

This, too, will “not” pass!

[A revised and expanded version of an Early Buddhism FB page post, fb180705.]

A US friend of mine was wondering if Buddhists should voice their concern and actively participate in political and social situations when there is a serious need to. When a political or social situation comes to such a head—and you can freely voice yourself—you should, of course, do what needs to be done.

He was especially pissed off by the popular saying, “This, too, will pass,” which seems to be a cop-out or an excuse for not rocking the boat: we do not make any effort to change things, or fear what others may say or think of us. This is a characteristic of “populist” Buddhism that only cares for itself or the guru at the cost of others’ welfare and freedom.

Pawn of the powerful

Throughout history, religion is often known to support the powerful. Generally, Buddhism tends or tries to be apolitical. However, because of its widespread influence, the powers that be often see it to their benefit to “patronize” Buddhism, even making it a state religion (which is the beginning of the end of Buddhism in that country or empire).

Emperor Kanishka (2nd century CE) of the Kushan empire used Buddhism, but also supported other popular religions, like Manichaeism which influenced Buddhism. This was one of the major causes for the rise of Mahayana, where the Buddha is relegated to an almost “unenlightened” status, lesser than even a Bodhisattva! This is where Buddhism is defined by the powerful, and, hence, it is no more the Buddha’s teaching in the true practical sense.

Consider the fate of Buddhism in China, Korea and Japan, and now in Tibet—and of course, in India. The weight of wealth, power and patronage crushed Buddhism to the dust in these countries, an Ozymandias¹ of the times, every time. The same is happening right now to much of “modern” urban Buddhism today.

Non-violent activism

However, in an open society like the US, UK and Western Europe, Buddhists are often and rightly involved in social activism. It is important, when we are socially active, to keep to the 5 precepts—no violence of any kind and have a mind of great compassion (like the Buddha).

We should have a mind of great compassion, recalling the noble aspirations of other activists, and the great activists of the past who have sacrificed so much to better our society today: freedom from religious domination, from slavery, from colour discrimination; and universal suffrage (women allowed to vote), open education, and so on.

¹ “Ozymandias” (1818) was a poem by English poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley, about a desert traveler who comes across the ruins of a great ancient empire (probably the great Persian empire before the time of Alexander the Great), but only some ruins remained of it. See R 146.

Spiritual activism

A couple of respected monks have told me that “silence is no option,” and I am inspired by this. I often see my work as “spiritual” activism, especially my essays, and sometimes in the Sutta Discovery (SD) translations, when critically analyse how some of us are turning the Buddha on his head. For this reason, I think, some mainstream Buddhists and “upper class” clergy pretend that the Sutta Discovery series does not exist.

The saying, “This, too, will pass,” clearly does not apply to situations where our lives, safety and freedom are in jeopardy. Then, we cannot “let it pass” but must do something sensible about it. However, we may “let it pass” when we are faced with negative emotions or a helpless loss. In other words, “this too will pass” is what we are likely to say when we are unwilling or unable to do anything about ourselves or a situation—when we are helpless.

The Buddha’s teaching

Early Buddhism speaks of the 3 unwholesome roots—greed, hate and delusion. Whenever we break the precepts or do something bad, our action is rooted in either greed or hate, and almost always in delusion, if we are still unawakened. However, when we habitually or properly cultivate lovingkindness, we are likely to weaken such an unwholesome root, or even stops its negative effects.

Of the effects of actions thus rooted in these 3 roots, we can safely say that those rooted in hate will quickly dissipate—“This, too, will end”—especially when we do not add fuel to the fire of hate. However, this will not work with the effects of negative karma rooted in desire (that is, lust). When we do nothing about it, it will not pass. Instead, it will grow and overwhelm us. We have to do something about it, such as mindfully turn our mind to something more wholesome and counteractive to that mind of greed.

When not to let it pass

The Buddha reminds us—in **the Bhaddekaratta Sutta**, for example—never to “let it pass” without us watching its rise and fall. This is helpful for bringing us closer to the path of awakening.²

Then, there is this famous teaching from **the Cūḷa Vedalla Sutta** (M 44):

A pleasant feeling is pleasant when it persists, painful when it changes;
A painful feeling is painful when it persists, pleasant when it changes;
A neutral feeling is pleasant when we know it not, painful when we know it. (M 44,24)³

Hence, whether pleasure or pain, happiness or sorrow, arises—this, too, shall pass.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

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² **Bhadd’eka,ratta Sutta** (M 131), [SD 8.9](#).

³ **Cūḷa Vedalla Sutta** (M 44,24) + [SD 40a.9 \(2.6.2\)](#).