

## OPENING OUR EYES TO THE DHARMA

by Piya Tan

There are many well-organized Buddhism classes (English and Chinese) we can join today. The common feedback however is that the drop-out rate is very high. The class may start with a hundred, and then drop to 10, within a few weeks. Sometimes only one student loyally remains and completes the course.

Here are some of the feedback I get from various students:

- (1) Students find the lessons boring after a few lessons.
  - (2) Other commitments prevent them from completing the course.
  - (3) Teachers know a lot but do not seem to be Dharma-inspired.
  - (4) Teachers are not able to answer certain troubling questions or just palm them off.
  - (5) Students have difficulty with Pali language.
  - (6) Students say they are learning nothing (irrelevance), so they give up.
- And so on.

The good thing is that so far no students have asked for any refund, even when some of these courses may cost hundreds of dollars. Apparently, the organizers generally are not totally disappointed since the money goes to paying the teachers and benefits the temple or centre.

Another point I would like to add is that we are not sure what happens to those who do graduate. Do they continue to teach and to do so effectively? Have their lives changed spiritually, or is it just another academic qualification? Is there any fellowship amongst these graduates, or are they generally aloof?

Buddhist education in Singapore currently appears to be very private enterprises by isolated groups. There is no concerted effort, not to say any common syllabus, nor any follow-up plans. Although some centres raise substantial funds and useful new members this way, others have to pay expensive licence fees for there accreditation (say from a Sri Lanka university). In other words, a lot remains to be desired in Buddhist education here.

Somehow I have a gut feeling that many, if not most, people who sign up for such courses, are not interested in a certificate, diploma or even degree. They want a systematic and effective study of the Suttas, teachings, meditation, that is, some aspects of Buddhism that would spiritually enrich their lives in a significant way.

Maybe it is for this reason that I often have a full week of Sutta and meditation classes. This is especially inspiring because I have tried my best to present the Suttas as they are, without making any special effort to “entertain” the class. It is encouraging to know that there are many who have a great desire for the Buddha Dharma through the primary materials, the Suttas.

My point is we should not be discouraged when we find little or no worldly fun in a class. We join a Buddhist class not to be entertained but to be enlightened. As our wisdom grows, we will discover a growing bliss in our own inner clarity.

I like to imagine when teaching the Suttas, I am in the living presence of the Buddha himself. No, I do not see him as an eternal figure, but I take it as a Buddha-recollection that we are very fortunate to have ancient teachings that are very close to what he has himself taught.

What if the class is boring because it is not Dharma-spirited. Then it is time to move on. The longer we are stuck in such an unhappy situation, the more we will blame Buddhism, instead of looking deeper into our minds. The point is that Buddhism is how we live, speak and think.

We should also be wary of teachers who are false (ignorant or lacking mindfulness) or weak (not keeping to the precepts) or uninspired (takes the Dharma merely as a classroom subject). Those who blindly follow others, no matter what their religion, are only preparing themselves for impending failure, sadness and suffering. Please reflect on this humorous story circulating the Internet, which I find (wittingly or unwittingly) point to some deep eye-opening wisdom.

Two blind pilots wearing dark glasses enter the plane, one with a guide-dog and another with a cane. Nervous laughter spreads through the cabin. The men enter the cockpit, the door closes and the engines start up. The passengers begin glancing nervously around, searching for some sign that this is just a little practical joke. None is forthcoming.

The plane gathers speed down the runway and those at the window seats realize they're headed straight for the water's edge. As it begins to look as though the plane will plough into the water, panicked screams fill the cabin. Then, the plane lifts smoothly into the air.

The passengers relax and laugh sheepishly and soon all retreat into their magazines, secure in the knowledge that the plane is in good hands. In the cockpit, one of the blind pilots then says to the other, "You know, Bob, one of these days, they're gonna scream too late and we're all gonna die."

There are many Buddhisms today: what we need is the Dharma that opens our eyes and liberates us from ignorance and suffering.

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