

Teaching through an Electro-larynx: The Oval Age-Old Bath

Noirin Sheahan · Noirin's Essays · 4 min read

Teaching through an Electro-larynx: Deplore Mouldy Dudes? The Oval Age-Old Bath?

Why might a Dhamma teacher be asking you to deplore mouldy dudes? Like the Buddha's teachings, the answer is 'in this fathom long body'. So put a finger on you Adam's apple. Now say "T". And then "D". Feel the difference? Say "Ssss". And now "Zzzzz". Getting the picture? Your vocal chords vibrate for some consonants and not for others. That's how our ears tell one from the other. And while an electro-larynx is a wonderful invention, it doesn't have the magical capability of our vocal chords to shut itself off for a fraction of a second while we say "T", or "P" or other consonants. Physiology lesson No 2: Try saying "Shhhhh" while you hold your breath. Do the same for "S" or "F". Not much luck? These need a little stream air flowing through narrow gaps between your teeth, lips or tongue as these shape themselves into funnels to convey these various hissing sounds. You can make a muted impression of them by first opening your mouth and then closing it rapidly to puff some air through the gaps. This is the best you can do after laryngectomy, when you breathe through a little opening (stoma) in the front of the neck rather than the nose and mouth.

Basically, an electro-larynx preserves the vowel sounds reasonably well, but the consonants provide a guessing game for your ears. And so, when I intend to say The Four Noble Truths, your ears might hear Deplore Mouldy Dudes! And when I encourage you to follow the Noble Eight-fold Path, you might think I'm asking you to wallow in an Oval Age-old Bath!

On top of that the electro-larynx sounds mechanical and robotic. How could I possibly teach with a voice like Daffy Duck? I thought that phase of life was surely over. But Bhante wasn't having any of that nonsense! He gave me a year to recover, but then ... Onwards! He scheduled me in for three week-long retreats during 2015. As usual, he was right. People rise to the challenge – it's heartening to see how true this is. It can even be fun to watch the Dhamma seep through a few Mouldy Dudes and other obstacles! In my youth, the only robot models were the evil Daleks in Dr Who. But one younger retreatant said she would listen even more intently to meditation instructions from Seven of Nine!

But, if you're not a Star Wars fan, don't worry! If you come on retreat with me (and I hope you will) you won't be struggling to translate an electro-larynx drone for the evening Dhamma talk. Earlier this year I wrote out my talks in advance and my friend Finola read and recorded these. We'll update these as needed. So far, the retreat facilitators have been willing to do much of the remaining talking for me – short readings now and again to punctuate the day and inspire us to greater things. My communication is good enough for interviews and for occasional reminders. Bhante has recorded all

the chanting as well as the evening metta guidance, so we use these for the morning and evening pujas. Basically it will be the same as normal – just an unruly mind and aching body to contend with! During the summer I came across some technology designed for the hard-of-hearing and used this during the October retreat. It's just a microphone, portable amplifier and earphones. Normally the hard-of-hearing person uses the earphones. I reverse this and ask others to wear the earphones while I speak into the microphone. This means I can turn the volume of the electro-larynx way down, as even a whisper can be heard quite clearly using the earphones. This cuts out the loud background noise and means I can talk quietly to someone in the interview room without disturbing others in the walking hall. We also used it in the meditation room for group interviews and whenever the spirit moved me to say something. A bit strange having all this techy stuff in a

Dhamma hall – but as one retreatant commented it can also be quite touching when we're all wired up together!

For the local-group meetings on Thursday evenings I decided again to write out the Dhamma talks in advance and each person read a part aloud. This is something we have done in our own meditation group in Dublin for many years. We agree on a book, and then read a few pages together – each person reading out a paragraph or two. Reading aloud like this often gets over whatever self-consciousness we tend to feel in talking about the Dhamma, and the discussion afterwards is the richer for this. Similarly in the Satipanya local group, the shared reading made for a more open and enjoyable discussion afterwards. And luckily I enjoy writing but have to steel myself before giving a Dhamma talk, so this format makes life easier for me. Giving a Dhamma talk can be exhilarating and deeply moving, but it can also be a bit daunting unless and until you relax into the experience. I'm spared all those collywobbles nowadays!

I asked the people who came on retreat this year to give some feedback on what it's like to be led by a laryngectomee, and the responses have now been posted on the website (in the section with my profile). It was very heartening and quite humbling to hear how positive people were in their evaluation. Although the sound of the electro-larynx sometimes grated, what came through loud and clear was people's willingness to work together to let the Dhamma unfold and express itself in this post-laryngectomy phase of my life. To quote from one retreatant: when something tragic happens, we can all rally and something quite wonderful fills the loss.

Teaching the Dhamma is truly a great privilege and a joy. I am deeply grateful to Bhante for his leadership, encouragement and persistence in prising me out of my comfort zone and onto the podium with or without a voice-box! I am also very grateful to all who have come on retreat with me either pre- or post-laryngectomy. May your implied respect continue to gladden my heart and encourage me along this path to freedom, happiness and peace. And may all the Mouldy Dudes and the Oval-Age-Old-Bath eloquently map the way!

Noirin / Ayya Puññyanandi

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