

Not By Works Alone

by Piya Tan

After years of living in Singapore, leading a semi-reclusive life of translating and teaching the early Buddhist suttas, and supporting my family as a lay Dharma teacher and meditation therapist, we (my wife, two young sons and myself) joined a full day trip to Johor (the Malaysian state just north of Singapore).

This trip was a very successful one because everything turned out just right. It was a weekend, and I had no teaching, counseling, family or urgent task. But the main reason I accepted the invitation was that it was from a remarkable Dharma-inspired practising Buddhist.

I will call him Sudhana for reasons you will discover if you read between the lines of this reflection. He is one of the mature adults who have been attending my Dharma courses and Sutta classes, and truly benefitted from them. Let me say that his whole life is changed by the Dharma he tasted.

He is a better husband, a better father, a better family man, a better worker, a better friend, and of course a better person. Yes, the thought of becoming a monk does arise in Sudhana's mind, but he well knows that walking the humble path of streamwinning puts him well ahead of the many yellow-necks who haunt us today. [See note 1]

How do you know the Dharma has changed a person's life? He will consistently tell you he is happy. He lost a bundle in the recent global financial collapse. But unlike others who put \$100 into the donation box to con "the Buddha" into giving him a million in return, Sudhana says that his loss is his dana to the economy!

How do you know the Dharma has changed a person's life? You are happy when you meet him, or even think of him. No, I am not talking about how we feel when we towards a famous religious master, or our favourite pop star, or a VIP politician who just shook our hand. That is admiration and self-satisfaction.

Of course, there's nothing wrong with just that. But I'm talking about a sense of deep happiness that makes us so fulfilled with a calm joy that we feel do not need anything else in the world.

We often enjoy being before a crowd, being the centre of attention; we enjoying being a noble tasking at trying change people's lives; we enjoy the power of teachings we do not understand; we are thrilled at the presence of those we canonise as arhats and living masters. The point is we should see a Dharma-moved change in our lives. If we lack emotional independence, we will always be dependent on an external power figure.

Let me come back to Sudhana. He is an assertively compassionate person who would gently and patiently talk Dharma to his work colleagues and to anyone who cares to ask, and yet does not dominate any conversation.

Oh, yes he is a consistent meditator, that is, he is sits in mindfulness whenever there is an opportunity. This is the real source of his miraculous change and spiritual strength. Although he is not as intellectually prone as I am to be, our mutual Dharma interest melds our minds together in a Sutta study. His attention span is remarkable, which is helped by the fact that he always ensures his handphone is switched off for better reception of the Dharma,

Sudhana is not a social worker or a fund-attracting CEO, who would break any precept to help others. On the contrary, he is an amazing simple, calm yet firm person who is inspired not to break any of the precepts, even when helping others, and who uses the eight precepts to lost weight, bodily and mentally.

Sudhana may not remember the exact title or reference of the (Saddha) Janussoni Sutta (A 10.177), but he certainly knows that if we do only good works, no matter how good, but do not keep to the precepts, we will be reborn with just rewards: we will be well loved, well cared for, well provided for as a loving pet (an elephant, horse, cow, dog, cat etc)!

Which reminds me: please treat your pet well, because it is likely to have been such a person in its past life. Elsewhere I have written about how our pets can go to heaven. [See note 2]

So what is the vital difference between good works and moral virtue? Good works is mainly our benefitting from the misfortune and badness of others, while our moral virtue is self-respect and other-respect that bring us untold spiritual happiness. No matter how “good” a worker we may be, without moral virtue, we but look good in the bad of others. We are “good” because of the bad of others! We have nothing to give really. People may think we are “good,” but even we do not even know who we really are.

Maybe that is why we do good works famously. But when we are morally virtuous, our actions are more easily guided by the clear calm of the Dharma: it gives meaning and truth to good works. For, we are showing others their own goodness. We are like two clear mirrors facing each other.

By the way, you may try, out of evolutionary curiosity or lack of free will, to find out who Sudhana really is. This does not matter; anyway; for, my point is that Sudhana is a true seeker, which you yourself are, or can be. I’m not talking about a person, but a type of individual.

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Note 1:

See Dakkhina Vibhanga Sutta (M 142.8/3:256 = SD 1.9):

<http://dharmafarer.googlepages.com/1.9DakkhinavibhangaSm142piya.pdf>

Jivika Sutta (It 3.5.2/89 f) = SD 28.9b:

<http://earlypalisutta.googlepages.com/28.9bJivikaSIt91piya.pdf>

Note 2:

See “Animals go to heaven,” Reflection 090121: see

<http://piyaweklyreflection.googlepages.com/090121AnimalsGoToHeaven.pdf>