

New lamps for old ones

Lest posterity laugh at us, but rather smile in joy
[Previously published as fb210412 Piya Tan]

A modern academic scholar is the embodiment of the diligence of a mediaeval monk and the curiosity of a rigorous scientist. Both are ideals of the learning quest. The mediaeval God is nothing but enlightening knowledge, but unlike the monk who lives in simplicity and poverty, the scholar today may tap a bountiful trove of funds—if he is able to show promise of uncovering any kind of new learning.

Shoulders and bodies

This is where the modern scholar turns away from the monastic path of God, or better, let's say, self-discovery. The successful and glorious scholar today is one who simply points to a new horizon of learning. In doing so, he must then fade with the setting sun of his life. The longer-lived retired scholar may celebrate festschrifts in between weeding the garden, and be gratefully footnoted on the pages of fresh young scholars trying to find faults with his works and ideas.

For, they must not only stand on the shoulders of bookish giants, but also trudge over mountains of the fallen giant bodies to reach new heights of learning. If they do well enough, they will be able to leave their own immortal frame on the summit of these mountains so other younger scholars have greater heights to climb and a broader horizon to survey while their sun is in the zenith.

Doctored Dharma

Buddhism is today one of the academic fields that is well fenced in, plotted out and measured, for academic achievement and entitlement. We see a kind of reverse osmosis here with the monks (of a different colour) renouncing the monastery for academia's hallowed halls. Since enlightenment seems to have died with the Buddha, why not return to the monastic catacombs of learning.

For the measure of man is man himself. Or better, we now measure his mind. Knowledge is not only power, it is also wealth, success, a blazing light to attract the masses. Since there is no Soul to lose, why not win the world? With such light, we will be heard as the Buddha's voice. What's in a name: every word we speak with a title smells just as true in the mindless crowd that has gathered around us. After all, Buddhism is about healing with the 4 truths: here we have a doctored Dharma by venerable Doctors.

Scholars of the world

Despite the samsaric cycle that is academia, wiser scholars, noticing the long chains that hold them to their chairs, do see the light. They have been trained to read facts and truths with an objective mind. In their wisdom, they realize, scholars excel in conundrums. Being objective is merely one's own view of things—nothing is more subjective than that!

This insight arouses in them such great curiosity and delight in the way that the Buddha speaks: they are willing and able to forget the words so that they can hear what the Buddha has tried to say. They wander in the cool and calm forest of Dhamma, and delight in knowing and naming every tree. Yet they never miss the forest for the trees. They even sit under a tree, just as the Buddha has done. They close their eyes to see what the Buddha sees.

The lamp of 3 wishes

These are the scholars who see the nature of all things, including religion: how man creates God in his own image; how the latter-day Buddhists, still unable accept the Buddha's death, turn to Resurrected Buddhas, Cosmic Bodhisattvas, Eternal Paradises and Lineages of the Dead. They see how Buddhist Theologians make grand statements of meditations when the Buddha speaks simply and joyfully of states that free.

The Buddha, as it were, has given us a lamp, embedded with 3 jewels, each granting us a wish, that we can only make with closed eye and open mind. Tips: the 1st wish must be that of health; the 2nd of wisdom; the 3rd freedom. Other wishes do not work. It's a very old lamp, and does not seem to work. Hence, many have given it away in exchange for brighter new lamps that need an external power supply. We have even forgotten about those real wishes. We keep looking at the new bright shiny electric lamps of others.

Learning

Learning is a most sacred path in the Buddha's teaching. Indeed, we are not even learners yet, even in our silken robes or ascetic rags or money-smiles. Religion can be such sublime pretences and learned habits: this is what we must renounce, or the burden of this load will only bring us down to the real levels, lower than the human that we were.

We are only true learners when we first tread the path of light, free from narcissism, doubt and superstition. When we further understand our desires and master them, we return but once to this world, going up the path of awakening. Then, we never return to suffering, ever onward. Finally, we win the very same freedom and awaken just as the Buddha does. For, what other awakening is there, if we are to be buddha, awakened?

R767 Revisioning Buddhism 323

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

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