

The best stories are unfinished

by Piya Tan

There is an important difference between art and truth. It is the same significant difference that separates literature and religion (or better spirituality). Art and literature, for example, try to present truth through stories (or narratives, as they say). We feel pleased when we like the story

But we often stop there: a story pleases us and that's it. We tend to take Buddhism, too, as a story. It pleases us, or rather a certain aspect of it, our perception of it pleases us, and we forget about the rest, especially the most important aspect of it.

Take **the story of the dog-tooth relic**, for example. A young man goes on a pilgrimage to Gaya, and his old mother asks him to bring back a Buddha relic from there. He completes his pilgrimage but forgets his mother's request. So along the way, he finds the skull of a dead dog and takes one of its teeth and gives it to his mother.

His mother joyfully worships it and a rainbow appears over their house. Prayers are answered, and more people come and more prayers are answered. The dog-tooth relic became a sensation and the house a holy place.

I find this story very troubling. For a simple reason, it is based on an outright lie, even if it is a pious one. Such a story may be misconstrued that it is all right to lie, if it is to make someone happy. Perhaps, if we limit the moral to "filial piety", it is less the moral problem.

The point is that there is, in fact, a better way for the story to end. I would have retold the story in this way. The young returns home with the dog-tooth and openly tells his mother:

"Mom, there are no more Buddha relics available in Bodhgaya. But I found this beautiful bone in the holy land. As you know if you regard this as symbolizing the Buddha, it becomes a relic "image" (like a Buddha image)."

If the mother is really full of faith (which is very likely the case), then she would not be too concerned with this rationalization. It is from the holy land, anyway. Moreover, it is based on truth, and is not a commercializing attempt.

During the recent "Buddha" relic controversy with the Buddha Relic Temple, the abbot there answered something like: *Since I take it to be a Buddha relic, it IS a Buddha relic.* We call this

"reifying" the Buddha. Sadly such an ultimatum tends to divide us into thinkers and non-thinkers, into wisdom versus faith.

There is an important difference between a "good" story and a "wholesome" story. A

good story moves you into the author's bias; a wholesome story moves you to goodness. An author may be biased by greed, hate or delusion. Goodness frees you from greed, hate, and delusion.

The point is that the word is not the thing. Otherwise, anyone reading the word would come to the same conclusion. We come to our own conclusions depending on whether we have greed, hate or delusion, or non-greed non-hate, non-delusion.

If you do not like what I have written here: ask yourself *why*?
If you like what I have written here: ask yourself *why*, too.

You will find your own answer and liberation there, not in the words.

We have to listen beyond the words, to the truth.
This week, we will study a Sutta on how a great disciple listens to the Dharma, and sees beyond the words, and he cries with joy as a result!

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