

Degree of Happiness

by Piya Tan

More than once, I have heard people tell me that the suttas are “academic.” At first, I found this confusing, as “academic” is a good word which has to do with learning, especially deep learning, the first stage of Buddhist training. What is confusing is that the word “academic” is used in a negative sense. The sense, whether the speaker is aware of or not, is probably, it is “too deep to be understood or be of any use.”

The next confusion, even a graver one, is that this negative sense is applied to the suttas, or more exactly, my annotated translations of the Pali suttas. The point is that many western Buddhists have communicated with me that they find the Sutta Discovery (SD) translations very useful to them. Monks, especially forest monks, in Australia, USA, Sri Lanka, Europe and Malaysia, are using these SD translations.

The forest monks of the Na-Uyana Forest Hermitage in Sri Lanka, for example, have asked my permission for their reading and recording of these translations. This is a great idea, as suttas are best heard, rather than read, and can be useful as a support for meditation practice.

However, I am not alone in noticing the difficulties that some people face when studying the suttas. Many Buddhists have attended academic courses on Buddhist Studies here in Singapore. The trend in such courses, too, is telling. A few hundred might sign up for the course, but the number will dramatically dwindle to a core of ten or fifteen people, and on the higher levels, often there is only a couple of students.

Many people give up on such courses, I am told, because the teachers are “boring.” This of course depends on how these students define “interesting.” Suffice it here to say that many expect such courses to present Buddhism to them like “instant noodles.” They see Buddhism as packets of information to be easily stored or consumed, and then to get back to their daily business.

Academic Buddhism can easily become boring if we lack a deep interest in it, or if we lack the necessary attention span and writing skills. Many of these courses lead to a diploma, some to a degree, and even beyond. Of course those who have a love for learning would be quite happy with just that. But what happens after that?

For those centres that see such academic programmes as a part of their on-going fund-raising priorities, all this is no problem. Most expensive newspapers advertisements for the courses are sponsored. Hundreds of initial students pay a generous amount as registration and course fees. The drop-out is in fact a blessing for the lecturers who then have a smaller class. The graduates are then recruited to help run the centre and attract more funds through further academic programmes. As such, these academic programmes are actually successful.

However, I also notice another interesting thing. Many of the graduates of such academic courses are not very happy people, as they often suffer from what I call “Vimalakirti’s illness.” The graduates often speak or teach at their own centres and at other places. They become aware that the audience’s level of Dharma understanding

is low and confusing, and there is much superstition and materialism (“instant noodle” Buddhism).

Some graduates, on attaining their degrees, begin to question, “What next?” It is almost the kind of feeling we get after a great movie. The movie ends, the lights come on, the doors open, and we are back in real life. Nothing has changed really.

The point is that “book Buddhism” in itself can neither get us a good job nor lasting happiness. The joyful interest only grows when we are touched by the life-blood of the suttas and meditation, and a spiritual friendship with inspired Buddhists. With the right key, we open the doors to the suttas. That right key is a positive attitude and great desire to learn the Dharma, best done through the suttas.

The first and last messages of the Buddha is “Take the Dharma, take yourself, as refuge” (S 6.2; D 16.2.2, also D 16.6.1). Notice “refuge” is singular, which means that Dharma and self-effort go together. The suttas are the dishes of Dharma; only after having tasted them, you will know how nourishing they are. The Buddha has given us great recipes; we only need get the right ingredients, together prepare the meal, and enjoy it in good health and happiness. Then we truly have a high degree of happiness.

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