The Buddha

Anyway, the simple answer is that we don’t have the right to speak for the Buddha. That is why we need to be diligent in studying the suttas, and quoting the suttas. The best we can do is perhaps to convey what we have understood of our study of the Buddha’s wisdom. Then, there comes a point when these suttas touch us so profoundly with joy that we simply cannot but express that joy to others. When we cannot feel the joy lighting our words of Dhamma that we have no right to speak of it, much less for it.

## Truly living

Over the years, I have made many happy people who see the truth and beauty of the suttas that I have been teaching. That joy and light inexorably connect us like family members who are meeting again returning from a long journey. Such Dhamma friends understand what basically Buddhism is about: that we need to aspire for the path in this life itself.

Why fall into the animal womb, the preta realm or the hellish states, or pretend to have when we really have nothing, are nothing, that nothing in this world is ours, not even our breath. All we can do is share the goodness that we are, our wholesome being, with others. When we share this, we truly become more: the nature of wholesome being is to grow and become light: then we awaken on the path. We are truly living; for, we have awakened.

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

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