

Will the Buddha be pleased?

These are days of monumentalisation in Bhutan. One colossal statue of Guru Rinpoche is already on its way in Kurtoe and another gigantic statue is soon to crown Thimphu's skyline. We have seen numerous other projects of building enormous statues, ornate *thongdrols*, grand temples and stupas. Perhaps, these are signs of Bhutan's rising economy and the undiminished sense of piety. Yet, anyone who has a good knowledge of what Buddhism stands for or even someone who has read Oscar Wilde's *The Happy Prince* would know that there is something amiss in our efforts to erect massive religious monuments.

In Oscar Wilde's story, the Happy Prince is a statue built on a tall column and gilded in fine gold with two sapphire eyes. He weeps for the poor in his domain and gives away the ruby on his sword, his sapphire eyes and his golden skin to help the needy. The figure that shall stand on Thimphu's horizon is a similar prince, except that he is a historical one, one known for his renunciation of material wealth and glory, one we all believe to be the most compassionate being, one who even breathes only for the welfare of sentient beings. He is the enlightened teacher who is unparalleled for his emphasis on internal spirituality and happiness, not material grandeur. He is Prince Siddhartha, the Buddha, whose earnest ears hear the wailing patients in the crowded hospitals, whose affectionate eyes watch poor children struggle for education, whose heart feels the cold, hunger, thirst and the numerous pains of the world. What will Prince Siddhartha think of the lavish projects of his 'faithful' devotees to honour him with the very riches he had loathed. Will he weep?

Of course, he will. The Buddha's compassionate eyes gaze on the world like a mother on a sick child. His long hands are stretched to help the world and his heart bent to bring happiness to sentient beings. His ultimate wish is to remove the suffering of all sentient beings and to do so through the spiritual path of internal edification and enlightenment. There is no room for projects of self-aggrandizement and extravagant materialism in his system. Do constructions of religious monuments, then, really conform to the spirit of his teachings? Should we not help the poor and needy who are dear to his heart in order to honour him?

Even as precious money is turned into these religious monuments, almost one third of our population is under poverty line and adequate education and health are yet to reach every village in the country. Even the facilities and services in the country's main hospital are far from being adequate and many children go without primary education. The country is still struggling with a burgeoning economy. Should monument building be our priority? If the statues are for objects of veneration and accumulation of merit, don't we already have enough holy relics of considerable antiquity to worship? The materialization of what is intrinsically a spiritual culture seems to be bringing a slow death of the Buddha's precious spirituality.

The more we reflect on the purpose of the Buddha's mission and the crux of his message, the more we will have to wonder if some of our acclaimed acts of Buddhist piety are Buddhist at all? If we want to honour the Buddha, listen to him and follow him, shouldn't we at least ask what is most important to him? Perhaps, it is now time for us, specially as we begin to prosper materially, to re-evaluate our spiritual priorities and obligations to get Buddhism right and verify a true Buddhist endeavour

from a false one. We must not forget the original purpose of the Buddha's teachings in the midst of our trappings of rituals, routines and idols. Monuments such as statues are only a means to an end, that end being freedom from suffering. Should the means supersede the end, it defeats its own purpose. Thus, a Buddhist could not be either excessively idolatrous or an iconoclast. The room for monuments should be determined by moral and spiritual considerations. Short of that, it is heretical idolatry or worldly obsession of perpetuating one's name in this impermanent world. A metallic Buddha may rise high on our mountain but will it please the real Buddha is a pertinent question. In the end, like Oscar Wilde's Happy Prince, Prince Siddhartha may drown in tears and crumble with a heavy heart break.