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# EASTERN HORIZON

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**EASTERN HORIZON PUBLICATION BOARD**

- CHAIRMAN** : Dr. Ong See Yew
- EDITOR** : B. Liow <Bennyliow@gmail.com>
- SUB-EDITORS** : Tan Yang Wah / Dr. Ong Puay Liu
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- ART DIRECTOR** : Geam Yong Koon
- PUBLISHER** : YBAM <ybam@ybam.org.my>
- PRINTER** : Vivar Printing Sdn Bhd(125107-D)  
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**COVER DESIGN** : Geam Yong Koon

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The Editor  
**EASTERN HORIZON**  
 Young Buddhist Association of Malaysia  
 9, Jalan SS 25/24, Taman Mayang,  
 47301 Petaling Jaya, Selangor, MALAYSIA  
 Tel : (603) 7804 9154  
 Fax : (603) 7804 9021  
 Email : admin@easternhorizon.org or  
 Benny Liow <Bennyliow@gmail.com>  
 Website : www.easternhorizon.org



*Venerable Hiriko was born in Slovenia, in 1985, and ordained as a bhikkhu in 2006 in the UK. Currently he is residing in Amaravati, UK.*



# “WHO AM I TO JUDGE?”

*By Venerable Bhikkhu Hiriko*

When we talk about the Dhamma as being the Truth, that doesn't mean that we are talking about a particularly selected philosophy which could be regarded as belonging to a single person or to a single community. “Dhamma,” as a word, is only a conventional term for something that we hold as our inspiration, something in which we believe as being good, something that has no birth nor death, pure, perfect, universal, without any form of personality and that which is beyond human limitation. Where there is no desire, no aversion and no ignorance.

In the Buddha's Dispensation we use the word Dhamma for the fundamental Truth, and the Buddha is the voice of the Truth. Dhamma is the Pali word for “nature”, nature as it is, there is nothing to add to it, nothing to take away from it. Also it is the “law of nature”: when we do good, the good comes back to us, and when we do bad, the bad comes back to us. We're not talking about having a Judge: but the Dhamma is like a mirror that reflects back what we are and what we have done. Therefore we say that at the right time we all will be fairly judged. But if we are the one who is the judge, then judgement will come back to us. And “Buddha” is the Pali word for “awakened”, being awakened to the Truth and being beyond judgements.



Therefore, who could claim to have power over the Dhamma? Those with desires? Those who are seeking gains for their own advantages? But if the Dhamma is being owned then surely we cannot regard it as unlimited, and it is therefore not Ultimate. Dhamma is not a Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu nor even Buddhist thing. If one doesn't see the Truth for himself, but only holds a belief, how could he claim to know the right path and regard himself as being the right person to defend and advocate Dhamma? (Reverend Vacchāyana answered to the traveller, "Who am I to praise the recluse Gotama? The recluse Gotama is praised by the wise as best among gods and best among humans." (MN 27)) Moreover, who would then dare to think to be the righteous judge of the Dhamma? Who could have a monopoly on universal virtues, such as love, compassion, joy and peace?

I write this having in my mind the Pope's visit to Sri Lanka in January 2015, where he took an opportunity to meet with representatives of Buddhists, Christians, Muslims and Hindus at the Interfaith meeting. At that meeting everyone expressed the view that all traditions share the same values such as love, self-sacrifice, kindness, peace and friendship, and all disowned evil, hatred, jealousy and pride. Pope Francis expressed his respect to other religions, rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions, and manner of life and conduct. He said that he is not calling for a single mindset – i.e. that we need to be united under one name – but to respect different views and to engage in dialogue that promotes mutual understanding.

*"The recluse Gotama is praised by the wise as best among gods and best among humans"*



The Pope also said, “as experience has shown, for such dialogue and encounter to be effective, it must be grounded in a full and forthright presentation of our respective convictions. Certainly, such dialogue will accentuate how varied our beliefs, traditions and practices are.”<sup>1</sup> Though all representatives were encouraged to recognize common values, it is most important to recognize that we cannot blindly hold on to any particular views and practices and stick with them, especially if they are not leading us to self-realization. It is an encouragement to recognize that there are limitations in beliefs. Respect is not developed just by saying: “OK guys, lets just talk about what we have in common,” but by admitting that we are still seekers, that we are still students. And just this mutual recognition of weaknesses can bring also mutual understanding, respect, compassion, tolerance and connect us closer to the Truth.

However, unfortunately it can happen anywhere on the globe, that religions or philosophies while they aim to bring about peace in the World, they end up being caught in their own limited views and conventions. They could imagine that they ought to find in themselves the absolute omnipotence. They might identify themselves with their “right ways” and are taking it as it is their property or the property of their ancestors. No doubt their faith in “the purity” is strong, but faith itself with deficient wisdom is the same as we would perform the ritualistic worship of a car: having such an attitude we would never enter into it and never drive it to the final destination. In such way we are fixed to the vehicle being locked in the garage and we get worried if it gets any scratch. But the Buddha would urge us to take the journey and go in the right direction and get to the final destination. Then, when we arrived, we wouldn’t need the vehicle any more (cf. MN 22:13). The vehicle itself is not the goal – the need to have everyone else bow to our judgement and accept our



“If, bhikkhus, others speak in dispraise of me, you should not give way to resentment, displeasure, or animosity against them in your heart. For if you were to become angry or upset in such a situation, you would only be creating an obstacle for yourselves”

<sup>1</sup> *Inter-religious and Ecumenical Gathering in Sri Lanka: Address of His Holiness Pope Francis, 13/1/2015.*



“Wrong grasp of a blade of kusa grass, cuts the hand, likewise the wrongly grasped recluship pulls one to hell”

Nationalists and self-centered people are looking for support for their unskilful views, limited by their own culture. But the fundamental problem actually is not a religion; the problem is stupidity. The Buddha has warned that if we take his teachings for our selfish purposes – even if we quote them correctly – this will lead us into the lower worlds, even to hell: “Wrong grasp of a blade of kusa grass, cuts the hand, likewise the wrongly grasped recluship pulls one to hell” (SN 2:8, verse 274). Isn’t it tragic-comical to see that the loudest “protectors of the Truth,” while aiming for higher levels of existence or beyond it, are actually proudly marching towards the pit hole, the lower worlds?

declaration as law is not the goal either.

Harming man, having wars and violence in the name of Dhamma or God or Truth is a complete contradiction: no Dhamma and no God need our protection! Buddha said, “If, bhikkhus, others speak in dispraise of me, you should not give way to resentment, displeasure, or animosity against them in your heart. For if you were to become angry or upset in such a situation, you would only be creating an obstacle for yourselves” (DN 1). The Buddha isn’t touched by praise and critics: he is independent and he does not need our refuge. Truth is OK in itself, it doesn’t need our distorted opinions to defend such high matters. On the contrary, our opinions would only soil the Dhamma.

Also, if we look at Buddhists, we can see that many forgot the words of the Buddha. Previously we were known in the world as “the peaceful ones,” but now we hear of people or groups who gain fame because of their selfish acts and are destroying, soiling and closing up the openness of the purity. These nationalists and fanatics have become like lady Vedehikā from the story told by the Buddha (MN 21:9). She was formerly known as gentle, humble and modest lady, but later she lost patience and with a rolling pin struck her maid Kali’s head, drawing blood. And friendly Vedehikā then became known as coarse, violent and ruthless. In later occasion the Buddha goes so far with his words, saying: “Monks, even if bandits were to carve you up savagely, limb by limb, with a two-handled saw, he among you who let his heart get angered even at that would not



“Monks, even if bandits were to carve you up savagely, limb by limb, with a two-handled saw, he among you who let his heart get angered even at that would not be doing my bidding”

be doing my bidding” (MN 21:20). There is absolutely no excuse for acting with aversion. The Buddha said that such monks who are like Vedehikā do not honour and respect the Dhamma. But nevertheless, Buddhism became now “Vedehikism”!

Pope Francis also said somewhere over the Atlantic: “Se una persona è gay e cerca il Signore e ha buona volontà, chi sono io per giudicarla?”<sup>2</sup> We can also paraphrase this with: if someone is searching for the truth and has good will, who are we to judge them? These are words of wisdom. These words of the Pope have echoed already for few years, but too few understand the meaning of it. Many would like to think that this is an invitation to be able to do anything what we want and nobody should judge us: we can do, talk, think, whatever we think is right. But... there is a misunderstanding. “Who am I to judge” actually means that I personally have to take responsibility for myself: I reap what I sow and you reap what you sow. We do not point our fingers outward.

The Buddha says that the holy man thinks in such way: “I am the owner of my action, the heir of my action; who has action as one’s origin, action as one’s relative, action as one’s resort; who will be the heir of whatever action, good or bad, that one does. All beings are owners of their action, heirs of their action; all have action as their origin, action as their relative, action as their resort; all will be heirs of whatever action, good or bad, that they do.” (AN 5:57) This means that the Dhamma itself shows the result of our actions, not a man. It puts responsibility on the right place – our own heart.

There is much talk about freedom of expression, which is of course a beautiful quality and is consistent with human dignity and rights, but there is not enough emphasis on responsibility and respect when we want to express our views – people measure their morality only in terms of what is in accordance with the civil

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<sup>2</sup> “If someone is gay, who searches for the Lord and has goodwill, who am I to judge?” (29/7/2013)

law or any other social agreement, but the law of some unity cannot be the last judge. We ourselves will remain both criminals and judges simultaneously, no matter where we live and what we believe in. Some advocate freedom of action, but they kill and steal; other defend freedom of speech, but they lie, making fun out of others, gossip, offend and provoke others; and the third defend freedom of thought, but remain stubborn, arrogant, proud, narcissistic and intolerant. Secular freedom is not the same as the ultimate freedom. If we value freedom of the press, we surely should firstly value mutual human respect. Respect for human dignity, for things which are holy for humankind, for what belongs to their identity and connects them with their ancestors is something that supports mutual trust. And trust leads to skillful dialogue and to the welfare and happiness of many.



“Who am I to judge” actually means that I personally have to take responsibility for myself: I reap what I sow and you reap what you sow. We do not point our fingers outward.

I do not want to suggest that the Buddha and Jesus and other teachers teach about the same thing. This is not the point I am making. But I would like to say that any conventional form has its limitations. Also, Buddhism after 2600 years has become like an old grandfather: it is weaker and its vitality is deteriorating. Therefore in the present time the Buddha-Dhamma can be easily overshadowed by strong materialistic views and by the fictions and illusions of a merely human spirituality with strong encouragement toward sensuality, mental laziness and in developing personal opinions.

Therefore if a man is seeking the Truth, he should not be negligent: question your own integrity, but not the integrity of others, do what is skillful, but not what is unskillful. Also, do listen to other views, not because you have to select your most loved ones, but because they put your own views into perspective and it might help you to see what you are still holding on to. This claim to “omnipotence” is in fact the source of all our sorrows, all our unhappiness, all our dissatisfactions – in short, dukkha. Only mind freed from this secret claim have truth in it.

It is said that Jesus is the shepherd of the sheep (John 10:7) and the Buddha is the leader of the herd (MN 12:9). Both do not desire to cause harm to their flock, but they warn the herd if they see it is heading towards a danger. Therefore, for your sake, listen to good friends. Do develop a generous and virtuous heart. See Dhamma for yourself. Moreover, do not get lost in grief, because Dhamma also forgives, because it is boundless. If our path really leads to “the salvation” and to “the Ultimate,” then we will not need to be afraid. If someone hates us, we accept, love and thank him for it, because this enemy of ours just broke the chain which was binding us to our fixed position and views. When the chains are broken, then peace, or Dhamma, or the Father’s Kingdom (call it as you see fit) opens for us. **EH**