

Voice of Sanity

*Venerable U Bodhinyana**

There are many people, adhering the popular form of Buddhism, who recite the *sutta*, *udana*, *paṭṭhāna*, *paritta*, etc., the whole day long or even days or weeks together, who do not seem to know the essence of the words that are inherent in it. As the mere talking about the food will not appease hunger, and these are the things unskilled people are doing. Mere reciting without practice may be likened to a phantasm, a magical delusion, a flash of lightning, or dewdrops. Now, what we ought to do with it is to carry, apply and translate it into practice with our calm, clean, clear and cool mind, whether we recite it or not it matters little.

When we repeat some thing mechanically, as we repeat the word, gradually the brain, through repetition, becomes dull and quiet; and that quietness is something marvellous to us. We think we have achieved some tremendous thing and we go around repeating this to others, and the poor gullible people say, 'Yes, Yes'. Can we discard all this nonsense?

Suppose a man got sick and he goes to a renowned physician for consultation. Upon examination the physician out of compassion wrote down a long list of (i) medicine, (ii) some old habits that he should avoid, such as – smoking, coffee etc., (iii) some new things he should adopt, such as – doing light exercise, eating a lot of vegetables and fruits and etc. The sick man without buying the medicine returns home and holding the prescription he starts reading it over and over again while living his life as usual. A few days later one of his neighbours also got sick and consults the same good physician, and amazingly this person is given the same prescription. But unlike him, his neighbour takes medicine properly, avoids the unhealthy habits and adapts new things into his day-to-day life. He is also particular in his effort not to be un-forgetful in living his life as advised by his physician. And whenever, he forgets it, he would pick up the prescription and go through it mindfully. Not long after this man got cured and went to see his neighbour. He felt pity for him, who is lying in the bed reciting his prescription, counting days and his family have given up hope.

He who knows the Dhamma attaches not to rituals (*sīlabbataparāmāsa*¹ or *sīlabbatupādāna*²), whose mind functions under perfect views (*sammā-diṭṭhi*³) and has removed all skeptical doubts (*vicikicchā*⁴) so that he is free of defilement and

* The President of the **Arakanese Research Society of Bangladesh**, General Secretary of **Buddhist Peace Fellowship of Bangladesh, Light of Sangha** and also involved with various organisations. Formerly, (while he was a layperson) he was known as Maung Than Aye, B.Com. (Honours), M.Com. Since his ordination as a *bhikkhu* (monk) he has been a leading proponent of **Engaged Dhamma** [distinct from popular Buddhism] in Bangladesh. He can be reached at email: u_bodhinyana@yahoo.com This paper was published in Rakhaing Review in 2005.

¹ One of the ten Fetters (*samyojana*).

² One of the four Clinging (*upādāna*).

³ One of the Noble Eightfold Path (*ariya aṭṭhangika magga*).

⁴ One of the ten Fetters and also one of the five Mental Hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*).

contamination, such person may be said to have realised his Mind-essence. The profound teaching of the Buddha has nothing to do with the written language. Since the vast treasure of his teaching were not written down in any text during the lifetime of the Buddha. So the lip-repetition of the text ends with its pronunciation, but, he whose thought is freed from illusion, by comprehending its essence, becomes an awakened one. Thus, he recites the *suttas* and the rest with his mouth and holds its teachings as its refuge, and exercises it in his deeds. So he is kind in his words, superb in his deeds and is peaceful in his mind.

Once, the Buddha taught his disciple Ariṭṭha⁵ as follows: “Now herein, bhikkhus, certain misguided ones learn the Norms (*dhamma*) by heart, to wit: the discourses (*sutta*), the songs (*geyya*), the exposition (*veyyākaraṇa*), the verses (*gatha*), the paeans of joy (*udana*), the words of the Master (*itivuttaka*), the birth-tails (*jakata*), the marvels (*abbhutadhamma*), the miscellanies (*vedalla*).

“Thus learning them by heart they do not by wisdom investigate their meaning: they do not take interest therein: just for the sake of being free from reproach they learn the Norm by heart: just for the profit of pouring out a flood of gossip.

“But as to the essence of the Doctrine which thus they learn by heart, they have no part nor lot in that. The teachings are ill grasped by them and lead to their loss and suffering for many a long day. Why so? Because of, wrongly grasping the teachings, bhikkhus.

“Just as, bhikkhus, a man in need of water-snakes, searching for water-snakes, going about in quest of them, sees a big water-snake and grasps it by the body or the tail: and that water-snake turns back on him and bites him in the hand or arm or some other limb, and owing to that he comes by his death or suffering that ends in death. And why? Because, bhikkhus, he wrongly grasped the snake.

“Even so, bhikkhus, in this case some misguided ones (foolish people) learn the Norm by heart, and come to suffer because they grasp it wrongly.”

If a homeless brother (bhikkhu), forgetting himself, lapses into greed, gives way to anger, cherish resentment, jealousy, conceit, self-praise, or insincerity, he is carrying a keen-two-edged sword only covered by a robe. One is not a homeless brother simply because he wears a monk’s rags and carries a begging bowl; he is not a homeless brother just because he recites scriptures glibly; he is only a man of straw.⁶

Though he dresses like a monk, but does not exercise the teachings of the Buddha; where could the lay people find *saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi* – the refuge in the Sangha in him? These hypocrites have assumed a religious garb only for the sake of the honour attending it, and – their aim being merely for the acquisition of wealth, fame, and greatness – having succeeded in learning by heart the contexts of a volume or two or

⁵ *Alagaddūpamasuttaṃ 238, Majjhima Nikāya, i.* in WOODWARD, F. E., *Some Sayings of the Buddha* (Oxford University Press, London. 1925), 284-5.

⁶ GODDARD, Dwight (ed.), *The Buddhist Bible* (Thetford, Vermont, USA, 1938), 626.

three; and who, having strong sectarian feelings, strive to win in their own sect and defeat the opponents.

The masses following the popular form of Buddhism find it easy in reciting *tisarāna*, while for the skilled person it is like climbing up the Himalayas and when he does so, he is on top of the world. So when he recites in taking refuge in the Buddha, he knows his desire should be for his wisdom; when taking refuge in the Dhamma, his desire should be to realise its truth; likewise when he takes refuge in Sangha, his desire should be to share its peaceful fellowship unobstructed by any selfish interests.

There is a story in *Dhammapada*, which runs thus: There were two bhikkhus – one a worldling (*putthujana*) but well versed in the Dhamma, the other a saint (Arahant) though not so erudite. The worldling did not practice what he knew; the one who knew little practiced the Dhamma and, realized Nibbāna, enjoying the fruit of the Holy life. The scholarly bhikkhu desired to embarrass the other by putting some intricate questions in the presence of the Buddha. Knowing well his base motive, the Buddha raised some questions connected with the realisation of the Dhamma. The saint answered them all from personal experience, but the other could not as he had not attained to any Paths of Sainthood. Thereupon the Buddha praised the saint who had practiced his teaching by uttering the following verses:

Bahum pi ce sahitaṃ bhāsamāno, na takkarō hoti naro pamatto;

Gopō 'vo gāvo gaṇayaṃ paresaṃ, na bhāgavā sāmāññaṃ hoti.

- Though much he recites the Sacred Texts but acts not accordingly, that heedless man is like a cowherd who counts others' kine. He has no share in the fruits of the Holy Life.⁷ And;

Appam pi ce sahitaṃ bhāsamāno, dhammassa hoti anudhammacārī;

Rāgañ ca dosaṃ ca pahāya mohaṃ, sammappajāno suvimuttacitto;

Anupādiyāno idha vā huraṃ vā, sa bhāgavā sāmāññaṃ hoti.

- Though little he recites the Sacred Texts, but acts in accordance with the teaching, forsaking lust, hatred and ignorance, truly knowing, with mind well freed, clinging to naught here and thereafter, he shares the fruits of the Holy Life.⁸

People under ignorance and delusion do not see this; they recite with their mouth generating and transforming script into sound, while their minds are thickly veiled by erroneous views and deeply rooted infections, just as the sun is often veiled by clouds and unable to show its splendor until the wind blows the clouds away. To utter pleasant words without practicing them is like a fine flower without fragrance.

⁷ Dhammapada:19, in NARADA, Thera: *The Dhammapada-PĀLI text & translation with stories in brief & notes*, (1993) reprinted by Corporate Body of the Buddha Education Foundation, Taiwan R.O.C., 20.

⁸ Dhammapada:20 in *Ibid.*, 21.