

Wizard of Oz

How Buddhism begins at home

[Previously published as fb220318 Piya Tan]

One of the stories that fascinated me as a primary schoolboy was L Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900): it still fascinates me. Some speculated that his story was an allegory of the politics of the day, but Baum insisted that it was only a fanciful story of a little girl from Kansas. The point is that a good story often has a life of its own by becoming meaningful, even purposeful, for almost anyone who has read it.

I've written this reflection, seeing *The Wizard of Oz* as a microcosmos of the realities that we each are. We are all the characters in this amazing American fairy tale. Young Dorothy and her little dog, Toto, are taken by a cyclone into the fairyland of Oz. There, she befriends Scarecrow (who wants a brain), Tin Woodman (who wants a heart) and Cowardly Lion (who wants courage). Dorothy herself, of course, wants to return home in Kansas.

Home

The lesson of the story is like how the Sinhala missionaries feeding their "superior" Buddhist culture to US local English-speaking Buddhists. We are taught to respect and support Sinhala Monks, especially the Chief High Priest (the Wizard of Oz). Only Dorothy understands that this is not her home (not the teachings of the Buddha), and wants to go home.

In their travels, the Wicked Witch of the West (the Chief High Priest's powerful local supporter) captures them, unstuffing Scarecrow and denting Tin Woodman, leaving Lion cowardly. Dorothy becomes the Witch's slave. Dorothy wears magical silver shoes, which the Witch desires, and manages to con her into giving them to her.

Dorothy, outraged, throws a bucket of water at the Witch, only to see her melt away! The Winkies (erstwhile slaves of the Witch) are grateful to Dorothy for freeing them from slavery under the Witch. The Winkies restuff Scarecrow and mend Tin Woodman.

Oz

Dorothy and her friends now journey on the Yellow Brick Road and reach the Emerald City (the Maha Vihara, the Great Buddhist Cathedral of the Chief High Priest). The Guardian at the gate instructs them to wear Green Glasses (Sinhala superstition) so that they are not blinded by the City's dazzling emeralds. (Yes, it's the glasses that make the City look green!)

When Dorothy and her friends meet the Wizard, Toto (Dorothy's dog) tips over a screen in a corner of the throne-room and reveals the Wizard (the Chief High Priest), who is honest enough to explain that he is a humbug—an ordinary old man who, by a hot air balloon, came to Oz long ago from Omaha. He provides Scarecrow with a head full of bran, pins and needles, the Tin Woodman with a silk heart stuffed with sawdust, and Lion with a portion of "courage."

Their faith in themselves makes these items a focus for their desires. Later, Dorothy learns that her silver shoes are magical and can bring her wherever she wants to go; or, in our case, free ourselves from foreign superstitions and win back our home in the Dharma.

Baum

Author L Frank Baum was himself controversial. In his 1890 editorials in the *Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer*, he called for the “annihilation of the few remaining Indians.” Some thought he was being racist towards the badly exploited Native Indians who lost their land, religion and culture (like us local Buddhists).

Culture is more than nice shoes, nice food, nice talk, but our purpose in life seems nothing more than worshipping and employing Sinhala priests, going to Sri Lanka to see Buddhism. Culture is how we treat our own home and people, working to understand the Buddha Dhamma here and now (as the Buddhists in Sri Lanka themselves did in better days).

Racist?

The Winkies, under the Witch’s spell, may charge that I am racist, even anti-Sinhala. Far from that, I admire what is good in Buddhist culture. From this admiration, I realize that we, too, can and must, be a Buddhist culture. We are like Scarecrow, Tin Woodman and Cowardly Lion when we are mentally and socially enslaved to foreign cultures on account of Buddhism.

Baum redeemed

When Chief Sitting Bull (who had defeated General Custer at the Battle of Little Big Horn) was later killed, Baum wrote his “racist” editorial. Later, Gretchen Ritter of Cornell University explains that Baum “took the position of a hardened frontiersman” but still “retained admiration” for Native Indians”:

“It was as the noble savages of nature that the Indians were admired. Sitting Bull’s greatness and nobility were his not by title, but by the achievements and ability. In contrast, those Indians that agreed to be settled were degenerate, ‘whining curs,’ who gave up their primitive ways to become wards of the government and ‘lick the hand that smites them.’ ... Baum thought it better that the Indians should die as NOBLE ‘Redskins’ rather than live as ‘despicable beings.’”

Colonialism and feudalism are dead, but they live on in our lives through the kind of Cultural Buddhism that we are proud in our Emerald City. This is a good place to start to be moved by the spirit of early Buddhist RENUNCIATION.

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

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