

Twin wonders

To change or not to change

[Previously published as fb210719 Piya Tan]

Often I start the day with a struggle: to spend more time with what I love doing, bringing joy to others; or with what I need to do that will help us know ourselves better. The former is that of compassionately keeping in touch with seekers and stragglers struggling to make sense of Buddhism and their role in life. The latter is my sutta work (besides my daily practice) that of listening in to the Buddha's wisdom and sharing it with others.

Rich uncle

The former act reveals the MEANING of life as it passes by me with those who are near and dear to me, and on social media. For example, I have many nephews and nieces (N or N) but they rarely keep in touch with me:

I'm not a rich uncle (though we come from a rich culture), but a troublesome Dhamma teacher who makes many nervous or nuts (not sure why); who teaches dry early Buddhism, not something that would pump pheromones rapturing in applause and admiration for us. Occasionally, just to see a Like from an N or N on my posts on the Sutta FB sparks a momentary joy of a relative link. This, in part, is my meaning of life.

True purpose

The latter (sutta work) has driven me with a true PURPOSE in life, keeping me healthy in mind and body in these late hours. The joy of working with the suttas that richly fruits in the sweetness of truth is more than a great living reward in itself. As I reach 20 years of sutta translation and commentary work, the benefit of constant good karma is clearly evident.

Every step in the reading and translating the suttas brings new challenges, whose clues and answers are already there in the last 20 years of study and practice. The Buddha's voice comes through the suttas ringing of Dhamma. What more does a Dharmafarer need?

Novel-writing

Working with the suttas has greatly improved my language and writing skills, seeing beauty in even a single word in print or pixel: it's a Dhamma word! Ratna, my dear wife and assistant, is inspired to improve her language. Although her first language is Mandarin Chinese, she has taken a course in novel writing in English. She wants me to check and gauge her writings. This, too, is a meaningful part of my daily routine.

2 kinds of characters

She told me something interesting from her own reading: that there are 2 kinds of characters in a novel. The 1st is the STAYER, who remains a straight-liner, unchanged, almost unaffected, by the ups and downs of the story. This is like Stevens the butler in

Ishiguro's *Remains of the Day* (1989), who doesn't even know how to love. A butler right to the end.

This reminds me of many of our Buddhist teachers, leaders and their dizzy followers. They follow trends, butlering the master of the day, always present before a crowd. They are like lotus leaves: no matter how much Dhamma rain falls on them, it touches them not. Dhamma changes them not a bit. Yet they prowl and howl around as if they know something, or that we should know that they are something.

Proofing is proof-reading

They haunt the social media, neither to learn from or love other humans, but to "moderate" their chats, to pontificate a fiat when someone seems to know something.

Recently, I wrote an appeal:

"Reading suttas is reading our scriptures, about the Buddha's awakening: PROOFING them makes them clearer for us, for others."

A local Buddhist Stayer posted a strong rebuke at me: How dare I treat the suttas as sacred scriptures when the Buddha tells us to question them; he even put some sobering words in the mouth of a respected monastic teacher to show how wrong I was!

Proof as a verb

Then, I realized that he must have misread PROOFING (by which I meant proof-reading) as PROVING. He was upset by just a word, and did not even ask me what I meant by my post. Then, again why should he: I'm not in the heraldic pen of local noble Buddhist peers.

My post was simply a desperate skilful means to muster PROOFREADERS to help in upgrading the readability of the revised editions of the past 20 years of sutta translations (in some 70 volumes). Anyway, I apologized to him for misguiding him with a little use form of PROOF as a verb for proofreading. If only my English was better.

Straightliners

The next thing that will happen, if we see some staying power in local Buddhists, is that some Straightliner would report this remark I just made: "Piya has written something bad about you!" We are simple folks of the Aristotelian rut: things are either black or white, good or bad. Nothing in between, much less asking questions for a deeper understanding.

After all, this is not some wise words from a white monk (we were ruled by white foreigners over 4 generations), or some good-karmaed wealthy Dharma teacher of popular acclaim, or even some well-meaning local politician!

Predictability

The years of predictability in such unstaged productions of straightline tragicomedy, has taught me to laugh at ourselves. We speak of Mahā Mettā (humungous love) and the Buddha's compassion, but it does not include being kind to those who don't measure up to the gold standard of crowd Buddhism led by titled and entitled leaders.

Now, if you had been attentive enough, you would have noticed I have not mentioned the 2nd kind of character in a novel. He is the CHANGER: the hero who is deeply affected by the ups and downs of the story; he changes and is happy and free in the end. I can think of quite a few novels as examples. But nothing beats the stories of the Buddha and the arhats, even those not yet arhats but on the path of awakening. They are all noble changers.

Real change

To really CHANGE for the better we must walk the noble eightfold path as a streamwinner. To start changing in that direction of wholesome change, we must habitually see change and impermanence in all things, especially ourself. This journey of truth and beauty starts and ends here in our own life.

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

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