

## Great learning and moral discipline:

A Reflection on verse 3 of the Mahā Maṅgala Sutta (Sn 2.4)

An excerpt from Māra: The Buddhist mythology of evil and embodiment of badness (SD 61a, previously SD 61.8) © Piya Tan 2024.

(3) Sn 261	<i>bahu, saccañ ca sippañ ca vinayo ca susikkhito subhāsītā ca yā vācā etaṃ maṅgalam uttamam</i>	great learning and craft [the arts], and being well-trained in moral discipline, and speaking what is well spoken— this is supreme blessing.	7-8 9 10
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**7 Great learning.** Māra often fools us into seeing our “Self” in all things: *in everything we experience; what is there in it for “me”? I wish this is “mine.”* Ignorance is Māra’s snare, knowledge his noose with which he leads us where he wishes. Knowledge without understanding and compassion makes us robots programmed and controlled by Mara.

Despite our noble aims, even *because* of them, we are often bent by the weight of profit, in the palpable, the objective, that something—like Narcissus seeing his own reflection in the water.<sup>1</sup> Even in the field of learning, we are goaded to seek *praise and gain* from it, some title or trinket. We then are but dancing bears, and Māra the organ grinder.

Only with truth and beauty working as one in us (like wisdom and compassion) *frees* us from Māra. Truth is when we truly *see*; beauty is when we truly *feel*. Then, we have looked deep into the mind and see with the light of our heart; thus we truly know and see that **we are as we feel; we feel as we think**. We are that Uroboros: thinking is our head, feeling our tail. When we see how they bite, we stop biting. We are then free from suffering.

Both thinking and feeling must be applied to **academic learning**, too. The academic study of Buddhism is helpful and profitable for the scholars of anthropology, philosophy, philology, history, and so on. And these, in turn, often benefit us when these scholars marry *truth with beauty*. But the scholars by definition are undertakers of learning: their Buddhism is dead Buddhism, practised in an ancient culture that has significantly changed or no more exists today.<sup>2</sup>

**8a Craft [the arts].** A “craft” is a work we do until it becomes a skill, creating what is good and beautiful. There are layperson skills, with which we better and beautify the world; there are renunciant skills that beautify the heart and free the mind. When we are skillful and diligent in attending to the diverse tasks that benefit us and others, lay and renunciant alike, such crafts become our refuge and protector (*nātha, karaṇā dhammā*).<sup>3</sup> Such skills support us economically and culturally, and protect us against being led astray by idleness, Māra’s playground.

If we see “great learning” [7 above] as an occupation or profession, a job with which we support ourselves, then, we may take “craft” as an art or skill that we love mastering and doing as something creative and enjoyable the creation of joy and beauty, something truly creative, artistic and original. This may include any of the arts: painting, poetry, music, singing, dancing, writing and so on. If this is applied to Buddhist work, then, “great learning” refers to mastering the suttas and meditation, and “craft” refers to the love and mastery in teaching Dharma and mindfulness, and counselling and healing others.

We often associate crafts with **culture**, since every culture has been preserving things of beauty generation after generation. We see a lot of beautiful Buddhist things in ethnic Buddhism, which is native or peculiar to a certain country or community. These beautiful things are excellent ways of reminding us of the Buddha and his teachings: the temples, wall paintings, Buddhist images and

<sup>1</sup> On the Greek myth of embodiment of self-love, see SD 34.1 (2.5.2.2); SD 60.1d (7.7.5.4).

<sup>2</sup> For more on “academic Buddhism,” see SD 60.1c (2.1).

<sup>3</sup> (Dasaka) Nātha S 1 (A 10.17/5:24,10-13), SD 79.4

Buddhist sculptures, rituals, traditions—in short, ethnic culture, reminding us that the Bodhi tree has taken deep roots in the country or community.

**8b Ethnic Buddhism.** However, when we look deeper into these cultural artefacts and traditions, we often find that their vision of the Dharma is often different from what we learn in the suttas, and that very often Buddhism has been culturally woven colourfully into the tapestry of ethnic Buddhism. When we look deeper still and a bit more widely, we are likely to notice that ethnic Buddhisms differ from one another depending on the country or people who uphold them.

There are however very close similarities in both structure and function. There is an elite priesthood supported by the rich upper class, whom they serve and socialize with, and there is the commoner priesthood served by commoners. There is also some kind of Buddhist heraldic system of ranks and titles based on Buddhist studies (especially Pali and monastic exams) by which a commoner priest may rise through the ranks. At the top of this hierarchy, historically, is the king, but today this is only true of Thailand.<sup>4</sup> In traditional terms, Buddhism in such countries is still defined and crafted by the ethnic sangha, and to some extent influential lay teachers.<sup>5</sup>

Hence, we can see that **ethnic Buddhists**, too, are undertakers of Buddhism [7 above]. The head undertakers and their hands are those who work to keep the Buddha's body fresh and appealing, masking death's telltale signs through embalming pujas still regularly performed today. They are professional cosmetologists, experts in the Buddha's iconography, hagiography, relic worship, and merit "transfer" rituals.<sup>6</sup> They are still mourning the Buddha who died over 2 millennia ago. This is, in fact, the kind of Buddhism that is at once appealing to all forms of Buddhists. If we know that the Buddha's funeral is still being performed today, wouldn't we want to attend it?

**8c The Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16), chapter 6, describes the Buddha's funeral as being fully performed not by the monks but by the laity, the Mallas of Kusināra. The Sutta describes the Mallas' preparations as follows:

Then, the Mallas of Kusināra passed the 2<sup>nd</sup> day, honouring, respecting, esteeming and venerating the Blessed One's remains with dancing, music, singing, garlands (*mālā*), and fragrances (*gandha*), and making cloth-canopies, preparing mandalas of garlands. So, too, they passed the 3<sup>rd</sup> day; so, too, they passed the 4<sup>th</sup> day; so, too, they passed the 5<sup>th</sup> day; and so too they passed the 6<sup>th</sup> day in that way.

(D 16,6.13), SD 9

From my experience in Thailand (1970-76), I have seen how the Thais honoured their dead in similar ways, with music and flowers. The local Chinese funerals, even for Buddhists, tend to be deeply influenced by Daoist and Confucianist beliefs and practices. Much rethinking and reforms are needed here as soon as possible, before the next death when Māra will again make his unseen presence felt.<sup>7</sup>

We must constantly remind ourselves that the Buddha teaches "**living Dharma**" in the sense that his teachings make our lives meaningful here and now when we properly *live* the teachings. **The Neyy'attha Nīt'attha Sutta** (A 2.3.5 f) teaches us to differentiate between conventional or literary language (which is conditioned by time, place and usage) and ultimate or Dharma language (which point directly to true reality). Teachings which are ethnic or literary (such includes most post-Buddha Buddhist literature) are "conventional" and their meaning *need to be drawn out* (*neyy'attha*). Most

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<sup>4</sup> Historically, British colonialism had effectively removed the monarchy in Ceylon and Burma. Siam was the only country that was able to remain uncolonized [SD 60.1b (4.5)].

<sup>5</sup> One of the most influential lay teachers was S N Goenka and his Vipassana movement: SD 60.1c 12.3).

<sup>6</sup> See eg SD 60.1e (13.5.2).

<sup>7</sup> Having said this, I am not against anyone or any ethnic teaching or practice that is not patently against early Buddhism. Anyone can choose the form of Buddhism they want to practise, but early Buddhism should be given its dues respect and place in religious history.

such teachings and practices of ethnic Buddhism need to be explained or reinterpreted in sutta terms (like the *Aśokāvadāna* and the Sinhala chronicles, *vaṃsa*). We can simply take them as cultural stories but not history nor scripture. Dharma teachings (employing terms like impermanence, nonself, aggregates and so on) refer to true reality or the path as taught by the Buddha.<sup>8</sup>

**9 Being well-trained in moral discipline.** Discipline (*vinaya*) is what keeps us away (*vinayati*) from evil. There is *the discipline of the renunciant* and *the discipline of the laity*. The renunciant discipline comprises the fourfold purification of good conduct (*catu pārisuddhi,sīla*), namely: the restraint in keeping with the Pātimokkha (monastic code), restraint of the senses, purification in livelihood, and reflection on the use of the 4 requisites (food, robes, shelter, medicines).<sup>9</sup> A layperson, for his spiritual health, should abstain from the 10 courses of unwholesome karma<sup>10</sup> (a practice summarized in the 5 precepts of abstaining from *killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and intoxication*), and habitually practise the 10 courses of wholesome karma<sup>11</sup> (distilled in the 5 moral values of *life, happiness, freedom, truth and mindfulness*). This is the foundation practice for happiness in this world, out of Māra's reach, and the path out of Māra's realm to the ancient city of Nirvana.<sup>12</sup>

**10 Speaking what is well-spoken.** Whatever is spoken about the Dharma of freedom is said to be "well spoken" (*subhāsita*). Basically, the well spoken is simply right speech. Ideally, it is useful and unifying truth plainly and pleasantly spoken. The Buddha declares that he would speak in 2 *well-spoken ways*, that is, only that which is true and useful, whether pleasant or unpleasant, but even then only at the right time.<sup>13</sup> When the situation is seriously unwholesome, the Buddha would utter unpleasant words that are true and useful, as necessary, as recorded, for example, in **the Cātumā Sutta** (M 67,4 f) where the Buddha is being rather severe with some new monks for being unmindfully noisy: he dismisses them (they have to leave and live on their own for a while). Such an episode is a valuable lesson for monastics today, so that they are reminded to be mindful at all times. Ironically, when Māra appears to us (we are unlikely to recognise him anyway) he would be *supersweet* with us so that we will fall for his ways.

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<sup>8</sup> A 2.3.5 f/1:60 (SD 2.6b).

<sup>9</sup> **Sāmūgiya S** (A 4.194,2), SD 56.6; Vism 1.42/15 f.

<sup>10</sup> The 10 courses of unwholesome karma (*dasa akusala.kamma,patha*) are abstinences from (1) killing, (2) stealing, (3) sexual misconduct; (4) false speech, (5) malicious speech, (6) harsh speech, (7) frivolous chatter; (8) covetousness, (9) ill will, (10) wrong views. See **Sāleyyaka S** (M 41,7-10), SD 5.7; **Sañcetanika S** (A 10.206,1-7), SD 3.9.

<sup>11</sup> The 10 courses of wholesome karma (*dasa kusala.kamma,patha*) are the cultivation of (1) lovingkindness, (2) charity, (3) contentment (celibacy); (4) truthfulness, (5) unifying speech, (6) pleasant speech, (7) useful speech; (8) renunciation, (9) compassion, (10) wisdom. See M 41,11-14 (SD 5.7); A 10.206,7.2-12 {SD 3.9}.

<sup>12</sup> See **Nagara S** (S 12.65,19-23/2:105 f), SD 14.2.

<sup>13</sup> **Abhaya Rāja,kumāra S** (M 58,58) + SD 7.12 (3.2).