

Call me by my name

Let me know you better

[Previously published as fb210429 Piya Tan]

Buddhists in ethnic communities and affluent urban enclaves are blinded by the same shadow: that of STATUS. Although early Buddhism teaches social equality, many ethnic Buddhists and many affluent Buddhists misunderstand karma. We may even say they tend to live in the past, believing that our present good fortune is the fruit of past good karma.

In other words, this seems to be a fatalistic view of karma, a kind of social Darwinism. Critics have quipped that “social Darwinism” is “a bad idea with a worse name.” Although basically this bad idea is based on the notion of “the survival of the fittest,” it is indeed a misapplication of Darwin’s revolutionary ideas. While the latter is a scientific reality, the former is merely an elitist bias.

Buddhist Darwinism?

Hence, “Buddhist Darwinism” is a nasty wrong view with a worse unwholesome name. It is based on a selfish, elitist, dehumanizing notion that if you are poor, bad looking, powerless, servile, unhealthy and suffering, too bad, it’s your bad karma.

Hence, it is not uncommon to hear elitist Buddhists instruct their children and workers to keep away from the less fortunate, since they will only ask for succour (money) without deserving it. Clearly, such almighty beings are like asuras who do not see compassion as kindness especially to those who do not deserve it.

See Dhamma, see others

What can we learn from the anecdote about the name Piya, then [fb210429]? The young monk clearly came from a neo-feudal society where some kind of class system exists, based on the unspoken wrong view that those with good karma are higher up (“atas” as we say in Singapore), while those with bad karma are lower down, a misunderstanding of the Sigalovada Sutta’s nadir quarter.

Those who have learned something from me in past decades have addressed me as bhante (a Pali term that basically means “sir”), acharn (a Thai word for “teacher”), even “doctor,” since I was invited to be a visiting scholar at one of the Ivy League US universities. While I understand their sentiment, I don’t encourage this.

While I’m quite contented to know that I’m being addressed, I do feel uncomfortable when I suspect that someone is projecting onto me undeserved sublime qualities or good karma. Should I appear to fail to measure up to their karmic scheme, I will become the brunt of their disapproval and anathema. When we place someone on a pedestal, and we lean too hard on the pedestal, that idol will surely fall.

Name-calling is good

The intelligent young monk thought that by calling me Piya is being disrespectful, maybe because in much of Asia, it is impolite for the young to address the old by name. However, when asked for his reason, he explained that Piya was the name of a poor 3-wheel cab driver, one of the lowliest occupations in an urban society!

The bad logic here is that since the 1st Piya he knew was a lowly 3-wheel driver, all Piyas are lowly 3-wheel drivers! The first wrong that needs to be corrected here is that of a wrong correlation. The name is not the person: it is merely a mode of communication. We may even add that the name is not the job, whether lowly or high class.

Knowing ourself

Secondly, it is wrong to tarnish all names by the same brush we have smeared the lowly 3-wheel driver. Indeed, in terms of practical benefit of transportation, Piya the 3-wheel driver would benefit others more than Piya the sutta translator.

Thirdly, if we really respect Piya the teacher, then any mention of the name should brighten up our heart and face every time we hail for a 3-wheel cab.

Many years ago, when Singapore swimmers had SIN printed on their caps, some zealots wrote to the local papers that this was a kind of insult to a certain religion that believe in Sin.

SIN is good

In my reply to that paper column (which was published), I wrote to the effect: SIN is just a convention with no religious connotation, unless we attribute such nastiness to it. At that time, a Prince of the Church in the Philippines was a Cardinal Sin! Finally, I wrote my own name ends in Sin with the big S: Tan Beng Sin.

What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell just as sweet. Yet, it's because we know that a rose smells sweet that we can dispense with the name. Anyway, since it is neither polite nor healthy to go around smelling people, a person's name can be a safe sweet sound.

That is why, as a rule, our eyes brighten, our heart leap up when we hear our name. Also notice how we feel about someone new who does not want to tell us his name.

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