

Ethical giving: the prince and the statue

Below we reprint a story by Oscar Wilde called 'The Happy Prince' (courtesy of *Bodh Gaya News*, <http://www.bodhgaya.news.net/statue/statue05.htm>), about a compassionate statue and his companion the swallow. They collaborated to reduce the suffering in their town, eventually at the expense of the statue's existence. English meditation teacher, Christopher Titmuss uses the story to explore the merits of building a massive statue of the future Buddha Maitreya in Bodh Gaya India, site of the Buddha's enlightenment over 2,500 years ago. This statue was costed at over US\$150 million. At almost 500 feet (152 metres), it was intended to be almost three times the height of the previously largest Buddhist statue at Bamiyan in Afghanistan, destroyed by the Taliban in 2001. The scale of the statue was criticised for its adverse impact on the local water supply, as a hazard for airplanes and as a heat radiator in an area already very hot.

The fate of this statue is now clouded. Its supporters have recently announced that the site may be changed to Kushinagar in Uttar Pradesh, where the Buddha died.

Compassion or delusion?

The cost of this project generated many concerns. Most focussed on the lack of support and involvement with the project by the local population and the incongruity of spending such a large sum in one of the world's most impoverished areas. Some critics complained of the opportunity cost of the project: couldn't more of this vast amount be used to help people more directly?

Supporters of the Maitreya statue say that the motivation for its construction is entirely altruistic. They believe that all—Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike—who see and participate in its construction will benefit

spiritually. They also claim it will attract extra tourists, generating jobs and other spin-offs. As well, the project was designed to incorporate several humanitarian elements, including a hospital, school and clinic.

There is no doubt that religious objects and art can be healing and inspiring, both for the creator and the faithful. It is understandable that many attribute happiness to the sight of such objects. But how many of the people able to make a sizeable donation to this extraordinarily expensive project would rely on faith alone to treat their father's pneumonia, or think that prayer is enough to protect their daughter, bitten by a mad dog, against rabies? How many of the people who seriously believe they can raise US\$150 million would share these beliefs?

Disneyland or salvation?

The answer, almost certainly, is none of them. For people whose basic needs are met, it might seem acceptable—even noble and generous—to raise or donate funds for a statue they believe will give spiritual benefit. But why don't these people think it could be more beneficial to use most of these funds to provide basic health care and education?

A thousand years ago, when few low-cost ways to improve people's lives were known, megaprojects designed to uplift people might have been more justifiable, in both Asia (like the Bamiyan Buddhas) and Europe (such as cathedrals); but today such priorities seem at best misguided and at worst obscene.

While some Buddhist scholars have criticised the Maitreya statue as promoting a kind of Buddhist Disneyland, there been almost no open criticism of this project from senior members within the Buddhist community. It is not as if projects costing US\$150 million are commonplace. Is this silence because they support the priority of

the fundraisers, or do they fear upsetting generous and powerful benefactors? Neither explanation is comforting. The establishment of western Buddhism will not be helped by silence on this issue. Those with the good fortune to live in modest comfort in the West or in Taiwan need to investigate before they endorse such a grandiose scheme. By all means, let's have statues. We might do this for our own pleasure. But if we support the building of a statue for the benefit of someone we don't know, then why don't we give more weight to means such as better health care and education?

Denis contributes the following ... The creation of images for the purpose of enhancing worship is a two-edged sword. In some religions such as Hinduism, religious icons abound, not simply to act as a bridge between devotees and their deity, but as aids to the achievement of yogic states. Judaism has taken an aniconic stance in response to fears of recidivism amongst its early followers, although the Judaic tradition is rich in imagery. Christianity has its statuary as well, though not all Christian sects approve of it. The Buddha recognised that in the Hindu environment from which Buddhism came, to create an image of a religious leader was likely to lead to his eventual elevation to divine or semi-divine status; something he rejected as bound to lead people astray spiritually. Yet in spite of his misgivings, the beautiful Buddhist iconography all over the world attests to the power of images to give meaning to worship for some devotees. Muhammad for his part was insistent that the creation of images was incompatible with direct experience of God, and largely preserved Islam's iconoclastic spirit.

Symbols are part of all religious experience and exercise power over the minds of people. All religions have them even if they are not expressed in artistic or concrete form.

The unhappy prince

by Christopher Titmuss

Oscar Wilde, the beloved 19th century Irish novelist, wrote a touching story called *The Happy Prince* about a tall statue gilded with leaves of fine gold, two bright sapphires for the eyes and a large red ruby on his waist.

One night, a swallow making the long journey down to Egypt, took rest at the foot of statue on a cloudless night. Suddenly and unexpectedly, a drop of water fell on the bird, then another drop, yet there were no clouds in the sky. The swallow looked up and saw the eyes of the Happy Prince were filled with tears. 'Why are you crying', asked the swallow.

The Prince replied that when alive, he lived in the Palace of Sans Souci, where there was no sorrow. 'Now I am a tall statue and I can see all the misery in the city. In a room, I can see a poor woman with her little boy lying very ill with a high fever. But my feet are fastened to this pedestal and I cannot move.

'Please stay tonight and take this ruby fixed to me to the sad mother and her thirsty boy.' The swallow agreed. Taking the ruby, he left it on the table of the poor woman and then, with loving kindness, the swallow flapped his wings above to boy to cool him down.

At the Prince's request, the swallow stayed more days taking the two 1000-year-old India sapphires from the eyes of the Happy Prince to the needy, despite the Prince losing his eyesight. 'There is no mystery so great as misery,' said the Happy Prince. 'Fly over the city and tell me what you see.' The swallow also saw suffering all over the city, so he gave up making the journey to Egypt.

At the request of the Happy Prince, every night the swallow stripped the statue of all of its gold leaf to give to the poor. Tired, weak and cold from the winter, the swallow made one last effort to thank the Prince for his loving kindness flying up high to kiss the lips of the Happy Prince and then immediately afterwards dropped dead from exhaustion.

Seeing that the statue now looked like a beggar, the city councillors melted down the Happy Prince in a furnace in order to build another statue. For a long time, the councillors argued over which one of them the next statue should be named after.

For the full text of the article, please go to: www.bodhgayanews.net/statue/statue05.htm.