

Should We Modernize The Buddha's Teaching?

by Piya Tan

Why is it that some feel that Buddhism should be taught and practised “as is” even today, while some think that we should “modernize” it? There are some clear and vital patterns in these two attitudes.

Those who feel that Buddhism should be experienced “as is” even today, generally make an effort to study the early Teachings more carefully and thoroughly, and give the Suttas a very high priority. They also have some commitment to proper meditation and mindfulness practice.

Those who think that we should “modernize” Buddhism generally give little or no priority to the early Teachings. They often quote “the Buddha” without any references, often simply making self-made statements that suit their agenda.

While the “as is” Buddhists are generally inspired by teachings and inner peaceful Dharma experiences, the “modernist” Buddhists generally are more excited by successful personalities, exuberant activities and fund-raising. These are of course not bad in themselves, and they have their place in the Buddhist mission.

But to give them a high priority in our Buddhist lives is like a carpenter worshipping his hammer, chisel, and other tools, cleaning and polishing them, neatly displaying them, and showing them off to friends, but almost never practising or working with them!

Those who try to modernize the Buddha's Teachings are as if trying to touch up or paint over the Mona Lisa to reflect our times, or remove chunks of the Borobudur and replace them with modern structures. The Buddha Dharma is a classic, and should remain so.

If we try to change too much of a classic teaching, especially one that is wholesome and works well, then we are likely to be constantly dissatisfied with our efforts. This clearly explains why we see many monastics today trying to modernize themselves, such as becoming academic scholars, social workers, musicians, and being engaged with “society.”

The early monastics are no academic scholars, no social workers, no musicians, and not engaged with society—they are renunciants. They are good meditators, wise teachers, and compassionate spiritual friends. The good works they do are based on morally virtuous lives. They certainly do not have any bank accounts. This way they give much better spiritual help to society, instead of exploiting it.

Modernist monastics who are engaged in the world would find that they soon get tired and bored with it, simply because they lack the moral virtue and wisdom that immunize them from being troubled by worldly vicissitudes (gain and loss, fame and obscurity, happiness and sorrow, praise and blame).

This also explains why I keep meeting with monastics wherever I go: the Science Centre (and its Omni Theatre), the Sentosa Resort, the Giant shopping mall, crowded computer fairs, and many such places. I often see brown-robed monks, orange-robed monks, grey-dressed monastics, gelongs and the like, often travelling or walking with women, using their phones and video cameras.

I mention this because I think this is becoming a trend. And the reason why they do this is clear enough: they are bored with their religious life-styles. So they need some “recreation.” Someone even asked me if they could make copies of this, and hand them to the monastics they meet in such “agocara” places, where they are not supposed to be! In terms of cleaning our own home, I think this is a very good idea!

My point, echoed by a growing number of concerned Buddhists and young people, is that, to become a monastic, a true renunciant, is surely the best way to get out of suffering and work towards awakening. Furthermore, monastics should be good and morally virtuous examples for lay people, so that we are inspired to become better practitioners ourselves. We need to constantly remind the monastics about this.

True renunciant monastics are like “heart” specialists who have healed themselves to a large degree. As such, they are in a better position to heal us. But if they keep breaking the rules, and lay people encourage or accept this, then in the end, what is the difference between the monastic and the lay? (By the way, lay people who encourage monastics to break their precepts are creating very bad karma for themselves, too.)

We cannot rest smugly on the statistics that about half of Singapore are “Buddhist”—what kind of Buddhist? Are they mostly ritualistic devotees and temple followers, who do not even know who the Buddha really is, much less the Dharma? Are their lives really changed for the better?

Without the Dharma, we are mostly talking heads. Inspired by the Dharma, we speak with our hearts and touch others so that their lives truly change for the better. We need not change the Buddha Dharma, but we surely need to change ourselves.

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