

## **All the World's a Stage**

by Piya Tan

A last-minute PODZ Group Pre-mentoring session (GPMS) had me cancel my attending the UN Day of Vesak (UNDV) in Bangkok in early May 2009, hosted by my alma mater, the Mahachulalongkorn Buddhist University. Two good friends of mine, Angie Monksfield (outspoken president of the Buddhist Fellowship) and John Whalen-Bridge (socially-engaged literature professor at the National University of Singapore) presented papers at the UNDV conference.

Angie spoke with characteristic conviction why monastics should be exemplary models for everyone. She highlighted the huge embarrassment to Buddhists in Singapore when a prominent local monk, earning a sizeable monthly salary for running a charity, has been charged with a number of cases of financial dishonesty. With poetic justice, as it were, the monk in question was present in the audience, too! How many of us could have spoken into the horse's mouth on the world stage? <sup>1</sup>

John spoke on the skillful means of Buddhist monastics staging open protests against oppression and injustice towards their religion and country.

Both papers were given approving nods by the more open-minded, but rebuked by the more politically correct. I will spend the rest of this reflection responding to John's essay because he has asked to, and partly because I feel his paper is insightful.

Why do Buddhist monks, John asks, who are supposed to have achieved some level of "permanent peacefulness" or disciplined enough to suppress anger or feel shame, could show their anger publicly? Monks in Tibet, Myanmar and Korea, for example, have been involved in conflicts "fueled by colonial resentment and geo-political maneuvering."

The first reason is found in just what has been said: Since Buddhist monks "conveniently signify the human capacity for self-pacification, that becomes, in the breach, highly dramatic first-page copy." When a monk awakens to nirvana, it is not news; when they are involved in politics, it is news, simply because they are not supposed to do so.

Monk, in other words, can be successful "performers," too. This is especially true so long as their expression of anger seems "reasonable" and they do not turn into violence in a way that make victims of others.

The "Angry Monk Syndrome," says John, has beneficial results for protesting monks for two reasons: (1) a sympathetic viewer will not blame the monks but rather the oppressing state. (2) The mass media is not Buddhist to a significant degree, and so need not be overly concerned that

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<sup>1</sup> Angie Monksfield's "Buddhist Approach to Economic Crisis:  
[http://www.icundv.com/seminar\\_detail.php?smt\\_id=48](http://www.icundv.com/seminar_detail.php?smt_id=48)

Buddhist monks are betraying Buddhist principles. The important thing is that the monks are perceived as harmless, which reinforces their victimhood.

John recalls an almost amusing incident when, as one of the pro-choice activists battling against pro-life Christian fundamentalists in Los Angeles in the late 1980s. The pro-choicers would try to be at the clinic that the pro-lifers intended to close down to peacefully stop them. However, if on that day the media refused to show up, both parties would call off their confrontation. It takes three to tango. The battle is symbolic of our beliefs and vision, and the world is our stage.<sup>2</sup>

My question now is: what if the theatrics do not work? Answer: We have occasions when the Buddhist action is non-theatrically real and painful. A classic case here is that of Vietnam of the early 1960s. The excessively partisan Catholic and anti-Buddhist Ngo Dinh Diem government persecuted the Buddhists.

The Vatican flag was regularly flown at all major public events in South Vietnam, and Diem had dedicated the predominantly Buddhist country to the Virgin Mary in 1959. In 1963, the Buddhists were not even allowed to fly the Buddhist flag on Vesak Day. When a group of unarmed Buddhists protested in Hue, the army and police fired guns and launched grenades into the crowd, resulting in deaths.

When all Buddhist efforts failed to end the government's persecutions, the monk [Thich Quang Duc](#), peacefully burnt himself in public. This was followed by more self-immolations. (The "First Lady," Ngo Dinh Nhu, said that she would "clap hands at seeing another monk barbecue show.") All this finally led to the Diem government's downfall that same year.

This is a powerful lesson for us. When we are persecuted by others, let us remember Thich Quang Duc<sup>3</sup>; and before we go on persecute others, let us remember Thich Quang Duc, too. The burning can start on either side, even from the most pacific, when pushed to the edge.

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<sup>2</sup> John Whalen-Bridge's "Angry Monk Syndrome' on the World Stage':

[http://www.icundv.com/seminar\\_detail.php?smt\\_id=61](http://www.icundv.com/seminar_detail.php?smt_id=61)

<sup>3</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Th%C3%ADch\\_Qu%E1%BA%A3ng\\_%C4%90%E1%BB%A9c](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Th%C3%ADch_Qu%E1%BA%A3ng_%C4%90%E1%BB%A9c)