

Revisioning Buddhism

An inspired re-look at
the Buddha's example and teachings

PIYA TAN

edited by Ratna Lim

THE MINDING CENTRE
Singapore

Revisioning Buddhism

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THE MINDING CENTRE, based in Singapore, is part of Piya Tan's Dharma ministry. It was founded in 2006 to provide Dharma-based non-religious service to those in need of counsel and solace. It also serves as a haven and hub for those seeking Dharma by way of meditation and education, Sutta study and translation, and spiritual experience. The Centre also supports and promotes Piya Tan in his full-time Buddhist and related work.

Courses: <http://themindingcentre.org>

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THE MERE BUDDHIST VISION. We aspire to learn, teach and practise mere Dharma, or “non-religious Buddhism,” that is, Buddhism as simple as possible, as the Buddha Dharma, so that it is open to all who seek true stillness and liberating wisdom. We aspire to compassionately and joyfully proclaim the possibility, necessity and urgency of gaining spiritual liberation in this life itself—at least as a streamwinner, with or without dhyana—in keeping with the Okkanti Samyutta (S 25). ***Mere Buddhism is easy: live it and be free***

DEDICATION

To a liberating Buddhism in a global village

To the Buddhists of our times:
may the Buddha Dharma grow in a meaningful and relevant
way wherever it is taught, learned and practised,
and

especially for the blossoming of the Buddha Dharma in
Singapore and Malaysia

where there are numerous foreign missions, such as
Chinese missions, Burmese missions, Sinhalese missions, Thai
missions, Tibetan missions, Japanese missions, Zen missions,
Western missions, but almost *no*
LOCAL MISSIONS

so that we can freely
meditate like the early saints,
chant the Pali texts in a local way,
sing Buddhist hymns and songs as appropriate,
study the suttas systematically and freely,
be free from money priests,
and inspire monastics to work towards awakening in this life
for the benefit of all beings

By the truth of these words, may all be well

Conventions

The following conventions are used in this book:

SD n.x *Sutta Discovery* by Piya Tan, where n denotes volume number and x is the chapter number.

Link: <http://dharmafarer.org>

D	Dīgha,nikāya	Long Discourses
M	Majjhima,nikāya	Middle Length Discourse
S	Saṃyutta,nikāya	Connected Discourses
A	Aṅg'uttara,nikāya	Numerical Discourse
Kh	Khuddaka,pāṭha	
Dh	Dhammapada	
DhA	Dhammapada Commentary	
U	Udāna	
It	Iti,vuttaka	
Sn	Sutta,nipāta	
Tha	Thera,gāthā	
ThaA	Thera,gāthā Commentary	
Thi	Therī,gāthā	
ThīA	Therī,gāthā Commentary	
J	Jātaka	
J or JA	Jātaka Commentary	
Vism	Visuddhi,magga	

Preface

REFLECTIONS & ASPIRATIONS

“Revisioning” means “looking again,” that is, going back to the Buddha’s teachings for inspiration and guidance in the face of the challenges of our times and societies. As Buddhists—monastic and lay—face the challenges and uncertainties of our changing and globalizing societies, we can be at a loss to keep Buddhism relevant and yet remain positively faithful to the early Buddhist teachings.

The 2600 years of Buddhist history is a record of how Buddhism has successfully adapted itself to new societies and times. However, such transitions and translations have not always been smooth or easy. Often enough, there were dark shadows and blinding lights. There are numerous lessons to be learned here.

This week itself, for example, a local Buddhist wrote to me, in a disillusioned tone, that a foreign priest, given a monthly stipend of \$2500, is selling small religious pendants and amulets at \$100 each. Often enough, it is known, these are fortune-hunters who, having collected enough wealth, would return to their home country, start a business and a family. Furthermore, they are not educating local Buddhists, but exploiting their ignorance and superstition, and so perpetuating religious materialism.

Then there is the perennial problem of “false monastics” in our heartland markets, collecting money in their almsbowl and rejecting any offering of almsfood. Such aberrations are *not* the real problem, but only their symptoms, that is, most monastics today not only collect money but are more wealthy than the average devotee. Only when we stop giving money to the monastics will these “false monastics” truly disappear.

In Singapore especially, Western visitors often noted that strong colonial habits still linger here, and often express their surprise that

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Christmas, for example, is celebrated here publicly with more enthusiasm than in the West. Then, there is the strange phenomenon of Buddhists wishing one another “merry Christmas” so that they need to be reminded that we do *not* celebrate it.

Often enough, during meetings and talks, some of our English-speaking Buddhist leaders, would compare ourselves with the Christians, where suttas would have served better as quotes. This only shows that we have not really internalized the Dharma.

And when there are public issues that affect our common image, we do not seem unified or forthright in our deliberations (as in the 2010 criminal priest scandal). The general tendency is an almost conspiratorial silence or a summary “it’s all right” (when it is not) attitude in the face of problems. We need to make serious efforts to turn away from vague Buddhisms and imbibe the Buddha Word.

“Revisionings” is a miscellany of my responses to some issues that have arisen, or some points that we should mull over. Although often there seems to be a tone of finality in these reflections, my purpose has always been to inspire you, the reader, to think over those issues that relate to the quality and future of Buddhism, and work towards some concerted voice and action for the common good.

Ratna Lim, my multi-tasking bodhisattva wife, the most hard-working person I know, has shown enthusiastic initiative in editing this book and seeing it to the press. Her urgency in wanting to share this work is understandable. We thank you for your generosity in making this book freely available. Above all, please join us in this return journey to the Buddha Dharma.

Piya Tan
7 January 2011

About the Author

PIYA TAN (1949-?2030)

Piya Tan, a former **Theravada monk** of 20 years, is working on an annotated translation of the early Pali Suttas, harmonizing between the historical critical method and Dharma-moved inspiration, and teaching them. Piya specializes in early Buddhism and its application today. His Sutta translations (the Sutta Discovery series) are especially popular with both forest monastics and academics.

In the 1980s, working closely with Dr Ang Beng Choo, project director of the Buddhist Studies Team (BUDS), Piya was consultant and regular lecturer. BUDS successfully introduced **Buddhist Studies in Singapore Secondary Schools**.

After that, he was invited by Prof Lewis Lancaster as a visiting scholar to **the University of California at Berkeley, USA**. He has written a number of educational books on Buddhism (such as *Total Buddhist Work*) and social surveys (such as *Buddhist Currents* and *Charisma in Buddhism*).

As a **full-time Dharma teacher**, he runs regular Sutta and Dharma classes at various temples, centres and tertiary Buddhist societies. He practises Buddhist counseling therapy using a combination of Forest-Insight meditation and Sutta-based psychology.

Piya often writes critically, in an increasingly mystical (that is, experiential) tone, on contemporary Buddhist-related issues, and often speaks out against the misinformation and abuse of Buddhism. He sees Buddhism as a life-affirming path to spiritual awakening, and has full faith in gaining streamwinning in this life itself, and urges others to aspire to this, too.

He enjoys mentoring young adults, inspiring them towards full-time lay Buddhist work. In his free time, he loves teaching his children and Ratna to think critically and enjoy the wonders of literature and nature.

For more information see Wiki Piya:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piya_Tan

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1 Modern monastics?

1 Modern Monastics?

[A response to the remark by a Singaporean ex-priest convicted of misuse of funds and dishonesty who claimed that today monastics are “modern” so the Vinaya is outmoded and irrelevant]

There is no such thing as a “modern” monastic, if we accept Buddhist monks or nuns as renunciants (those who “have left home”). A monastic with the Singapore dreams of the 5 C’s (cash, credit cards, cars, condominiums and country club membership) is clearly a contradiction in terms.

The Vinaya not only forbids monastics from buying and selling, but also from what we today call “social work” (see the “Morality” section of the first 13 Suttas of the Dīgha Nikāya). In the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta (D 16), the Buddha even declares that monastics should have nothing to do with his funeral. There are wise and capable lay followers who can do that:

[Ānanda:] “Bhante, how are we to treat the Tathāgata’s remains?”

[Buddha:] “Do not worry yourselves about the funeral rites [relic worship],¹ Ānanda. You should strive for the highest goal, devote yourselves to the highest goal, and dwell with your minds tirelessly, zealously devoted to the highest goal. There are wise noble, priests and householders who are devoted to the Tathāgata: they will take care of the funeral.” (D 16.5.10/2:141)²

¹ “Funeral rites,” *sarīra, pūja*.

² Cf 時，阿難即從座起，前白佛言：「佛滅度後，葬法云何？」佛告阿難：「汝且默然，思汝所業，諸清信士自樂為之。」 Then, Ānanda having risen from his seat, approached the Buddha, saying “After the Buddha has passed away, how should the funeral rites be done?” The Buddha told Ānanda, “You should be unconcerned with it. Keep your mind on your goal, various laymen disciples will be happy to perform it. (T1.1.20a22-a24)

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If monastics become good meditators and Dharma teachers, and are fine examples of those who have mastered inner stillness and simplicity, they can teach and inspire wise lay people to run the temples, centres and social work. In fact, this is quietly happening right now in some of the more truly caring groups of lay Buddhists inspired by the forest monastics of today.

In other words, a Buddhist monastic is not a priest. A monastic, by definition, is a celibate, single person, who has no dealings with money. He is regularly engaged in spiritual training and meditation to gain awakening in this life itself. If the monastic ideal were any less than this, there would be no need for the Buddha to arise in the world.

If we examine closely a monastic or lay person who says something like, “Society is changing. So we cannot stick with tradition,” or “Buddhism must change with the times,” we will invariably find that he or she has little or no training in Buddhism, or is steeped in worldly affairs and moneytheism of some form. This is business talk, not Dharma talk.

The Buddha Dharma arose as an antithesis to society. Society moves fast and quickly tires us; Buddhism slows us down and rests us. Society wears us down, even sickens us; Buddhism builds, heals and energizes us. The Buddha’s mind-healing methods, preserved in his meditation-training, are liberating and awakening.

The external forms of Buddhism, especially religious rituals, are often exploitative and materialistic. They are recidivist: they bring us back to the very problems that the Buddha speaks and acts against: the exploitative priestcraft of the brahmins. The modernized moneytheistic priests are invariably Buddhist “brahmins”!

The Buddha and the early monastics, all alike, dress in simple rag-robies, live on alms-food, dwell at the foot of trees and in simple dwellings, and use simple medicines. They wander about teaching

1 Modern monastics?

the Dharma or live quietly meditating alone in the forests and mountains. For the three months of the rains, they stay together in a suitable place, supported by the laity, to whom they give Dharma and meditation instructions.

In due course, such rains-retreat turn into rituals, used even by those who do not really observe them, by holding kathina and other ceremonies to raise funds for themselves. Many “modernized” Buddhisms have even forgotten about the rain-retreat and robe-offering.

But how did the “modernizing” start? It clearly began after the Buddha’s death, when the monasteries became more settled, larger, richer, and started owning property, mostly through support of kings, and of the rich and powerful. While the wandering forest monks quietly continued with their meditation practices, the settled monastics (like those of the Nalanda University in India and the Mahavihara fraternity in Sri Lanka) became more scholastic and worldly, turning more to ritualism, scholasticism and “modernizing” Buddhism.

The Buddhism of the Nalanda period (for example) copied brahminical and Saivite practices like mantras, fire puja, and myths. They became successful as “modernized” tantric forms of Buddhism, but it was a far cry from what the Buddha had taught. In fact, the monasteries became so wealthy that they caught the attention of the Turkish Muslim marauders who plundered and completely annihilated Indian Buddhism by the early 13th century.

Those who are ignorant of early Buddhism, or have little information about it, or who try to fit Buddhism into their own ideas, easily find such modernized Buddhisms very attractive because they promise various kinds of power, purification, ego-stroking, and entertainment. In fact, one of the attractive qualities of such modernized Buddhisms is their virtuoso rituals and performances,

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complete with exotic paraphernalia (ritual uniform and implements). They are like sophisticated religious choirs, orchestras or magic shows; some are more like popular pop groups that cater to immediate religious and social needs in a magical or entertaining way. For a high fee, of course.

Modernized Buddhisms externalize and ritualize the healing process. They try to help us without telling us how the healing works, or whether it works at all. Modernized Buddhism works like *a life-saving service* at a swimming pool complex: when we are in danger of the waters, they try to help us. But the life-guards cannot be there all the time.

Early Buddhism teaches us how the mind works, how to heal ourselves and how not be lost in worldliness. The Buddha teaches us *how to swim*, how to avoid dangers in water, and stay safe.

Buddhism is often represented by a wheel: we need not reinvent the wheel. Please choose your Buddhism wisely.

2 Becoming Human: It's Easier Than You Think

Contrary to popular Buddhism and Buddhist mythology, it is *not* difficult to obtain human birth. This popular wrong view is encouraged by the misquoting of the parable of the blind turtle alluded to in the later works without reference to its context in **the Bāla Paṇḍita Sutta** (M 129),³ where it is stated:

Bhikshus, suppose a man were to throw into the ocean a yoke with a single hole in it. Then the east winds carry it

³ Bāla Paṇḍita Sutta (M 129), SD 2.22.

2 Becoming human: it's easier than you think

westwards; the west winds carry it eastwards; the north winds carry it southwards; the south winds carry it northwards. Suppose a blind turtle were to come up from the ocean depths once in a hundred years.

What do you think, bhikshus? Would that blind turtle put his neck through the yoke with a single hole in it?"

"Even if it could, bhante, it would only happen after a very long time."

"Even then, bhikshus, it is more likely that the blind turtle would put his neck through the single-holed yoke than would the fool, once fallen into a lower world [animals, the pretas, the hells], regain the human state, I say! Why is that?"

Because in the lower worlds there is no dharma-faring, no doing of what is wholesome, no performance of merit. There they eat each other, preying on the weak.

(M 129.24/3:169) = SD 2.22

A very close parallel to this parable is found in **the Chiggala Sutta 2** (S 56.47). In both cases, the reference is to rebirth in "a lower world," that is, as a preta (departed being), an animal, or a hell-being, or (according to later mythology) as an asura (narcissistic demon). The Chiggala Sutta 2, however, mentions ignorance of the four noble truths as the reason for the difficulty of regaining human birth (S 56.47/5:455 f).

The context of the two passages is identical and should be well noted, that is to say, "the fool, once fallen into a lower world" would find it very difficult to regain the human birth. This is because there is no practice of Dharma or making merit there (the Bāla Paṇḍita Sutta, M 129), nor knowledge of the four noble truths (the Chiggala Sutta 2, S 56.47). It is in this connection that the statement of the difficulty of human birth should be understood. Hence,

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here is no issue of the contradiction between “rarity of human birth” and the increasing human population.

On the other hand, it is very easy for celestial beings to “fall” (*cavati*) from their divine state and be reborn into the human realm. It is very rare indeed that a celestial being is ever reborn from a lower heaven to a higher one. I can think of only two canonical cases, that of two gandharvas (celestial minstrels) who cultivated mindfulness and were reborn in the brahma world (Sakka Pañha Sutta, D 21.1.11),⁴ and the non-returners in the Pure Abodes.

The reason for this divine devolution is that our heavenly states are supported by our store of good karma and other factors (such as the prevailing life-span). Once the karmic support is exhausted or the divine being reaches the end of his lifespan, he would “fall” from that state.

According to the Sāleyyaka Sutta (M 41)⁵, it is easy to be reborn as a human being, or even as a divine being—we can aspire for it. But there is a catch: we need to live morally virtuous lives. Moral virtue is the fuel that propels us into such births and keeps us on that trajectory. If we live a morally virtuous life and aspire for such a birth, we will obtain it. The quality of the human state that we are reborn into will also very much depend on the kind of karma we have in store.

We may *have* a human body, but it is difficult to *be* human, so that in the end, it is also difficult for us to *remain* in a human body (Dh 182). In other words, if we behave like an animal (living a cyclic life of eating, enjoying sense-pleasures, without mental development), or we live in fear and blindly following others, we are likely to be reborn as animals, if we are not already one!

⁴ Thanks to Bhante Sujato for reminding me of this episode (email, 8 Aug 2009).

⁵ Sāleyyaka Sutta (M 41), SD 5.7.

3 Hungry ghosts

In the (Saddha) Jāṇussoṇi Sutta (A 10.177),⁶ the Buddha declares that if we do good works (including social work) but do not keep the precepts (whether monastic or lay), we would be reborn as an animal treated as pets (elephant, horse, cow, chicken etc) which are well cared for!

In other words, we do not live by rice and bread alone, not by faith alone, but we are nourished by sense-stimuli, mental volition and consciousness. However, even when the physical body is deprived of material food, and dies, our mental body or existential consciousness continues to be sustained by our habitual thoughts, and to be reborn according to how we use our sense-faculties.

Recommended reading: “The body in Buddhism,” SD 29.6a.

3 Hungry Ghosts

One of the most profound and enduring problems addressed by religion is that of death. More exactly, what happens after death? For Buddhists educated in early Buddhism, the answer is clear: there are only dead *bodies*, not dead *beings*. We are all reborn when we die.

Our rebirth is initially decided by the momentum of our dying thought-process. If we hold on to negative thoughts, then our rebirth would be a negative one, that is, one of the subhuman realms—we would be reborn as an asura, a preta, an animal, or a hell-being. We know that the animal realm exists, but what about the other dimensions?

One helpful way to interpret such realms is to take them as psychological states that overwhelm us. An **asura**, as such, is a violent

⁶ (Saddha) Jāṇussoṇi Sutta (A 10.177), SD 2.6a.

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demon-like being who habitually measures others, intent on using them for what power, pleasure or satisfaction they can provide him (which reminds us of an exploitative unfeeling bossy person).

An **animal**, psychologically, is one who leads a predictable cyclic life of eating, sleeping, hunting, mating, reproducing, and dying. He is gullible to baits and lures, and as such is easily trapped and tricked by others. He almost never thinks, and as such can be easily exploited, abused, even consumed, by others.

A **hell-being**, psychologically, is one who lives in prolonged violence, murder, loss and pain. He is born into a war zone, a literally explosive environment, losing limbs, and then dying an early death, by being bombed, shot, mutilated or murdered. Mass suicide bombers are likely to be in this realm.

A **preta**, psychologically, is one addicted to something, but like all addicts, he can never find satisfaction. He is often represented in religious art as having a huge but flat leaf-life body, with a pin-head mouth. Those addicted to sex, food, gaming, gambling, drugs, drinks, cigarettes, or mindlessly collecting things, would be denizens of this realm. (Those who happily collect and exchange stamps, and such like, are not included in this category!)

The pretas are listed last because we will examine them for the rest of this reflection. A careful study of the early Buddhist sources shows two levels of development of preta belief. The first is simply that of the pre-existing brahminical notion of the “departed” (which is what the Pali word, *petā*, originally means).⁷ A more developed preta belief is found in the Tirokudda Sutta.⁸

The (Saddha) Jāṇussoṇi Sutta (A 10.177) tells us that there will always be “departed ones” who are our relatives (imagine our sam-

⁷ See eg (Saddha) Jāṇussoṇi Sutta (A 10.177/5:270), SD 2.6a.

⁸ Tirokudda Sutta (Kh 7 = Pv 1.5), SD 2.7.

3 Hungry ghosts

saric network of relatives), and that we may dedicate our acts of generosity and goodness to any of them. The Tirokuḍḍa Sutta explains how the preta is uplifted from his sufferings by our own spiritual joy (that is, lovingkindness), and that we may dedicate merits, not only to relatives, but to any such beings present.

Both these Suttas show the vital importance that we should ourselves pray for the departed ones. The mechanical and jarring chants of the professional priests who lack moral virtue and loving-kindness are not helpful to them at all.

When Buddhism reached China beginning around the 1st century CE, such preta stories fascinated the Chinese, already steeped in Confucian filial piety and Daoist spirit beliefs. Such stories were often cited in response to others' criticism that Buddhism was a "foreign" religion that lacked filial piety.

The early Chinese Buddhists went on to create an enduring myth of Mulian (based on the story of Moggallāna) to inspire filial piety. Mulian's mother, it is said, is reborn in hell as a hungry ghost on account of her bad karma. Mulian performs an act of giving to the Sangha (order of monks) and so liberates her.

Popular Chinese mythology seems to conflate two separate realms (the hells and the preta realm), and regard them as a kind of walled prison. During the seventh lunar month, the hell gates are opened and the pretas are free to wander the world for that period. Such an idea is not found even in Chinese Mahayana.

Chinese cosmology clearly mirrors the ancient imperial social system. In this popular mythology, the pretas are consigned to the hells, but given an annual respite, thus betraying a notion of an enduring soul. The pretas, treated as living relatives, are even given posthumous funds in the form of hell-notes, looking like US Federal Reserve greenbacks, with denominations ranging from \$10,000 to

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\$1,000,000. In Singapore, it is common to find \$10 billion notes sold in joss-shops.

Apparently, there is a bad inflation in hell! On a more serious note, this is clearly against the teachings of **the Tirokuḍḍa Sutta** which says that there is “neither business ... nor buying and selling with money” amongst the pretas (verse 7).

Educated young Chinese often have serious difficulty with such simplistic beliefs and they would ask such questions as these:

- (1) Does this mean that when a Chinese dies, he goes straight to hell as a preta?
- (2) What can the pretas buy or need in hell with all the “money” that is burnt for them?
- (3) How do the pretas end up in hell, when they actually have no realm of their own?
- (4) Were these hungry ghost beliefs and stories promoted by money priests so that they can live off the dead?

Let me close this reflection on a light note. When I was still a monk in Malaysia, it was reported to me that a young Chinese man once left a wad of newly-designed one-ringgit notes on the table. His old mother, thinking that it was hell notes for their ancestors, piously burnt them as offerings! I fully endorse this practice as it is likely to encourage more discreet burning, and also probably raise the value of the country’s money supply!

4 Are Bodhisattvas Selfish? [see also 23]

While I was having a meal at a mixed rice stall, a person came up to me and asked me to pay for his meal. I agreed and asked him to order what he wanted to eat. However, he said he wanted to buy his meal elsewhere: he was asking for money, and I don’t think he

4 Are bodhisattvas selfish?

was honest about it. So I said no. It is wrong because the message would be that it is all right to lie.

This set me thinking about some of the Bodhisattva stories we read or hear about. The Vyāghrī Jātaka (“the Tigress Birth-story”), a Sanskrit tale from the Jātakamāla, for example, tells of how the Bodhisattva sacrifices his own life to a hungry tigress that was too weak to even attack him. So he cut himself up so that the tigress, drinking his blood, would gain strength and devour him.

So the Bodhisattva, it is said, practises his perfection of giving to the highest level, giving his own life away to others. The question now is, what happens to the tigress? What is her karma? Isn't it karmically horrible to eat a Bodhisattva's flesh? The tigress will face even more painful rebirth on account of the Bodhisattva's giving. Anyway, this is just a story, which should help us think more deeply.

Compassion unguided by wisdom easily make pious fools of us, fearing bad karma even in criticizing evil and wrong, and so become easy lackeys of the cunning and confused. Wisdom untempered by compassion turns us into clever talking heads who would give the best explanations for a problem without raising a finger to solve it. We need to have a right balance of wisdom and compassion when examining or executing a skillful means.

With such an understanding let us now examine an oft-quoted Zen story; indeed, popular enough to be cited by even non-Buddhist writers as their own.

Two Zen priests, Tanzan and Ekido, traveling on pilgrimage, came to a muddy river crossing. There they saw a lovely young woman dressed in her kimono and finery, obviously not knowing how to cross the river without ruining her clothes. Without further ado, Tanzan graciously picked her up, held her close to him, and carried her across the muddy river, placing her onto the dry ground.

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Then he and Ekido continued on their way. Hours later, they found themselves at a lodging temple. And here Ekido could no longer restrain himself and gushed forth his complaints:

“Surely, it is against the rules what you did back there.... Touching a woman is simply not allowed.... How could you have done that? ... And to have such close contact with her! ... This is a violation of all monastic protocol...”

Thus he went on with his verbiage. Tanzan listened patiently to the accusations.

Finally, during a pause, he said, “Look, I set that girl down back at the crossing. Are you still carrying her?”

(Based on an autobiographical story by Japanese Zen master Tanzan)

Tanzan (1819-1892) was a Japanese Buddhist priest and professor of philosophy at the Japanese Imperial University (now the University of Tokyo) during the Meiji period. He was regarded as a Zen master, and figured in several well-known koans, and was also well-known for his disregard of many of the precepts of everyday Buddhism, such as dietary laws. I’m not sure if there is anything virtuous in this.

The first thing we should note is that this is an autobiographical Zen story; it probably did not happen, not exactly in this manner, anyway. For, if it did, then it has a serious ethical problem, where one is good at the cost of the perceived evil or foolishness of another. I think it was the Irish playwright, George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) who quipped, “There are bad women because there are good women.”

Indeed, a bodhisattva who is regarded as good or compassionate on account of the evil or lack in others, would actually be a selfish

6 Bhikkhuni sangha revived

person, as the bodhisattva is not independently good. A true bodhisattva is one who, being himself highly virtuous, is capable of inspiring goodness in another, even if it is to the bodhisattva's apparent disadvantage.

Tanzan's self-told tale has a serious moral flaw if he made himself appear virtuous at the cost of Ekido's concern for the Vinaya. Such a person as Ekido, however, was simply rare, even non-existent, in Meiji Japan, where priests were as a rule non-celibate (on account of the *nikujiki saitai* or "meat-eating and marriage" law of 1872). As such, it was likely than Tanzan had invented a Vinaya-respecting monk as a foil for his self-righteousness.

On the other hand, Tanzan's tale also evinces his serious lack of understanding of the Vinaya rules. For, in a real life situation, even a Vinaya-observing Theravada monk would help this lady in every way he could, or he would ask his "kappiya" (attendant) or some suitable person to help the woman.

Even if the Vinaya-keeping monk were to help the woman, he would have done a good deed, albeit by breaking a minor rule. For this, he only needs to confess before another monk, and remind himself not to wander into improper places the next time. There is no need of any skillful means here, only common sense.

6 Bhikkhuni Sangha Revived

From the mud, the lotus grows in the bright sun

On the morning of 4th November 2009, I woke up to an email from Santi Forest Monastery with a message from Bhante Sujato's blog:

Black Sunday

On Sunday 1 November at Wat Pah Pong (the head monastery of the Ajahn Chah tradition) Ajahn Brahm and his monastery Bodhi-

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nyana were formally expelled from Wat Pah Pong for performing bhikkhuni ordination.

This is a black day for all Buddhists. It is the end of innocence for Buddhism in the West.

For more information, see my <http://sujato.wordpress.com/>

Bhante Sujato

Suddenly, I realize why Australian Dharma friends have emailed me, asking about my views on bhikkhuni ordination. My initial response was outdated and guarded. That is, until I learned more about this historical development:

For new nuns

Wed, Nov 4, 2009 at 6:23 AM

Subject: Public Letters of Support for Bhikkhuni Ordination

Dear all,

If you have not yet heard the news, we are pleased to announce the bhikkhuni ordinations of the four women monastics at Dhammasara Monastery in Western Australia: Venerable Ajahn Vayama, and Venerables Nirodha, Hasapanna, and Seri. This was the first Theravada Buddhist bhikkhuni ordination in Australia. See the Santi website for links to photos and information about the ordination.

If you would like to write a letter of support for bhikkhuni ordination, you can do so at: <http://www.supportbhikkhunis.org>.

Anagarika Jason Chan set up this website as an independent project.

Bhante Sujato has also been writing a blog to keep us up-to-date on developments surrounding the bhikkhuni ordinations.

*With metta,
Santi Forest Monastery*

Piya's response (email 4 Nov 2009)

Ajahn Brahm, Bhante Sujato & Dharma friends,

Firstly, my sadness in Wat Pah Pong's rejection of your courageous effort in reviving the Bhikkhuni Sangha. The bright side (one way of looking at it) is that this means you (we) are an independent Sangha, free to perform your own Sangha acts now.

Secondly, it is time that we let go of rules and rituals that hinder the opportunity for women to taste the freedom of renunciation. Such *vesāraja* (moral courage) can only come from deep Dharma-inspired practice and great compassion.

Thirdly, some high standards similar to those of the Buddha's times should be applied, ensuring that candidates would stay on to work in communion and not wander off on their own steam as I-pod gurus, which was common when I was a monk a generation ago.

Fourthly, the fourfold assembly (*parisa*) is now complete again: sadhu sadhu sadhu! May this respite last until the Buddha Metteyya's time.

With metta and mudita,
Piya Tan
2009

More info:

1. The Revival of Bhikkhuni Ordination in the Theravada Tradition by Ven Bhikkhu Bodhi.
2. Bhikkhuni ordination procedure by Bhikkhu Sujato.
3. New bill only tightens clergy's grip on power. (Bangkok Post 2007).

Link: <https://sites.google.com/site/dharmafarer/home/bhikkhuni-ordination>

7 Has Maitreya Come?

Maitreya (Pali, *Metteyya*), as our Buddha prophesizes, will be the next Buddha in the distant future when our present Buddha's teaching is totally forgotten. Maitreya is perhaps *the* most popular religious figure, and has been even adopted by numerous non-Buddhists. One of the latest claims is that this prophecy actually refers to the coming of Christ!

Since the Theosophist movement in the 19th century, many non-Buddhist religious groups and cults have used Maitreya's name and characteristics of Maitreya for teachers in their traditions. Another such innovator was Share International, formerly called the Tara Center; the Ascended Master Teachings (early 1930s-1956) which called him "Cosmic Christ." Some Ahmaddiyya Muslims claimed that their founder Mirza Ghulam Ahmad was Maitreya. Some Bahais believed that their prophet Bahauallah fulfilled the prophecy by appearing as Maitreya.

Since the 7th century, many had proclaimed themselves as Maitreya: Xiang Haiming (613); the empress Wu (690); Gung Ye, the Korean warlord and briefly king of Taebong (10th century); Yiguandao patriarch, Lu Zhongyi, believed God mandated him as Maitreya (1905); L Ron Hubbard, founder of Scientology, in his poem, "Hymn of Asia" (1955), hinted himself to be Maitreya. In 1973, a 27-year-old Frenchman, Claude Vorilhon, a car racer and a sports journalist, claimed to have met Elohim (God) in a UFO and told him that Maitreya would arise in France. Claiming that he is the one, he called himself Rael. Some Koreans believed that Maitreya will arise in their country. A few rebellion leaders in China and Thailand, too, proclaimed themselves to be Maitreya. And the list is growing.

What is the real story behind Maitreya? Maitreya (Pali, *Metteyya*) is mentioned only once in the early Buddhist texts: in **the Cakka,vatti**

7 Has Maitreya come?

Sīha,nāda Sutta (D 26),⁹ which was probably as late sutta compiled during Asoka’s times. Even then, it is not so much prophecy, as it is an inspiration or memorandum to the emperor to be a truly good ruler. The Sutta closes with a teaching on the four focusses of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*) and a reminder for the monks to practise lovingkindness, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity. In other words, it is a didactic (educational) discourse.

The Cakkavatti Sihanada Sutta opens with the Buddha’s final teachings, that is, to *dwell as island unto ourselves*. This is a reference to the four focusses of mindfulness. Then follows a Jātaka story of king Daḷha,nemi and the seven universal monarchs. All of them keep to the ancient way of ruling which keeps everyone happy. The eighth monarch, however, breaks with tradition (a “modernizer,” probably). As a result, poverty becomes bad, and when people begin to steal, then deviant lustful conduct grows, and finally disrespect for others becomes rampant.

The king decides to help those who steal by providing with their needs. This encourages others to steal, to the extent the king has to punish them with death. With such a killing, the lifespan of humans declined from 80.000 year to 40,000 years. Then lying becomes widespread; followed by slander, sexual misconduct, then harsh speech and idle talk.

At each worsening stage, the human lifespan declined by half until the point where human lifespan is only 10 years, at which point a woman of 5 years is ready for marriage, In other words, the maturing process of human is speeded up dramatically. At that time, a terrible “seven-day war” breaks out. Many flee and hide in remote places.

⁹ Cakka,vatti Sīha,nāda Sutta (D 26), SD 36.10.

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In due course, the warring parties tire and stop killing. With that, the human lifespan doubled. As each new generation begins to become more moral, their life-span keeps doubling, until it reaches 80,000 years again. This is a time in the distant future when India and the world become such a crowded and prosperous world.

This is when the next Buddha, Maitreya, would arise, teach the Dharma, and establish the Teaching. The Sutta closes with the Buddha teaching on the four focusses of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhana*) and a reminder for the monks to practice lovingkindness, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity.

The following points should be noted:

- (1) The Sutta is a mythical story to remind the ruler to keep to the good ways of his predecessors.
- (2) The events described here have not yet happened, but will only occur at least thousands, if not millions, of years from now when the present Buddha's teachings are totally forgotten.
- (3) Metteyya is the future Buddha, not some cult leader or self-proclaimed religious guru.
- (4) The Sutta reminds Buddhist monastics to meditate and practise lovingkindness and other wholesome virtues.

The misuse and abuse of Maitreya's name by others is like reflected light. Without any warmth, a light that appears for some to be dazzling in the dark, so that they are blinded by the light. But those with Dharma-eyes will see true reality, as in the bright light of day. Let us leave the dark dusty corners of strange religions for the open fresh space of Buddhist liberation. Let go of the past, it is gone; let go of the future, it is yet to come. Live now with lovingkindness (*mettā*): then we are ourself Maitreya at heart.

8 Vimalakīrti's Illness

One of the most beautiful Mahāyāna statements is found in the Vimala,kīrti Nirdeśa (The Teaching of Vimala,kīrti). In chapter 5, the layman bodhisattva Vimala,kīrti lies sick, and is visited by a large assembly of holy beings, headed by Mañjuśrī. When Mañjuśrī asks why he is sick, Vimala,kīrti replies,

“Mañjuśrī, as long as there are ignorance and the thirst for existence, there is this illness of mine. As long as all beings are sick, there is this illness of mine. Were all living beings free from illness, then I too would not be sick.

What is the reason for this? Mañjuśrī, a bodhisattva remains in samsara for the sake of living beings; for samsara itself is an illness. Were all living beings free of illness, the bodhisattva too would be free of illness.

For example, Mañjuśrī, when the seth's only son is sick, both his parents become sick, too. And the parents will suffer as long as their only son has not recovered. Even so, Mañjuśrī, the bodhisattva loves all living beings as if each were his only child. He becomes sick when they are sick; when they recover, he recovers.”

Mañjuśrī asks, “Where does your illness come from?”

“The illness of the bodhisattvas arises from great compassion.”

Like any Buddhist text, we should *experience* these words. The best way is to take one of roles, either as Mañjuśrī or as Vimala,kīrti. This helps in our feeling the sense of the passage. In the end, they are the same: here, Mañjuśrī is our inquiring mind; Vimala,kīrti is our higher wisdom. *We* are the bodhisattvas.

When we ask ourselves a Dharma question, it will answer itself if we listen hard enough. This is a dialogue of the heart and mind.

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We cannot be truly a Buddhist if we do not feel suffering; that is, our own sufferings and those of others. Just as the four elements (earth, water, fire and wind) inside us and the four elements outside us are the *same* elements, even so, our sufferings and those of others are the same. Only selfishness makes us think that they are different. This is spiritual wisdom.

When we understand that how *we* suffer is the same as how *others* suffer, we appreciate the being of others, that they are in real pain, too. And we would meaningfully respond to the pains of others. We then have active and wise compassion.

The suffering of someone hit by a tsunami or an earthquake is no different from the pains of someone near us who has lost his job, or going through a divorce, or some other personal problem. Natural disasters happen all the time somewhere on our planet. We tend to be shocked because of their scale.

If we are truly and wisely compassionate, we understand that the pains of those who have lost loved ones, homes, and property, are the same as those who are suffering silently in loneliness, or in illness, or with some problems here in our midst. My point is that the magnitude of suffering cannot really be compared or measured, even between two individuals.

It is often subjective, that is, it is our bias, that makes us think which people need more help or which suffering is bigger than another. Maybe we feel more important helping those in bigger disasters, but those suffering poverty near us are not as important: this is not true compassion.

We should first respond to the pains of those nearest to us because they are within our reach to help. It would be rather improper if we let those near us suffer, and we go way far out to help others. As a Malay saying goes: "Milking a monkey in the forest, but our child at

9 Mental slavery

home dies of starvation” (Monyet di hutan disusukan, anak sendiri di rumah mati kelaparan).

Of course, with more of us working together in wisdom and compassion, we can cover a wider area to help more of those who are suffering.

All those who are suffering are like our children. This means that if one of our children is recovering from an accident, and another suffering from a fever, we would still attend to both of them as if each is our only son. Compassion means never comparing or measuring how we or others suffer, but knowing that there *is* suffering, and responding accordingly.

Nor should we be slow in helping others. For, charity delayed is charity denied.

To have great compassion means to always keep in mind, thus:

“Let no one suffer in my midst! Let no one suffer if I can help it. Let no one far or near suffer! I will never tell a suffering person, ‘It’s all right.’ Instead, I will ask, ‘Why are you suffering? How can I help?’ And I will act on it.

For, my pains arise from great compassion. My pains push me to share and to give. Let me not give till it hurts, but rather let me give till I cry in joy.”

9 Mental Slavery¹⁰

A situation where one is deprived of personal freedom and is forced to serve another is *slavery*. But worse than bodily slavery is *mental slavery*, when we are so conditioned by a person, a group, an idea or an ideology, that we are unable to think for ourselves to the

¹⁰ Source: Piya Tan, **The Person in Buddhism**, SD 29.6b(7.4).

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extent of being unable to distinguish right from wrong, and unable to act rightly. We remain mental slaves when we are *ignorant* of the true causes of the problems and sufferings, or when we are *deluded* with persons, events and ideas in our lives.

We are deluded when we are moved by charisma¹¹ and nose-led by memes.¹² **Charisma** is when, through our admiring someone, we blindly attribute various qualities, especially, authority, power (including magical powers), holiness (such as sainthood) and other qualities. We are likely to think that such a person is always right, and we often unquestioningly obey such a person in doing anything for him.

We often attribute charisma to a priest, a religious leader or anyone we admire on account of their speaking ability, the way they dress (monastic robes), titles (Ven Dr, PhD), looks (handsome, pretty), or any other trait or feature they have that we regard as desirable. Furthermore, the charisma is enhanced when such an admired person lives in a large and impressive temple or building, or is of a certain race, or controls a lot of funds, or has great influence, and so on.

Such ideas and external features are known as **memes**. And memes have only one purpose: to replicate themselves and overwhelm everything else. Charisma and memes combine into a very lethal weapon that makes us surrender even our minds to others, so that we become merely a cog or wheel in their system. We have handed our remote control over to the person we admire or worship. We have been mentally enslaved by that guru or cult!

We are easily enslaved by others through charisma and memes. The best protection and immunization against them is *wisdom* and *emo*

¹¹ See Piyasilo, *Charisma in Buddhism*, 1992h: http://www.buddhanet-net/pdf_file/charisma6.pdf.

¹² See **Memes** = SD 26.3.

10 Why Suttas repeat themselves?

tional independence. Wisdom arises through a deep understanding of the Buddha's true teachings (especially the Suttas) and emotional independence comes from being truly happy deep inside ourselves so that we do not need to rely on any external source of succour. This is best done through proper and good meditation.

The most important and difficult task in Buddhist work is the mental liberation of a person. Ideas, even Dharma teachings, are tools for liberating the mind. No matter how well we think of Buddhism at the moment, we must tell ourselves that this is only *provisional* knowledge, a step towards even higher and clearer Dharma.

As long as we keep an open mind to the Dharma, and a close mind to evil, we will truly see the impermanence and unsatisfactory states of persons, situations and things, and not be cheated by them. As we focus on such a vision, we grow closer to self-awakening in this life itself.

Part of our spiritual growth comes from seeing the suffering of others and the dangers that threaten the Dharma. We have to put in committed and consistent effort in Dharma-inspired education and social work. Such efforts towards personal liberation must be tempered by an understanding of social realities. We need to use our wisdom, skillful means, patience, wholesome networking and, above all, set a good example and inspiration for others, as the great saints of the Buddha's time have done.

10 Why Suttas Repeat Themselves?

Despite the title, it is not always true that suttas tend to repeat themselves. Take this remarkable passage, for example, which occurs only twice throughout the Pali Canon, that is, in the Vatthûpama Sutta (M 7) and the Sālha Sutta (A 3.66):

He understands thus:

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'There is this.

There is the lowly.

There is the excellent.

There is the escape beyond the occurrence of this perception.'

[*The Buddha then says that all this has been realized by the arhat.*] (M 7.17/1:38), SD 28.12 = (A 3.66.13/1:196), SD 43.6

From the Sutta context, it is clear that the above passage (especially the four mysterious lines) refer to the four noble truths. The meaning of the four lines are as follows:

- (1) "There is this" refers to the first noble truth: "This truth, that is *suffering*, should be *known*."
- (2) "There is the lowly" refers to the second noble truth, that is, *craving*; it is lowly, which is *to be abandoned*.
- (3) "There is the excellent" refers to the third noble truth, that is, the ending of suffering, namely, *nirvana*, which is *to be realized*.
- (4) "There is the escape beyond the occurrence of this perception" refers to the fourth noble truth, that is, *the noble eightfold path*, which is *to be cultivated*.

Such language may appear cryptic to us, but it is a spiritual shorthand with which awakened minds communicate. The Buddha communicates in a similar way, for example, to Bāhiya Dāru, cīriya (the bark-clothed ascetic),¹³ and to the weaver's daughter of Āḷavi.¹⁴

More commonly, however, we find that the Suttas tend to repeat important points and passages. On closer examination, we will often find a pattern in the Sutta narrative, that is, how the sutta compilers present the teachings effectively in the oral tradition.

¹³ Māluṅkyā,putta Sutta (S 35.95/4:73), SD 5.9 = Bāhiya Sutta (U 1.10/6-8), SD 33.7.

¹⁴ See DhA 3:172 f or Piya Tan, *The Buddha and His Disciples*, 2004 §3. Cf Dh 294 f.

10 Why Suttas repeat themselves?

Scholars of ancient scriptures have called such repetitiveness in the religious texts, “ring composition.” Here is how the ring works. First, there is a prologue that presents the theme and context (a sort of syllabus). The story then builds up towards its crucial centre, that is, a turning point or climax. Once there, or at the end of every new passage, the beginning or opening idea is repeated as verbal markers (the refrain), and the narrative reverses direction, as it were.

The second half of the story rigorously echoes the first, but in a somewhat reverse order, going back to the beginning idea, the key teaching. The ring structure is like unrolling a ball of thread that is then wound back into its spool.

A simple example of a ring composition is found in the Vitakka Saṅṭhāna (M 20),¹⁵ where the Buddha teaches five methods of overcoming mental distractions during meditation. From the second method onwards, each passage begins by saying, “Now, if the previous method (it is listed) should fail, then do this ...”

Another example, a bit more complex, is that of the Mahā Vaccha,gotta Sutta (M 73),¹⁶ where the brahmin Vaccha,gotta asks the Buddha about the various categories of practitioners who are saints, that is,

- (1) arhat monks,
- (2) arhat nuns,
- (3) laymen non-returners (who are celibate),
- (4) laymen streamwinners (who enjoy sensual pleasures),
- (5) laywomen non-returners (who are celibate), and
- (6) laywomen streamwinners (who enjoy sensual pleasures).¹⁷

¹⁵ Vitakka Saṅṭhāna (M 20), SD 1.6.

¹⁶ Mahā Vaccha,gotta Sutta (M 73), SD 27.4.

¹⁷ (M 73.7-13/1:490-492) = SD 27.4.

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Both in Vacchagotta’s questions and the Buddha’s answers, the type of practitioner is mentioned in a *concatenated* manner (as in a computer programme). The Buddha thus answers,

“Yes, we have numerous (1).

Not only (1), but numerous (2), too;

Not only (1+2), but numerous (3), too;

Not only (1+2+3), but numerous (4), too;

Not only (1+2+3+4), but numerous (5), too;

Not only (1+2+3+4+5), but numerous (6), too;

Such ring compositions make use of other programming sequences, such as concatenations, recursive cycles, nested passages, and so on. This is a hallmark of the early Buddhist oral tradition, when nothing was written down.

In the Sutta Discovery translation series we generally do not shorten such passages,¹⁸ but preserve them where their repetitions and cycles are vital not only for remembering the Teaching, but also for reflecting on the nature of true reality. The Teaching, in other words, must be rightly heard before we can really understand it in a positive life-changing way.

11 Your Mind: Use it or Lose it

One of the greatest discoveries relating to the human brain in our generation—that is, in the last century—is that of neuroplasticity (the ability of the brain to “repair” itself). In 1998, a landmark study found that human brain is capable of developing new brain cells (neurogenesis)¹⁹ or of making new synaptic connections²⁰—thus,

¹⁸ In the manuscripts, they are called *peyyāla* (meaning *et cetera*).

¹⁹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neurogenesis>.

²⁰ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neuroplasticity>.

11 Your mind: use it or lose it

debunking the prevailing theory that the brain was a rigid system, and that we are daily losing brain cells which do not regenerate.

Neuroplasticity refers to changes in the brain structure and function brought about by training and experience. The brain is an organ that is able to change in response to experience. Neuroscience and psychological research over the past two decades on this topic—thanks to their close connection with Buddhism, especially meditation—has burgeoned and is leading to new insights about the many ways in which the brain and behaviour change in response to experience.²¹

Neuroplasticity is being studied at many different levels, in different species, and on different time-scales. Yet, all of the work invariably lead to the conclusion that the brain is not static but is dynamically changing, and undergoes such a process throughout our entire life. Research on brain plasticity reveals how the composition of the adult mammalian brain is constantly changing and show the factors that influence these changes.²²

A healthy brain is like a jungle, full of trees; it has numerous synaptic connections. This is called synaptic density and is a direct measure of our brain reserve. A brain should not look like an island with one palm tree. This is because Alzheimer's disease and other types of dementia will invade the brain and cut down the neurons and synaptic connections, like a lawn-mower cutting down grass. A brain that is a jungle of synaptic links effectively slows down the onset of Alzheimer's and other brain diseases. However, in a brain that is an island with only one palm tree, symptoms of Alzheimer's will quickly arise because there is no brain reserve to fight it off.

²¹ See **Meditation & Consciousness** = SD 17.8c.

²² <http://www.jneurosci.org/cgi/content/full/25/45/10366>; also <http://www.hhmi.org/janelia/conf-042.html>.

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An article in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* highlights the results of a large study that “suggests that regular exercise [15 minutes a day, at least 3 times a week] is associated with a delay in onset of dementia and Alzheimer’s disease.” Results showed that such exercises decreased the onset of dementia by 32%.²³ This study joins a growing body of research that points to a connection between physical exercise and brain health.

On a positive note, I might add that meditation (breath or loving-kindness, or better both) of 15 minutes a day, at least 3 times a week, would further reduce our chance of getting dementia. Better still, the meditation should be done on a daily basis of as short as 10 minutes a session. It is also vital to learn how to deal with or reduce stress, and meditation is a good way to do this.

Medical advice in preventing dementia are: avoid strong drinks (or at least reduce it), keep blood pressure normal, engage in some physical activity, and cultivate interests or hobbies: keep the mind active. And, of course, meditate.

There is such a thing as “young onset Alzheimer’s disease” which strikes those below 60.²⁴ The best defence here is learning and doing effective meditation. Keep the mind active, be socially communicative, and it will stay healthy.

My point is that to be a Buddhist is to know our mind, train our mind, and free our mind. This means we need to keep our mind healthy, too. Our mind: use it or lose it.

²³ SD 144 no 2, 17 Jan 2006: 73-81, <http://www.annals.org/content/-144/2/73.full>.

²⁴ http://www.afateens.org/learn_dementia.html; <http://www.-medicalnewstoday.com/articles/103648.php>.

12 Desire²⁵

We are our senses

Sense-desire is the first of the five mental hindrances for a very good and natural reason: firstly, we are our senses and our minds work, like a computer, with an on-off pattern. “On” means paying attention to a thing, something which interests us; “off” means a lack of attention or interest towards something that we see no pleasure in. Behind this reactivity and predictability of samsaric behaviour there lurks the mother of all emotions: *desire*.

More specifically, our desires are sense-based; for, that is *all* that we really are. We are our senses, and our senses create the world we live in.²⁶ What sort of world do we create for ourselves? If we were to carefully review how we have lived up till now, we might realize that we have been *making choices between like and dislike, doing and not doing*. Even at the moment of waking up, we need to choose between rising up or remaining in bed for a little while longer.

Although there are some choices we would rather *not* make (like going to work in an office run by an asura-like boss), we simply try not to think about it, not to give it any attention, so that the pain is much less, that is, less noticed and noted. Our desires, as such, bend the truth to fit our liking.

As a young man, before I became a monk, some of my friends and I tried our first beer. The taste was so awful I remembered wondering why people drink it at all. But after a short time, I began to enjoy its taste, not so much because I liked it, but because it was fun being with friends. It was as if we were expected to enjoy this disgusting brew. I gave this up on becoming a practising Buddhist.

²⁵ Based on Kama-c, chanda, desire for sense-pleasures, see SD 32.2.

²⁶ See **Sabba Sutta** (S 35.23/4:15) = SD 7.1.

Desire causes fear

Sensual desire causes fear; for, we invariably fear losing what we are clinging to. And we tend to cling to what we perceive as being pleasurable or empowering. Psychologically, lust is the identification with a sense-object (form, sound, smell, taste, or touch) that we regard as pleasurable. What we regard as pleasurable is invariably based on our past experiences or memories of what we regarded as desirable or gratifying. And when a similar sense-object arises, we superimpose (“re-cognize”) that perception on the present object. As such, we are caught up in the past, and we remain emotionally stunted as the Peter Pans of pleasure. Such pleasures are neither real nor lasting because they are based on past objects or events, which have all ceased to exist.

Our past perceptions and memories often condition our present perceptions. Conditioned by the past, lust arises in us towards present objects. When we are caught up in present sense-pleasures, sensual lust arouses a fear of losing them. Furthermore, when we are used to such pleasures, fear arises when we notice their *absence*.

According to **the Abhaya Sutta** (A 8.184), *fear towards the future* arises when we are afflicted by some disaster or disease, and *our present lust* for sense-pleasures or *attachment* to the body arouses a fear of death.²⁷ **The (Kāma) Bhaya Sutta** (A 8.56) says that sensual lust causes fear not only in the present, but also towards the future.²⁸ In this connection, the Dhammapada says:

*From lust arises grief,
From lust arises fear;*

²⁷ A 8.184/2:173-176 = SD 14.8.

²⁸ A 8.56/4:289.

13 Ill will and mental cultivation

*For one who is free from lust,
There is no grief, much less fear. (Dh 215)*

The Bhaya Bherava Sutta (M 4) says that those with lustful minds often feel fear in the present when they are in a secluded spot, such as a forest, as their minds are under the power of lust.²⁹ This shows that lust is *a raw stimulation of the physical senses*. But we can be more than just our senses: we can experience profound mental joys.

When we are attracted to only a part of a person (say, the eyes) we are mistaking a part for the whole. And we may lose interest when we see the whole person. As such, it is important to know the whole person, that is, to accept him or her totally with lovingkindness. This is called unconditional love.

13 Ill Will and Mental Cultivation

We often think of ill will (*vyāpāda*)³⁰ as shown towards another person, but, as stated in **the (Nīvaraṇa) Bojjhaṅga Sutta** (S 46.52), ill will can arise *internally* as self-hate towards our own selves, or *externally* towards others.³¹

Self-hate often arises in us as a result of *guilt*. The feeling of guilt is likely to be common if we believe in “sin” or a God-idea, or where family upbringing or religious indoctrination has been rather stern and lacking real love and communication.³² Guilt and sin are negative emotions imposed upon us by an authority figure, who often

²⁹ M 4.4/1:17 = SD 44.3.

³⁰ This is the second of the 5 hindrances to mental concentration: see SD 32.5.

³¹ S 46.52/5:110 = SD 62.6. See SD 32.5(2.1).

³² On fear, see **Thīna,middha** = SD 32.6(3.4.3).

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invokes or is inspired by some kind of dogmatic belief in a supreme being.

Fear, or better, guiltless fear, on the other hand, is a natural response to what brings us pain and suffering, or what is not conducive to our personal or spiritual development.³³ When we accidentally touch a hot stove and get burnt, we will be careful not to touch it again, but it is senseless to feel guilty about it.

But stoves have no feelings, we might retort. For, when we hurt others, we hurt their *feelings*. The point is that we are not really in control of other people's feelings. We are wrong and unethical only when we purposely or foolishly hurt their feelings. Of course, we need to tell truthful and useful things at the right time, too, so that these are beneficial to others.

Guilt and self-hate can also arise where we have had strong family ties, but feel that we have failed to fulfil certain duties or obligations. Unconsciously, we bear this burden of the past around with us, affecting the quality of our lives, and of those near and those dear to us. As a result of all this, we keep blaming ourselves, even hating ourselves, to the extent of feeling that we should be punished, or do not deserve to be happy. If we are such a person, we are unlikely to be able to enjoy our meditation due to self-hate.

The meditation teacher, Brahmavamso, in his *Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond* relates such a case. One of the Western nuns told him that she went very deep into meditation, almost to the point of dhyana. But it stopped right there because *she felt she did not deserve that happiness!* I have a few meditation students who tell me

³³ Cf role of guilt in promoting sloth and torpor, see *Thīna,middha* = SD 32.6(3.4.3).

14 You have to be somebody before you can be nobody

the same thing—the feeling that they do not deserve to be happy. The hindrance here is obviously ill will.³⁴

Self-hate can also arise in us if we have been abused or violated, especially at a young age. We might feel that our body is impure as a result, or we fear being loved, or we feel unworthy of love from others.

In some cases, any suggestion of bodily pleasure could trigger this repressed painful memory, arousing fear and hate in us. Or, we could be violently angry at the perpetrator, and at ourselves for being helpless or doing nothing at that time. The important thing to remember here is that all this is past and gone. They are only memories, that is, how we perceive things. We have constructed and perpetuated these memories. We should let go of our persistent “victim” role.³⁵ Then, we begin by accepting ourselves just as we are.

14 You Have to be Somebody Before You Can be Nobody

Or, why do great masters still mess themselves up

One difficulty a Buddhist writer or speaker often faces is that of finding the right words for expressing Buddhism in everyday language. Very often, we would simply cannibalize the ideas of others and stick our name on them. But I think our ideas can gain much more currency if we are generous and grateful enough to own up our inspiration.

If we do meet an intellectual genius or spiritual giant, it is a privilege to stand on his shoulders. Recently, I read about one such giant

³⁴ See Brahmavamso 2006: 33-35.

³⁵ On the “victim” role, see **Self & Selves** = SD 26.9 (4.1).

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in Buddhist psychology, one of my favourite subjects. I'm speaking of Jack Engler, a leading Buddhist psychotherapist who famously said, "You have to be somebody before you can be nobody" (1981), a catchphrase of Western Buddhism and an adage of transpersonal psychology.

Engler's spiritual journey started at 16, with his reading "The Seven Storey Mountains," the autobiography of the Zen Catholic Thomas Merton. Then, he went on to the University of Notre Dame, and to the Benedictine and Trappist monasteries of Europe, and to Merton's monastery in Kentucky, USA. He was drawn to Catholic monkhood, but Merton strongly discouraged him. He continued his studies in England and Germany, where he got a degree in theology, and then a doctorate in biblical studies at Oxford.

Then it happened: a "personal crisis—a personal and spiritual dead end." He returned to America in 1969, became a social activist and began teaching religious studies. Eventually, he decided to "start graduate work all over again" in psychology and religion at the University of Chicago, where he got his MA and PhD.

One day, at the end of his search, he entered a bookstore and found a copy of Nyanaponika's *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*. "I got about thirty pages into it," he said, "and I knew that I had found what I had been looking for all my life. It was instantaneous."

For his doctoral dissertation, he went to India to study Buddhist psychology and practise meditation. He studied for a time at the Nalanda Institute and did extensive research with practitioners from the Calcutta Buddhist community. The data he compiled from this research was groundbreaking, endeavoring to "establish cross-cultural validation of the psychological changes at each major stage" of Buddhist meditation practice.

Back in the US, his aspirations changed, and he decided to go into clinical practice because "I had finally seen not only my own suffer-

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ing but everybody else's. India just profoundly changed me that way."

This reflection is very much inspired by reading Andrew Cohen's interview of Engler (2000). In his interview, Engler said that while in Calcutta, he met many Indian practitioners who had suffered extreme trauma, just like many Western students. Some of them "had reached deep levels of enlightenment." No one claimed themselves to be fully awakened, but they had attained fairly deep levels. Even then, it was clear that, there was still a lot of personal suffering in their lives that had not been addressed.

And, noted Engler, we see this in a lot of Western students and Western teachers (and I might add in Asian students and Asian teachers, too). They've had kensho (enlightenment) experiences, but "they're going down like flies," still misbehaving, sometimes outrageously so—money, sex and power. So there's still a lot of personal work to be done, noted Engler: Do more practice! In principle, that's what should happen, he said. But there aren't too many such people around.

Engler then used his technical lingo to explain the stages of awakening according to Theravada, which I can relate to quite comfortably. So I have adapted some of his ideas into my own understanding of spiritual development as reflected in **the Udakûpama Sutta** (A 7.15).³⁶

According to the Sutta, three fetters—self-identity view, attachment to rituals and vows, and doubt—prevent us from the first step to awakening. Psychologically, these three fetters are *cognitive* in nature. As streamwinners, in other words, we have completely given up what cognitive psychologists would call "maladaptive cognitions" or "core beliefs." When these unwholesome ways of look-

³⁶ A 7.15/4:11-13 = SD 28.6.

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ing at things are given up, our basic understanding and perspective of ourselves change for the better. We have a better sense of selfhood—not in the sense of an unchanging soul (*jīva*) or connection with some universal self (*attā*), but as a truly liberated being, in the sense that we are no more the product of how we perceive the world, but that we are living in true harmony with the world within and without.

However, although both the streamwinner and the once-returner may have abandoned “maladaptive cognitions,” they have only given up basic beliefs and assumptions, they do not automatically sublimate or correct their latent tendencies, that is, emotions and drives triggered by lust, aversion and ignorance. Cognitively, we may relate to our sense-experiences more wholesomely, but we may continue to act in the same neurotic ways.³⁷ That is why religious big-shots, even those who are branded with all kinds of status and titles, still badly mess themselves up and hurt others. The point is that they are not even streamwinners yet. For, if they are, they would have the strength not to break even the five precepts.

The arhat, on the other hand, has overcome not only the first five fetters, but also the five higher fetters.³⁸ This second set of fetters is rooted deep in the unconscious, powerfully influencing our feelings and motivations. It is relatively easier to transform cognitions and beliefs, making them wholesome, than to change our feelings, motivations, and impulses. Understandably, the core of this deepest

³⁷ Take the case of the streamwinner, **Ānanda**, who, traumatized by the Buddha’s impending death, declares, “Bhante, I have seen the Blessed One in comfort, and I have seen the Blessed One enduring it. And, bhante, my body has become weak [unwieldy] as if drugged [drunk]. I’m disoriented and things are unclear to me as a result of the Blessed One’s illness.” See **Mahā Parinibbāna S** (D 16.2.24/2:100) = SD 9; see also S 47.13/5:162; Tha 1034.

³⁸ On the fetters, see **Udākūpama Sutta** (A 7.15/4:11-15) = SD 28.6.

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group of fetters is “conceit” (*māna*), the remnant of the tendency to compare and measure self with others—this is the root of *narcissism*, pathological self-love. The higher fetters, as such, have to do with rooting out the residues of narcissistic attachments, of finally freeing the mind from self-idolization and from idolizing others.³⁹

15 The Truth is in How We Breathe

A voice that often bugs me as I complete each reflection is whether it is another splash in the play-pool of clever words. To write with feeling is clearly harder than to write what we think. The two are clearly different as our experience of the Buddha Dharma deepens.

The sweetest taste that Buddhism promises us is that of *spiritual freedom*. But if our tongue is still busy with another mouthful, let us at least find a proper spoon to taste the Dharma meal with when it comes. And what a breath-taking meal this will be. Here is how we prepare ourselves for joyful life’s true feast.

(1) Watching the present moment

We begin breath meditation by simply “**letting it come, letting it go.**” The most popular opening gambit involves simply keeping our attention on the breath.⁴⁰ A simple way of doing this is to simply note the endings of each: at the end of the in-breath, note it as “In,” and at the end of the our-breath, note it as “Out,” and repeat this until you feel so peaceful, even this sounds somewhat “noisy.” Then go on to stage (2).

If we are beginners, as we watch the breath (that is, keeping our mind on *the awareness of the breathing process*), we might notice

³⁹ See Jack Engler, 2000: 3 (online), 7 (print). www.enlightennext.org/magazine/j17/engler.asp.

⁴⁰ See *Ānāpāna,sati Sutta* (M 10) = SD 7.13.

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some physical discomfort. Then, we should simply note that discomfort as a meditation “object,” as a sense-experience, without any comment (this is “non-judgemental awareness”). Whenever distraction arises we patiently and joyfully bring our attention back to watching the breath.

The main difficulties we face in meditation are mostly rooted either in the past or the future. In the initial uneasy stillness of the meditating mind, unhappy thoughts of things done or undone in the past may arise, or we may project fond hopes for the future. These are simply tricks that the “doing mind” play on us.

To let go of the past means not to think about our work, or family, or responsibilities, or bad times we had had as a child. We abandon all such past experiences by showing them no interest at all. We let go of even what happened to us just a moment ago. When we meditate, we become, as it were, *someone with no history*.

(2) Silent awareness of the present moment

Inner speech or mental chatter prevents us from mentally focusing. The opposite of this is to watch *the silent awareness* that arises in our meditation. To enjoy this stillness, to value mental peace, we need to remove the importance we give to our *thinking* or the way we think. We just need to suspend all judgements, at least for the moment. In this way, we are ready for the more valuable *reality* of silent awareness that will raise the quality of our lives.

One way of overcoming inner speech or mental chatter is to cultivate a more refined present-moment awareness, watching every moment so closely that we have no time even to comment on what has just happened.

Another useful method of cultivating silent awareness is to recognize the silent spaces in between thoughts during a period of inner

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chatter. If we look carefully—and we need to—we will notice these little windows of silence in the midst of our mental noises.

(3) “Sustained attention on the breath”

We now go on to *silently know* that the breath is coming in, or going out. We need to go on doing this for, say, a hundred breaths successively, without any break or missing even one. This is **the third stage** of the forest-method breath meditation, known as “sustained attention on the breath.”

We cannot *make* this stage happen. It comes *naturally* when we have properly and patiently done the previous stages. We silently know that the breath is *coming in*, that is, at the first touch of it, as soon as it arises. Then, we silently know that the breath is *going out*, that is, at the first touch of it, as it arises.

(4) “Full sustained attention on the breath”

Here we should carefully observe the sensations that gradually arise through *the one and same breath*, not missing a moment of it. When the in-breath ends, we *know* that moment: we *see* in our minds that last moment of the in-breath.

Then we notice that there is a pause or gap before the next breath comes. If we are a bit unsure about this, just *feel* the stillness at end of each breath. Feel these peaceful pauses, and enjoy them.

Then we go on to notice the very first moment of the out-breath, and we notice every sensation of the process of the out-breath, until it disappears, completing the exhalation. Then we *know* the ending of the out-breath.

All this is done silently and in the present moment. And we go on doing this for many hundreds of breath in a row. After a while, all this becomes very natural, and begins to take its own peaceful course. There is no more bodily sensation as we fully become one with our breath.

Remember: “You” cannot reach this stage; only the mind reaches this stage. This is where the mind takes care of itself, as it were, and it does so very well indeed, if you just let it.⁴¹

16 What Does the Buddha Mean?

In reading religious scripture, it is vital not only to understand what the words, sentences, images and stories mean, we need to know the original *intention* of the writer or speaker. This is not always easy in religious writings, as it is rare that people read the scriptures and religious works with a truly open mind to understand the author’s original intentions.

Even avowed open-minded scholars do not always know the original or true intentions of the scripture authors. A good scholar might be able to have some good idea of the *probable*, even the *intended*, meaning of a religious text. He might then go on to argue his case with logic and learning, and, as such, earn the respect of his colleagues, and to publish books and be better known even abroad. He would then go on to write more about the intended or probable meanings of such religious texts, and to publish more books. So all appears right in that neck of academia.

Let us here limit our discussion to early Buddhist texts. Many, especially the scholars and specialists, know enough Pali to write very good explanations and critiques of the early Buddhist texts. Word-wise, such scholars seem to know more than even the Buddhist practitioners themselves.

⁴¹ This writing is inspired by Brahmavamso, “Cultivate tranquility, harvest insight.” *Buddhadharma Quarterly*, fall 2004. Download from <http://www.thebuddhadharma.com/issues/2004/fall/ajahn-brahm.html>; also on <http://sites.google.com/site/santifm10/ajahnbrahm>.

16 What does the Buddha mean?

The most important contribution that Western and modern academics have made to Buddhist studies is, I think, “historical criticism,” also known as *higher criticism* or *the historical-critical method*. This disciplined approach investigates the origins of a text, and compares them to other texts and traditions of the times or antecedent ones.

Such a disciplined approach has been applied to Bible studies, often enough with disastrous results. The more research scholars know about such ancient texts, the more they realize the Bible is not what many believers claim it to be. While the theologian might choose to bowdlerize or rationalize the disagreeable or contradicting parts, a more honest scholar might renounce the whole enterprise for a more purposeful life.⁴²

The historical critical approach to Buddhist studies is, however, clearly beneficial for both the academic scholar and the Buddhist faithful. The early Buddhist canon was compiled some 2500 years ago in India. The repetitive style of the texts (eg the use of literary devices such as *the ring composition*) reflects its oral tradition. The exactness of this oral tradition is reflected today in the structure of a computer programme.⁴³

A close study of the Buddhist texts will reveal a lively internal coherence, so that one sutta (discourse) helps to explain another, evoking a delightful vision of jigsaw pieces fitting together to form beautiful pictures.

Another valuable insight from historical criticism is to inform us on how the lifestyle and ideas of the Buddha’s milieu and earlier times influence his teachings, and how he and the early saints respond to

⁴² Well known Bible scholar Bart D Ehrman, for example, turned away from his born-again evangelism to taking the Bible as literature: see his [Youtube interview](#), Berkeley, April 2008.

⁴³ See Revisioning Buddhism 10: “Why Suttas repeat themselves.”

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such realities. All this gives us a better idea of what “really” happened behind the words and sounds of these ancient texts. The early Buddhist texts are a literary and traditional legacy for the faithful. In an important way, they preserve the *word* of the Buddha.

However, this is as far as historical criticism can help us in our investigation of the Buddhist texts. If historical criticism and the scholars can tell us what the Buddha really *says*, we still need to know what he really *means*.

These ancient texts try to point to the *truth* realized and taught by the Buddha. However, just as love cannot be felt from words alone, nor sweetness tasted even from the clearest pictures, the Buddha’s *truth*, the true Dharma, can only be personally experienced through contemplative practice, that is, mindfulness and meditation.

For this reason, the monastics of the forest tradition are highly valued virtuosi of Buddhism today, in so far as they continue to live monastic, moneyless, celibate and spiritual lives in the manner of the Buddha and his saints. Such monastics, although living apart from society as holy individuals, are, however, neither priests nor royalty, but teachers and exemplars to the laity.

That is, insofar as they have trained, or are training, themselves in the contemplative tradition handed down from the Buddha himself down the millennia. We can still have a direct experience of the Buddha’s awakening, or we can at least feel the gentle, yet zestful, stillness of approaching this great awakening.

We can only truly see the forest Dharma beyond the textual trees in the inner space of our still minds, and it is still possible to do this. Indeed, it is badly needed today as religions generally become more worldly, more violent, more exploitative and more confusing. A viable spiritual exercise is to look closely at the Buddha Word, and

17 What the Buddha really looks like

then close our eyes to look deeply within at our inner stillness. Then we will, in due course, discover what the Buddha really means.

17 What the Buddha Really Looks Like

The beautiful Buddha image we often see today with a full head of wavy hair, an angelic face, a toga-like robe with flowing pleats, and, of course, the halo, are the legacy of Indo-Greek Buddhist art of north-western India, which was in turn the result of Alexander the Great's campaigns in the 4th century BCE.

The Buddha in no way ever looked like such an image, nor any other such image that we see today, certainly not like the 71-metre Leshan Buddha from China (said to be the biggest in the world) which will be in public gaze for Vesak in 2010.

So how did the Buddha image arise? One very likely source of the ancient Buddha image is the Graeco-Bactrian kingdom (250 BCE-130 BCE), located in modern-day Afghanistan, from which Hellenistic culture diffused into the Indian subcontinent with the establishment of the Indo-Greek kingdom (180-10 BCE).

Under the Indo-Greeks, and then the Kushans, the interaction of Greek and Buddhist cultures flourished in the area of Gandhāra (today's northern Pakistan), before spreading into India, influencing the art of Mathura (about 150 km south of modern Delhi), and then the art of the Gupta empire, which was to extend to the rest of South-east Asia. Graeco-Buddhist art influences spread northward into Central Asia, shaping the art of the Tarim Basin, and then the art of East Asia.

Greek influences on Indian Buddhist art and Buddhist art in general are seen in the wavy hair, symmetrical angelic face, the gentle flowing pleated robes and Apollo-like torso of Buddha images. The Mathura school of Indian Buddhist art, on the other hand, produced

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a similar Buddha image but with a shaven head (more true to reality, but with less aesthetic appeal). The image failed to catch on, and the tonsure was covered with whorled hair, reflecting one of the lesser marks of the “superman.”⁴⁴

How did the Buddha really look like? We can know this for certain from the early Indian suttas. From the Vinaya and the Suttas, we are often given the clear impression that the Buddha looked very much like any other bona fide monk. Just as the Buddha made the Vinaya rules, he kept to them, too: “As I say, so I do; as I do, so I say.”⁴⁵ In other words, the Buddha kept his head shaven, and wore rag-robles just like any other good monk. Furthermore, there is clear evidence that on many occasions not everyone is able to recognize the Buddha on seeing him.

Let me quote two very famous historical cases. The first case is recorded in **the Sāmañña,phala Sutta** (D 2), which recounts how Ajāta,sattu (the king who killed his own father, Bimbi,sāra) has to ask his physician Jīvaka, which of numerous monks in the assembly before him is the Buddha. Jivaka has to point out the Buddha to the king (that the Buddha is the one sitting against the pillar facing the east) (D 2.11/1:50).⁴⁶

The second case, recorded in **the Dhātu Vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 140), is that of a monk’s inability to recognize the Buddha. The monk Pukusāti, on his journey to meet the Buddha, spends the night, en route, in a potter’s hut. The Buddha decides to meet him there, but Pukku,sati does not recognize him—that is, until midway in the

⁴⁴ See **The Body in Buddhism** = SD 29.6a (7.2).

⁴⁵ D 2:224, 229, 3:135; M 1:108, 109; A 2:24; It 122; Sn 357 (Nigrodha-,kappa); J 326/3:89.

⁴⁶ Sāmañña,phala Sutta (D 2), SD 8.10.

18 Good heavens

Buddha's teaching to him! At the end of the discourse, he apologizes and acknowledges the Buddha as his teacher.⁴⁷

The Introduction to **the Kalinga Bodhi Jātaka** (J 4:228) records the Buddha as rejecting the use of any bodily relics and dismissing even memorial forms (objects representing him) as “groundless and fanciful,” as they are arbitrary. He allows only the use of **the Bodhi tree** to represent him. A similar prohibition is alluded to in chapter 48 of the Sarvāsti,vāda Vinaya.⁴⁸

When we bow to a Buddha image, it is wise for us to recollect the Buddha's virtues, as it would help us clear and calm our minds. With our minds calmed, it becomes clearer so that we understand ourselves better. A good mind can solve any problem.

Buddha representations and Buddhist images should not be treated as fetishes (magical objects). They have no power of their own, except for what we attribute to them. Or, better, whenever we bow before one another, we should visualize the Buddha image; for, this reminds us of our potential for self-awakening.

18 Good Heavens

The kind of **heaven** that a religion promises is the mirror and measure of its spiritual strength. On this tiny blue planet in this neck of boundless space, its denizens offer two kinds of heaven. There are those who promise an eternal heaven for believers who show complete faith in a supreme deity, just as the citizens of a powerful empire show undivided loyalty to a monarch or potentate.

⁴⁷ Dhatu Vibhanga Sutta (M 140), SD 4.7.

⁴⁸ See A K Coomaraswamy, *Elements of Buddhist Iconography*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ Press, 1935:63 n4.

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The everlasting heaven of such a system is a place of eternal pleasure, with the kind of reward depending on what their founders see as desirable, mostly on account of their social and geographical ambience and political fortunes.

A religious system that arose in difficult desert environment understandably would envision a heaven of lush greenery, a sort of garden of Eden. A feudal imperial system, on the hand, would see its heaven as a divinized version of power and justice (as characterized by traditional East Asian religions). As on earth, so in heaven.

The conception of an eternal heaven and its pleasures is only meaningful when foiled against an eternal **hell** and extreme suffering. But who decides who goes to this heaven, who goes to that hell? It is decided by people called “rulers,” so called because they *measure* the worth of those they lord over in fact or by law.

On the other hand, a *life-centred* religion, and here I think Buddhism is a very good example (perhaps the only one), promises neither eternal heaven nor eternal hell. The reason is simple: what is eternal only exists in our imagination, but never in the real world. Whatever exists must exist in time; whatever exists in time is impermanent. Perhaps, we can say that the only eternity is impermanence itself, but this is stepping too close to the edge of language as we know it.

Now let us, for a moment, imagine that the well-regulated heaven-hell system of the God-religions is a behavioural set-up to reward believers and punish unbelievers, backsliders, apostates, and those whom the rulers see as unruly or unruleable. The Buddhist afterlife-worlds, on the other hand, are really much more complicated, because although the hells are the lowest realm, crowded up by the habitually violent and tortured, these are not the only possible worlds.

18 Good heavens

There is **the asura world**, dominated by power-centred narcissistic demons who habitually use and abuse others for their own purposes and pleasure. They are those who would not think twice to fell a whole tree just to sample a few of its fruits, or to kill a golden-egg-laying goose to get *all* the precious eggs at once.

Next we have **the preta world**, haunted by those who find no satisfaction in anything, who collect things, but are unable to delight in any. Whatever they hold or hold dear turns into dirt, dust or dung. Some would fancy the golden touch king Midas of myth to be a pleasant-looking preta.

Then there is **the animal kingdom** that is without any real king; for, its beasts are predictable, fear-driven, self-procreating bodies at worst, or loyal and loved companions and entertainers of humans at best. Many animals are *mouth-born*: they are borne in the mouths of other animals, including humans, and then chewed and eaten.

Then there are **the heavens**, which are generally very spacious and delightful, where pleasures are most satiating as they arise just as we would like them, limited only by our desires. But there is a catch: it is like spending a long holiday in a Club Med resort. The bills there run by the second, surely draining our karmic reserves. Although such Elysian stays can last beyond world-periods, even the gods must in due time fall from their heavens. This is the only way heaven can exist, that is, in impermanence.

There is a silver lining to this heavenly cloud though: even *animals* can go to heaven, especially our pets. All we need to do is treat them well, and let them pass on peacefully. They will be reborn in

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the heavens as divine beings.⁴⁹ All beings with a heart have a chance to go to heaven.

The best of these realms is **the human**, who knows both joy and sorrow, and as such, have golden opportunities for learning about life to the fullest. Unlike the denizens of the other worlds, humans have a capacity for choice between good and evil. Good is the natural course of living beings: it allows us to grow, to evolve out of the cyclic rut of the realms, to spiral into a realm-free state.

Within the limitation of words, such a state has been described as *without here, nor hereafter, nor in between; neither coming nor going; beyond earth, water, fire, wind or space; beyond present, past or future; where consciousness truly find no footing*. If there is any “forever” state, this is it.

19 Global Buddhism

Buddhism is today a global religion, thanks to technology (especially printing, IT and the Internet), an openness to education, and its missionary spirit. A very vital aspect of global Buddhism is a dynamic presence and meeting of Eastern and Western Buddhisms, especially the phenomenal growth of Western Buddhism today. The two are, of course, often closely interwoven, as they are an integral part of global Buddhism.

The globalization of Buddhism can be seen as the two interlinked threads of development, namely, modernization and westernization. Modernization is effectively the rise of “Buddhisms” as Buddhist individuals or groups undergo religious changes, planned and

⁴⁹ See **Animals to heaven**: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/090121AnimalsGoToHeaven.pdf>

unplanned, to keep up with challenges and changes, or to effect and sustain their presence and growth.

We shall here focus our reflection on the interaction between Eastern and Western Buddhisms. An *interaction* arises through seeing differences and a desire to learn from them. This interaction is further healthily encouraged by our common vision of the Buddha Dharma.

The main source of such differences is that, while Eastern Buddhism tends to be more steeped in spiritual insight, Western Buddhism tends to be advantaged with **social maturity**. One interesting characteristic prevails throughout Eastern religious history, that is, the co-existence, even to this day, of a number of religions in the same community or country, even where there is a dominant religion.

Although social and political unrest often storm such societies, the grassroots generally live and let live. Such religions are, as a rule, harmonious, when they are not used or abused by the powerful and the eccentric. This persistence of harmonious co-existence in the East is what nurtures numerous profound contemplative traditions, such as those we see in forest Buddhism.

History is often a record of how humans inflict suffering upon one another, with interludes of peace and prosperity. So it is with religions. In Eastern history, however, we tend to see less overlapping of religion and politics (except perhaps in some forms of Islam) than in Western history. In other words, when the pre-modern generals, kings and emperors went to war or decided to expand their territories, it was only rarely that they did so for the sake of religion: they did so more for the sake of power and territory.

Only in Western history, we see crusades, religious wars and campaigns to assert the presence and power of a particular religion, that is, Christianity. Such spirited and organized belligerence can only occur with *the overlapping of politics and religion*. As a rule,

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the Western rulers and potentates were Christian (or at least nominal ones), and were defenders of the faith.

In terms of social history, such a centralized kingdom or empire (when there was peace) allowed the growth of wealth, knowledge, technology and greater power. With a common religion unifying pre-colonial Europe, whose royal families were often united by marriages, they could then divert their attention to conquer other nations for God, glory and gold; hence, colonialism.

If we were to stand back and look at our histories, we can say that while the religious climate of Eastern history (with less overlapping between politics and religion) tends to *favour religions of personal transformation*, Western history, on the other hand, is marked by *the morganatic marriage between politics and religion*, that necessitates some level of social maturity, needed to hold an empire together, along with its colonies.

The sun may have set over the Western empires, and wars today are more *economic* in nature than *political*, but the West now faces a new kind of invasion: that of Eastern religions, such as Buddhism. In fact, the invasion is so complete now, that we can say that the natives have completely befriended Buddhism to the extent of westernizing it.

Buddhisms, Eastern and Western, can greatly benefit by learning from one another. Eastern Buddhism badly needs to infuse itself with social maturity, that is, we must be willing and able to see ourselves as a “local” community, living and working as Buddhists, and to have the courage to dexterously address both internal problems and external issues with wisdom and compassion.

Western Buddhism, marred by technology-centred materialism, spiritual fuzziness, and religious scandals, can further mature itself by imbibing the Eastern contemplative tradition. They need to turn away from exotic and externalized Buddhisms, and move towards

20 Spiritual friendship

Buddha-like inner spirituality. A global Buddhism that has the hallmarks of spiritual insight and social maturity will make this world a very much better place.

20 Spiritual Friendship⁵⁰

In **the Upaḍḍha Sutta** (S 45.2), the Buddha is recorded as stating that spiritual friendship is *the whole of the holy life*. Spiritual friendship here refers properly to *the meditation teacher's wholesome relationship with his pupil*. The teacher here inspires the student so that he is able to tap his spiritual potential to attain mental peace, clarity and wisdom.

The Meghiya Sutta (U 4.1.7) speaks of the five qualities of spiritual maturity that comes from spiritual friendship. Its first benefit is an intrinsic one: it is good in itself. When we meet our spiritual friends, our spiritual mentors, we cannot but feel a sense of secure joy.

In a sense, spiritual friendship is an unequal relation: the mentor is wiser and more experienced than we are, and from whom we benefit, conducing to our own spiritual growth. This is as natural as water flowing downwards from the heights.

Yet, spiritual friendship, on account of its *interactivity*, also brings the best out of both the mentor and the mentee. In fact, they also often learn a lot from such an interaction, unless they are adepts (“non-learner”), that is, arhats (which means that they are already spiritually perfect).

As such, spiritual friendship is also open to an interactivity *on a level ground*, as it were. Here, the mentor and the mentee inspire one other in the expression of beauty and truth, in mutually raising and

⁵⁰ Abridge from **Bad Friendship**, see SD 64.17.

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refining one another's consciousness. This is called **“true-hearted friendship.”**⁵¹

Great spiritual energy arises from such an interaction. This is the kind of energy that best fuels a Buddhist community, and which inspires others to see their innate goodness and bring it up onto the conscious and active level. It is from such true friendship that we inspire and bring out the artistic talents, intellectual genius and unconditional goodness in others. Spiritual friendship, as such, is **the ground for beauty and truth**, where we are able to truly appreciate that *beauty is truth, and truth beauty*.

When we are truly happy, we will naturally do good. The truly happy are also morally virtuous. Conversely, when we are morally virtuous, we will naturally be happy, too. Spiritual friendship, by its very nature, is a morally interactive relationship. Moral virtue ideally entails the best that we can offer to others, to healthily work and interact with them, through our bodies and speech. This is essentially what the five precepts are about.

Such a morally virtuous life only enhances our spiritual energies, fuelling us with more joyful interest in our activities, connections, and fellowship with others. But we should direct the most vital effort towards our own spiritual development. For, it is our *inner* energies that make our friendship *spiritual*. In exerting such an effort, we continue to grow spiritually and empower ourselves to become spiritual mentors to others.

Spiritual friendship and true-hearted friendship not only create and build up beauty and truth, but they also *refine* our senses to see

⁵¹ True-hearted friendship (*suhada mittatā*): see **Sigāl'ovada Sutta** (D 31.21-26/3:187 f) = SD 4.1.

things within and without ourselves more clearly. We become truly *wise*, so that in due course, we are able to see directly into true reality. We become *awakened*. For this reason, the Buddha declares that spiritual friendship is the *whole* of the holy life.⁵²

21 Buddhism Inc

In the past, wherever Buddhism gains the patronage of the powerful, especially the king or the emperor, it took a life of its own, or took its own life, as some might say. Buddhism, patronized by the powerful, was defined by the powerful. There was only one Buddhist voice: the voice of power and the powerful.

Today, real danger comes from the corporatization of Buddhism, of Buddhism Inc. Buddhist corporations are on the rise. Inspired young people renounce the world, aspiring to taste the true Dharma, and to bring others closer to the true Dharma. But when they finish their training and return home, they find it dominated by Buddhist corporate figures and corporations. They have no voice except that of the corporations; they have no lives, except to serve the corporations.

The Buddha apparently foresees such developments, and he has provided us with a not-so-secret weapon against the corporations, that is, **meditation**. When we meditate on the true nature of our bodies, we see them for what they are: consciousness patched up with the four elements, a love-gift from our parents, sustained by food, but subject to the inclemencies of our surroundings, and is, above all, impermanent. With this understanding, we free our bodies from being corporatized; for, our bodies are really seen for what they are in true light.

⁵² **Upaḍḍha Sutta** (S 45.2/5:2 f = SD 34.9) = (**Kalyāṇa,mitta**) **Appamāda Sutta** (S 3.18/1:87 f = SD 34.3).

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This body-based mindfulness frees our mind from our physical being, whence thoughts proliferate, forming and feeding our self-created worlds. Having given up this fabricated world of the physical senses, we venture into the realm of feelings, of directly knowing pleasure and joy for what they really are—and yes, they are truly beautiful, but *impermanent* all the same. Knowing this, no corporation, no matter how large or powerful or rich could seduce us away from our dawning self-knowing.

As we begin to see how these precious feelings are mind-made, it is easier for us to let them go. It is as if we have held a beautiful flower long enough in our hand to enjoy it. We then let the flower go, and stand away to look at it from a distance, and see a sky of flowers. This is our mind that has brought us these joyful flowers in the first place.

As we dwell intimately with our minds, beyond pain and pleasure, beyond good and evil, in the stillness of inner space, we see what eyes can never see, nor ears hear, nor the nose smells, nor the tongue tastes, nor the body feels, nor the mind thinks. We are the very thing of beauty that poets and maestros toil to sing about, that artists painfully labour to print on canvas, that visionaries can only dream about. We *are* that beauty, we *are* that truth, so that we can really say *beauty is truth, truth beauty*.

Buddhism incorporated can be so attractive when we have no real families, no true friends to turn to, in an increasingly crowding and rushing world. A corporation can delude us into believing our life's questions have been answered, that we have taken control of our lives and those of others. The painful reality is that the most sinister and insidious of corporations is a religious one, sliding on a belly of funds: we are only one of its tiny moving legs.

The magical antidote here is the cultivation of lovingkindness. We need to firstly accept ourselves just as we are, fully forgiving our-

21 Buddhism Inc

selves whatever commissions and omissions that we can remember: they are just memories, the dead that refuse to be buried. We need to leave them buried. Then we go on to accept others just as they are: what we are doing is to free our images of hate, pain and mismeasurements of others. Just as we are happy, let others be happy, too.

We go on building up this lovingkindness, like the sun that always rises and shines brightly on everyone and everything. As our minds and bodies heal themselves, we begin to glow spiritually, inspiring lovingkindness in others, and we begin to make more and more true-hearted friends. For, *friends are not found, they are made*, and the best way to make friends is through lovingkindness, opening the doors of our hearts to others.

The corporation is a heartless money-machine: Buddhism is commodified, thingified. It needs a heart to free itself from itself. It cannot see, as it has no eyes: it needs the Dharma-eye to truly see. Only through clear inner stillness, it can truly see. Only through lovingkindness it will begin to feel. As long as we truly see and truly feel, we cannot be corporatized. Buddhism is not a commodity, not a thing: our acts, words and minds are Buddhism; we *are* Buddhism.

Recommended reading:

The Three Roots Inc (SD 31.12): See: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/31.12-Three-roots-Inc.-piya.pdf>

22 Aliens and UFOs in Buddhism

And on the pedestal these words appear:

“My name is OZYMANDIAS, King of Kings.”

Look on my works ye Mighty, and despair!

No thing beside remains. Round the decay
of that Colossal Wreck, boundless and bare,
the lone and level sands stretch far away.

(Percy Bysshe Shelley, 1818)

In 2001, the Taliban of Afghanistan obliterated what remained of the Buddha statues of Bamiyan, about 230 km (143 mi) northwest of Kabul. There were two images, one (37 m = 121 ft) built in 507, and a bigger one (55 m = 180 ft) in 554, probably by the Kushans, and were the largest examples of standing Buddha carvings in the world.

In the 11th century, when Mahmud of Ghazni attacked Afghanistan and west India, he tried but failed to destroy the images. He ended only looting the Buddhist monasteries there. Even in the 17th century, Nader Shah, the ruler of Iran, using cannons, could not destroy the statues. But in 2001, the Taliban, using dynamite, anti-aircraft guns and artillery, successfully demolished the Buddha images. The demolition efforts began on 2 March, and were completed only after a few weeks.

The question now is: Who really destroyed these precious world-heritage Buddha images? In Buddhism, we try never to blame any people, much less a single person, for wrongs done. They are the result of *many* causes and conditions. Who made and supplied them with those powerful weapons? Why were they so determined to destroy the images which would have been lucrative tourist attractions that would enrich the region? Why were the images built in the first place?

22 Aliens and UFOs in Buddhism

About a year after the bombing, I was invited to attend a Friendship Day inter-faith forum in one of prestigious Singapore schools. It was attended by some 800 international students. The Muslim speaker spoke first and understandably was apologetic, stating that such violence was against the spirit of Islam. The Hindu speaker, too, spoke of non-violence and tolerance. The Christian speaker sadly missed the forum, I was told, as he could not find his way there.

In my turn, I said that we need to look at the incident as a bigger picture. The Buddha images have been put together from the elements, and have to return to them sooner or later. For practising Buddhists, Buddha images represent inner peace and impermanence. Everything in this world, no matter how beautiful or good, must perish. The Taliban only sped up the process.

The historians and art lovers mourned the loss; the informed Buddhists celebrated impermanence.

A Taliban official was reported on an Islamic website as saying that the destruction of the statues was carried out after a single Swedish monuments expert proposed to restore the statues' heads. When the Afghani council suggested that the funds be used to feed the children instead, he refused. The frustrated Taliban reacted by destroying the images.

Is it better to maintain an ancient statue or to feed hungry children? Any thinking Buddhist, any thinking person, would know the right choice. The point is that we could have preserved *both*: the rich past and the living present of the country.

According to the UNICEF 2007 report on "The State of the World's Children," 10.9 million children under five die in developing countries each year. An FAO 2009 news release states that 1.02 billion people do not have enough to eat — more than the total populations of the USA, Canada and the European Union put together.

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Now let us look at a modern “Bamiyan Buddha.” Many people are impressed by the “flying saucer” stupa of the Dhammakāya movement in Thailand. The dome is covered by 300,000 Buddha images. These images and the dome surface were built from silicon bronze, normally used in submarine’s propeller for strength, and covered with titanium and gold. The structure is said to be able to last for 1000 years. The cost: 30,000 million baht (about USD930 million or SGD 1,270 million).

I wonder how many of the world hungry, or the poor and hungry of Thailand herself, all these wealth and technology could have fed?

I feel deeply saddened and alienated as I write this, reflecting on how the religious can so cavalierly use structures and words simply in the rhetorical name of “world peace” and “love for mankind,” oblivious of the true realities, or ignoring them.

It is more meaningful to reflect on the impermanence of the Bamiyan Buddhas and the hungry Afghan children, and do something about it. Or, if we like, we could investigate why the Turkish marauders invaded 11th century India in the first place: there were many golden UFOs then, too.

As Viktor Frankl, the famous neurologist who survived the Holocaust said, “Ever more people today have the means to live, but no meaning to live for.”

23 Good from Bad [see also 4]

Compassion unguided by wisdom easily makes pious fools of us, fearing bad karma even in criticizing evil and wrong, and so we become easy lackeys of the cunning and canny.⁵³ Wisdom untemper-

⁵³ Two examples of such a person, according to **Sigāl’ovāda Sutta** (D 31.-15/3:185), are the sweet-talker (*anuppiya, bhāṇī*, lit “speaker of what is

23 Good from bad

ed by compassion turns us into clever talking heads who would give the best explanations for a problem without raising a finger to solve it.⁵⁴ We need to have a right balance of wisdom and compassion when examining or executing a skillful means.

With such an understanding, let us now examine an oft-quoted modern Zen story; indeed, popular enough to be cited by even non-Buddhists as their own.⁵⁵

Two Zen priests, Tanzan and Ekido, traveling on pilgrimage, came to a muddy river crossing. There they saw a lovely young woman dressed in her kimono and finery, obviously not knowing how to cross the river without ruining her clothes. Without further ado, Tanzan graciously picked her up, held her close to him, and carried her across the muddy river, placing her onto the dry ground.

Then he and Ekido continued on their way. Hours later they found themselves at a lodging temple. And here Ekido

pleasant”), one who says what others like to hear, one who is politically correct at best, a flatterer, a toady, and the destructive companion (*apāya, saḥāya*, lit “a companion who leads one to loss”); Commentary: “a companion who brings about loss of wealth” (*bhogānam apāyesu saḥāyo hoti*, DA 3:948), a wastrel. Quoted at J 2:390,19*.

⁵⁴ Two examples of such a person, according to **Sigāl’ovāda Sutta** (D 31.-15/3:185), are the downright taker (*añña-d-atthu, haro*, lit “one who merely takes away”), the out-and-out robber, and the mere talker (*vacī, paramo*, lit “one who is worda at best”), “a man of much profession” (DPL), one who merely pays lip-service, an empty vessel, an insincere person.

⁵⁵ This popular anecdote seems to have inspired a number of quotes and adaptations: Daoist, <http://weblog.raganwald.com/2007/10/three-stories-about-tao.html>; Jewish, http://www.bethelsudbury.org/jewish_basics/text005.php3?page=735; Catholic, <http://www.fisheaters.com/twomonks.html>

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could no longer restrain himself and gushed forth his complaints:

“Surely, it is against the rules what you did back there.... Touching a woman is simply not allowed.... How could you have done that? ... And to have such close contact with her! ... This is a violation of all monastic protocol...”

Thus he went on with his verbiage. Tanzan listened patiently to the accusations.

Finally, during a pause, he said, “Look, I set that girl down back at the crossing. Are you still carrying her?”

(Based on an autobiographical story by Japanese Zen master Tanzan)

Tanzan (1819-1892) was a Japanese Buddhist priest and professor of philosophy at the Japanese Imperial University (now the University of Tokyo) during the Meiji period. He was regarded as a Zen master, and figured in several well-known koans, and was also well-known for his disregard of many of the precepts of everyday Buddhism, such as dietary laws.⁵⁶

The first thing we should note is that this is an autobiographical Zen story; it probably did not happen, not exactly in this manner, anyway. For if it did, then it has a serious ethical problem, where one projects oneself as being “good” at the cost of the perceived evil or foolishness of another. I think it was the Irish playwright, George

⁵⁶ Japanese Zen practitioners’ disregard for Buddhist precepts is proverbial, and which is psychologically compensated by their almost military ritual formalism. Compounded by the Japanese culture of face and silence, serious breach of human decency easily occurs, esp with Japanese masters in the West. See eg the case of the notorious Shimano sensei:

http://www.thezensite.com/ZenEssays/CriticalZen/Aitken_Shimano_Letters.html.

23 Good from bad

Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) who was said to have quipped, “There are bad women because there are good women.”

Indeed, a bodhisattva who is regarded as good or compassionate on account of the evil or lack of others would actually be a selfish person, as such a bodhisattva would not be independently good. A true bodhisattva is one who, being himself a highly virtuous being, is capable of inspiring goodness in others, even to the bodhisattva’s disadvantage.

Tanzan’s self-told tale has a serious moral flaw if he made himself to appear virtuous at the cost of Ekido’s concern for the Vinaya. Such a person as Ekido, however, was simply rare in Meiji Japan, where priests were, as a rule, non-celibate. As such, it was likely that Tanzan had invented a Vinaya-respecting monk as a foil for his self-righteousness.

Feminists might object that the story demeans women. It could well be a man waiting helplessly by the rushing waters, and two strong nuns (a Zen nun and a Vinaya nun) happen to arrive. The Zen nun then laughingly tells the poor man, “What water? There is no one to cross over!” The compassionate Vinaya nun carries the poor man across and leaves him on the far shore, and resumes her journey.

Tanzan’s tale, in fact, reveals his serious lack of understanding of the Vinaya rules or deliberate disregard for them. For, in a real life situation, even a Vinaya-observing orthodox Theravada monastic would help this person (man or woman) in every way he could, or he would ask his colleague or some other capable person or persons to help the helpless. If a Vinaya-minded monastic helps the helpless, he has done a good deed by breaking only a minor rule, for which he only needs to confess before another monastic, and remind himself or herself not to wander into improper places the next time. There is no need of any skillful means here, only common sense.

24 Buddhism Rises in the West

Buddhism first became globalized with Alexander the Great's invasion of northwest India (4th century BCE). This cultural cross-current gave us at least one remarkable Buddhist work, one on apologetics, entitled the *Milinda,pañha* (The Questions of Milinda).

Milinda was **Menander 1 Soter** (reigned 155-130 BCE), a Buddhist ruler of the Indo-Greek Bactrian kingdom in present-day Pakistan. With Greek influence, too, we see perhaps the most beautiful of Buddha images, modelled after the sun-god, Apollo, complete with wavy hair, flowing pleated robes and radiant halo.

Buddhism reached its height in the time of the Indian emperor Asoka (3rd century BCE), who is said to have sent out various missions that brought Buddhism to south and southeast Asia and Vietnam, Persia (modern Iran), the Middle East (including Israel), Egypt and the West, especially Asia Minor (or Anatolia, including modern Turkey), Greece, and Italy. With the rise of the Abrahamic religions, much of this is history now, although we still see vestiges of Buddhist stories in local folk tales, especially that of "Barlaam and Josaphat," a Christianized version of the Buddha story.⁵⁷

Apparently, the Buddha's relics made their way to the West. Few mediaeval Christian names are better known than those of **Barlaam and Josaphat**,⁵⁸ who were credited with the "second conversion" of India to "Christianity," after the country had relapsed to "paganism" following the mission of the Apostle Thomas. Barlaam and Josaphat were remembered in the roll of saints recognized by the

⁵⁷ See eg http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barlaam_and_Josaphat.

⁵⁸ See, eg, Graeme MacQueen's "Changing Master Narratives in Midstream: *Barlaam and Josaphat* and the Growth of Religious Intolerance in the Buddhalegend's Westward Journey." *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 5 1998: 144-166.

24 Buddhism rises in the West

Roman Catholic Church with the festival day of **27 November**. In the Greek Church, Iosaph (Josaphat) was commemorated on **26 August**, while the Russians remember both Barlaam and Iosaph, together with the latter's father, king Abenner (Suddhodana), on **19 November** (2 December, Old Style).

Sir Henry Yule once visited a church at Palermo, Italy, dedicated to "**Divo Josaphat.**" In 1571, the Doge Luigi Mocenigo presented to king Sebastian of Portugal **a bone and part of the spine** of St Josaphat. When Spain annexed Portugal in 1580, these sacred treasures were removed by Antonio, the pretender to the Portuguese throne, and ultimately found its way to Antwerp, Belgium, where they were preserved in the cloister of St Salvator.

After the European colonists had settled in India, with the arrival of Roman Catholic missionaries, some of them were struck by the similarities between episodes and features of the life of St Josaphat and those of the Buddha, as is clearly evident from the early 17th century Portuguese writer **Diogo do Couto** who declared this fact.

By the 1850s, European scholars doing comparative study of the legend of St Josaphat ("Bodhisat") and the life of the Buddha, "came to the startling conclusion that for almost a thousand years, the Buddha in the guise of the holy Josaphat, had been revered as a saint of the principal Churches of Christendom"! (D M Lang, introduction, *Barlaam & Josaphat*, 1967:x-xi).

With Western colonialism and European contacts with the East, Buddhism again began flowing back to the West, beginning with scriptural scholarship, and is now blossoming into numerous Western Buddhist groups and teachings. After about a century of Western Buddhist scholarship, we now have even more accurate editions and translations of the early Buddhist texts, complete with critical apparatus in English and other European languages.

Revisioning Buddhism

Following the 1960 hippie counterculture that experimented in Oriental religions and altered states of consciousness, a growing number of Westerners, including many well-educated seekers, came to the East to become Theravada monastics, Zen priests and Vajrayana practitioners. The latter two traditions have been successfully westernized, although not without some major hiccups.⁵⁹

A new, and very important, development is the interest of **Western science in Buddhist meditation**, especially the mindfulness practices of early Buddhism. This interest in Buddhist psychology started over a century ago, with pioneers like William James, but it was only in the mid-20th century that the momentum began to pick up.

Mind scientists can now see and measure, for example, what happens in the human brain during meditation. So significant is this new meeting of science and religion, between Western psychology and ancient Buddhism, that scientists now even have their own annual retreats conducted by other scientists experienced in Buddhist meditation.⁶⁰

When Buddhism went beyond India and changed the societies that adopted it, Buddhism was in turn changed by these societies, so that what are originally the Buddha's teachings and methods went through a sea-change or were altogether set aside. However, with more Westerners and the Western-educated turning to "forest" Buddhism today, seeking a more pristine practice in early Buddhist meditation, we now have a better chance of tasting the refreshing spiritual springwater at its source, as it were.

The 20th-century British historian, Arnold Toynbee, was attributed with the saying, "The coming of Buddhism to the West may well prove to be the most important event of the Twentieth Century." The truth of such words goes beyond who actually said them. Let's

⁵⁹ See **Bad friendship**, SD 64.17.

⁶⁰ See **Meditation and Consciousness** = SD 17.8c.

25 Poetry in prose

say it is now becoming common wisdom of an uncommon phenomenon.

25 Poetry in Prose

Some say that we can never know the Buddha's Teachings through books, or even the Suttas. They might be right, but the question remains whether this is for the wrong reasons or the right ones. Jealous gurus, for example, often teach us not to read anything at all, because listening to their teachings alone is sufficient, indeed necessary, for salvation. This is an effective way of preventing extra-curricular learning that may make the followers outshine their guru, or to doubt him.

On the other hand, it is unlikely that many of us could ever read everything there is on Buddhism. Still, we need to be well informed on our living values. The point is that many of us tend to look at Buddhism only on the surface, and leave it at that. This is our "view" of Buddhism. We have never really looked any deeper into the heart of Buddhism, so to speak, so that even when we do hear some truly insightful teachings, we might fail to see it.

Even a teaching in Dharma language (an explicit teaching) is at best "conceptual" to the unawakened, especially the intellectually-inclined or inattentive. Indeed, when the Buddha teaches using Dharma language, it *sounds* the same to all his listeners, but it *means* differently to each of them depending on their wisdom and readiness.

A remarkable example of this is the story of **the weaver's daughter of Āḷāvī** (DhA 3:170 ff). When the Buddha gazes at her, it is said, she intuitively knows that he wants her to approach him, and the following dialogue (called **the Four Questions**) ensues before the bemused gathering:

Buddha: Where do you come from, young girl?

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Girl: I know not, venerable sir.
Buddha: Where are you going?
Girl: I know not, venerable sir.
Buddha: Do you not know?
Girl: I know, venerable sir?
Buddha: Do you know?
Girl: I know not, venerable sir. (DhA 3:172 f)

The four questions respectively mean:

“Where were you before you were reborn here?”
“Where will you be reborn?”
“Do you know that you will surely die?”
“When will you die?”

The crowd that “listens” only conceptually to the Buddha does not understand his words; but the weaver’s daughter understands him intuitively. She answers the questions correctly and gains the wisdom-eye that sees reality directly.

The Buddha’s teachings preserved in the early texts are so deceptively simple that we might skim through them without ever feeling what lies between the lines or behind the words. These words are the guardians and door-keepers of the true Dharma. Of course, we need to befriend these guardians first, but we should not fraternize with them, nor get lost in word-play with them. We should move on into the Dharma Palace and taste the teaching for ourselves.

Some of us may find the repetitiveness of the Sutta passages boring, but they were not put there to bore us. It is our own defilements that bore us! The point is that these texts are not so much to be read as they are to be *performed*. These are precise details on

25 Poetry in prose

how to direct our minds to see beyond the prose into the poetry of awakening.⁶¹

The Buddha teaches the ascetic Bāhiya how to reflect on the body, feelings, the mind and mental phenomena, just as they are. When this is properly done, says the Buddha,

*then, you are “not by that”;
when you are “not by that,”
then you will “not be therein”;
when you are “not therein,”
then you will “be neither here nor beyond nor in between
the two.”*

The phrase “**not by that**” means that we would not be aroused “this or that” lust, hate, delusion, or fear.

“**Not be therein**” means that we would not be caught up *in* any experience, such as in visual forms, sounds, etc.

“**Be neither here, nor there, nor in between the two**” means that we would not be reborn anywhere, not into this world again, nor into some heaven, nor be caught in any intermediate state. Bāhiya became a layman arhat.⁶²

We may not become arhats after reading this, but we may be better prepared to use the suttas in a spiritually effective way. We should first carefully read the instructive parts of the sutta that we like, reflecting on them a sentence or a phrase at a time. After each reflection, remain silent for a while to let the meaning arise, and then let it sink in. Don’t think the Dharma: *feel* it. Stillness will

⁶¹ For a helpful reading, see Rupert Gethin, “Mythology as meditation: From the Mahāsudassana Sutta to the Sukhāvativyūha Sūtra,” *Journal of the Pali Text Society* 28 2006:63-112, esp 95 f.

⁶² See **Māluṅkya,putta Sutta** (S 35.95/4:72-75) & SD 5.9 Intro (2) & **Bāhiya Sutta** (U 1.10/6-8) = SD 33.7.

follow: stay with it joyfully as long as you wish. You will soon see the bright moonlight in the flowing stream.

26 My Influence on the Buddha

All right, so I've got you started on reading this write-up by an impossible, even dishonest, title. Yet I don't think I can be more honest than what I am trying to express here. Let me state my aim more clearly before I pique (annoy) those who have greater influence on the Buddha to write to me demanding clarification.

How sure am I about what I know of the Buddha? What are my sources on Buddhism? Do I really *know* Buddhism, or do I only know *about* Buddhism, or do I only know *of* Buddhism? Reflecting on these questions might well whet our interest in not being tricked into becoming a blind believer.

To know *about* a religion is merely to rely on the five physical senses here. The eye (eg reading books on religion); the ear (eg listening to sermons); the nose (eg smelling incense); the tongue (eg singing hymns); the body (eg doing prostrations). But less often, we use the mind (we need to examine all this more deeply).

To know *of* a religion is even less helpful, that is, to learn about it from those who only know *about* it. More positively, either way can be a good start to learning Buddhism, that is, if we continue to work in experiencing Buddhism directly. The Buddha, soon after his awakening and just before his passing, that is, his first and last message (it's the same message) to us, admonishes us *to place the teaching above the teacher*, to hold the Dharma before any guru.⁶³

⁶³ **Gāraṇa Sutta** (S 6.2/1:138-140) = SD 12.3 & **Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16.2.26/2:100 f) = SD 9.

26 My influence on the Buddha

Look for a guru, we will find a cult. Look for the Dharma, we will find good teachers. A guru is often like a dirty mirror: we cannot see ourselves clearly in it, but we take the distorted image to be mystifying, even intoxicating. The Dharma is a clear mirror in which we can see our true selves, and a good teacher is one who helps us clean this looking-glass so that we see even better.

Then there are those who might laugh it off or joke it away, telling us that there is *no* looking-glass, so what cleaning is there? If we fall for such empty words, we will return to square one. We have fallen down the ladder and are swallowed up by the snake.

Religion is often a manifestation of our desire, hate, fear or delusion, a projection of our unfulfilled wishes or preconceived view, even a denial of everyday reality.⁶⁴ We need to question ourselves often and honestly about our faith, so that we do not go on to mislead and hurt others with our views. The healing starts with mindfulness, that is, to elevate our unconscious or repressed states into the conscious mind, dealing with them for what they are, and freeing them forever.

Otherwise, we could fall deeply in love with a power-figure, or run after our past that we see in a guru. For example, some of those who are enthralled by the Star Wars movies have started a Jedi religion: there is even a Jedi Church with a global following. Admittedly, this is more fun, and definitely less harmful, than most cults. However, once we realize that the Force is not really with us, we should move on.

Buddhism, as a religion, uses stories, myths, parables and figures to present its message. Such a message often instructs us to do something or not to do something. In other words, we are expected to behave and believe in a certain way so that we become better peo-

⁶⁴ See **How Buddhism became Chinese** = SD 40b.3 (Cosmic Buddhas and Paradises).

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ple. As such, it would be strange if we were to, say, merely frame up or enshrine this message and worship it.

The Lotus Sutra, for example, is full of interesting parables, stories and ideas, but it was composed around three hundred or more years *after* the Buddha's time. We do not know its author or authors (could they be like the highly motivated graduates and professionals of today?). But the way the Lotus Sutra demeans the historical Buddha and the early saints, leaves informed Buddhists wondering what their real agenda was. Buddhism unquestioned is like a dead cult.

Perhaps, post-Buddha writings like the Lotus Sutra are what we today call a "statement" on social engagement. Some highly-motivated people those days might have felt that the monastics were not doing enough in spreading Buddhism or alleviating suffering, and wanted them to be more "pro-active." Or, on the other hand, could it have been written by those who wished to sabotage the historical Buddha's teachings?

Now, the Buddha had passed away, but there are those who could not accept his death. They fell into a state of denial of cosmic proportions, and created an eternal cosmic Buddha, like a God-figure. The habit is catching: *we tend to create gods in our own image*. In fact, our influence on the Buddha, for example, seems to grow with the generations. Shouldn't we try to correct this image problem, or at least examine why it arose in the first place?

In the last century, we have a new, even more influential, way of looking at the Buddha: that of the academic scholars. We now have the scholars' Buddhism. British author, David Lodge, in his novel, "Small World" (1988), a humorous campus romance (but a serious work), makes one of its characters, Persse McGarrigle, write a thesis on the influence of T S Eliot (1888-1965) on Shakespeare (1564-1616)!

27 The meditation without a name

Many scholars are as sure of themselves about their Buddhism as some traditionalists are about their Dharma. The point is that both of them have their valuable insights, and we need to learn from both. Better still, we should search the suttas and let them speak for themselves.

Some may think that this reflection is “narrow”; I would prefer to take it as being more “focussed.” We all have heard of the proverbial *frog in the well or under a coconut-shell*. But do the frogs really mind being safe in a well or the water or under a shell? For, that’s where all the nutritious mosquitoes are, and where they are safe from predators.

In fact, there is a beautiful story of a frog in the water who becomes awakened: **the Maṇḍuka Deva,putta Vimāna Vatthu** (the Mansion Story of the Frog Deva) (Vv 5.1). Once, while the Buddha is teaching, a frog listens captivated by his soothing voice. A farmer, standing nearby, accidentally pokes him with his stick, killing him.

The frog, dying with a peaceful heart, is reborn immediately as a beautiful deva, as though waking up, in the heaven of the Thirty-three. Recalling his good karmic fruit, he appears before the Buddha to show his gratitude. The Buddha then teaches the Dharma to the deva, and he attains streamwinning.

27 The Meditation Without a Name

Meditation is the Buddha’s greatest gift to the world. The Buddha made this contribution over 2500 years ago, and we can still benefit from it even today. This is a true transmission of the calm and clear mind that anyone who is open enough can receive.

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Before the Buddha's time, meditation was mostly a secret teaching by exclusivist gurus. Not everyone was allowed to learn it. Only those of the higher social classes would be taught by such priests.

With his awakening, the Buddha opened the door of salvation to all beings. He taught anyone who came to him, from any class, or no class (the outcastes), the religious or the non-religious. As such, Buddhism is the first *open* religion, not a tribal system. The reason for the openness of Buddhism, especially its meditation, is a natural one. An open mind is a healthy mind. Conversely, a closed mind tends to be fearful, stressful, even paranoid.

Buddhist meditation works so well that during the last 50 years or so, mind scientists have made great progress in learning about it and using it to learn about our brain, the mind and healing. Meditation is often used as a complementary therapy especially in cases where long-term treatment is needed. Meditation helps to significantly speed up the healing process. And in some cases, such as stress management, even using meditation alone can be effective.

Due to its efficacy, meditation is now openly used by professional psychotherapists and the healing professions. We have, for example, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), and Breathwork. The reasons for such professional labellings are partly because the meditation methods are selective and modified in terms of the therapist's needs, and to distinguish one professional or commercial therapy method from another.

The New Age groups have Zen Yoga and Transcendental Meditation. Religious groups and guru-centred groups have their own exotic names. What's in a name? A selling point. Such labellings are clearly to attract followers and clients. Understandably, such groups use impressive publicity and media advertisings. The point is that a "named" meditation is necessarily a self-limiting one.

27 The meditation without a name

Early Buddhist meditation, on the other hand, has no name, and it comprises some 30-40 types of meditation. Even the popular word “meditation” is a modern one, which may give the wrong idea that prayer is involved. However, we can still use this word, bearing in mind that prayer is not intrinsic to Buddhist meditation. The Buddhist texts themselves describe meditation as “concentration” (*samā-dhi*), “cultivation” (*bhāvanā*), dhyana (*jhāna*), and so on, depending on the method and purpose of the meditation. To “cultivate” the mind, we have to do it ourselves. No one else can cultivate our minds for us.

Here are some pointers for taking up a safe and effective meditation method:

- (1) The teacher or instructor is himself a calm and friendly person. (Some teachers may dress in a bizarre way, which might suggest eccentricity, or a desire for power or status. Meditation is not about being well dressed, anyway.)
- (2) The teacher makes no claim to special powers for himself or to change your life, as your own meditation will work for you.
- (3) The teacher answers your meditation questions patiently in a clear and relevant manner, and does not ridicule or belittle you.
- (4) We feel generally good about the meditation, or feel calmer than before.

Meditation is not about charismatic teachers or powerful gurus or famous masters. It is about spending quiet time with oneself, being at peace with oneself. As we enjoy the meditative peace, we leave more and more of our unhappy past behind us, and live more and more in the present, truly *enjoying* (feeling joy) in the people we meet and in what we are doing.

Above all, one of the best benefits of meditation is that it makes us *emotionally independent*. We are not dependent on anyone or

anything for our happiness. We are happy because we have decided to be happy. Then we are in a good position to fully live life, and to bring joy to others, too.

28 How Religions Learn

Religions often copy from one another. Those who are more adept at such copying succeed as dominant faiths or religions of considerable wealth and influence. In fact, a comparative study of religions is an examination of how religions influenced one another in their quest to collect followers or assert themselves.

In our times of democracy, open learning and secularism, no organized religion, if it is wise or has some common sense, would use forceful methods of conversion. Indeed, mainly because history has painfully and significantly separated the church from the state, spiritual faith from secular power, that major religions must today humbly, and with good sense, resort to *ecumenism* amongst their own estranged sectarians, and to *dialogue* with other faiths that they once denigrated. A religion heals best in a *love* mode, but hurts most in a *power* mode.

How can a religion accept others without contradicting itself? There are two ways: one is the “supremacy doctrine” and the other is the “reality vision.” The supremacy doctrine is seen, for example, in the Catholic Church’s skillful use of the evangelist John’s opening statement, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”⁶⁵ “Word” is translated from the Greek “logos.”

For the Church, this means that everything is “under God.” Thus, it makes sense for them to be open with other religions, such as Bud

⁶⁵ The New Oxford Annotated Bible.

28 How religions learn

dhism, which after all are a part of God's grand plan. Moreover, Buddhism, despite its relative lack of organization, is now a global faith through "reverse evangelism," that is, people are naturally attracted to its teachings of self-reliance, inner peace and universal spirituality, without the necessity of being religious, attracted to it as a secular religion or non-religious spirituality.

The Buddhists, on the other hand, welcome such peaceful openness, because such was the ambience in which Buddhism arose in India. It was an ambience that inspired and encouraged deep and diverse spirituality.

Christian missionary zeal went hand in hand with Western colonialism. Conversions were most rampant where people did not have strong spiritual roots, but were driven more by material wants and political tides. Nations with strong religious roots (such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand) remained effectively untouched by such evangelism.

Some of the evangelical efforts made by the colonial missionaries are worth examining. Space allows only one example, that of Adoniram Judson's translation of the Christian Bible into Burmese (1834), where he renders John 1:1 (read in English) as "In the beginning was the Dharma, and the Dharma was with God, and the Dharma was God."

The Latin Vulgate reads this line as "In principio erat verbum." Here, "verbum" means "word." But in 1519, the famous humanist theologian Erasmus of Rotterdam tried to correct "verbum" (yes, the gospel word itself) to "sermo," meaning "speech." Erasmus was inspired by the Church fathers, and felt that God should be something more active than merely a "word." But the Church remained unimpressed.

The Buddhists, too, are unimpressed with Judson's translation for two reasons. Firstly, they know that they are being fished with their

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own bait, as it were. More importantly, they know that “Dharma” is everything to everyone: it is a word with the most senses (like “thing” in English). So Judson’s translation backfired!

The point is that the Burmese have no word for “Word,” as envisioned by those Christians (just as the Chinese do not have a proper word for “sin,” because they happily lack such a cultural or emotional experience, until the missionaries put it into their heads!). If other religions prosper on account of planting and growing concepts and dogmas, Buddhism liberates us by teaching us to *free* ourselves from concepts and dogmas, so that we directly and fully experience life by rejoicing in true reality.

The true strength of Buddhism, therefore, is not in the word, spoken or printed. The true strength of Buddhism is *the silent spirit of the joyful heart*, that is, meditation. It is a teaching that seeks not to convert others, but to convert oneself to true peace and clarity, and to unconditionally *love oneself* and *to love others as we love oneself*. In fact, meditation is such an effective spiritual tool that other religions see it as an expedient for their own purposes, too.

In 2001, the monk Santikaro, a pupil of the famed Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, was in Singapore, on invitation, to teach meditation in Damien Hall at the Church of the Blessed Sacrament, and two other Convents. This is not surprising, as Catholicism once had a strong contemplative tradition, and now felt a need to recharge itself, as it were, learning from whomever and whatever that could recharge its spirituality.⁶⁶ Buddhist teachers, of course, joyfully minister to

⁶⁶ This vital contribution is witnessed here for posterity. Such Catholic practices as monasticism, chanting, the rosary, and incense, too, are evidently rooted in Buddhism, but more research is needed for a more complete understanding of such processes. Much evidence, for example, were lost with the burning of the ancient library at Alexandria. **Edward Gibbon**, in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, claimed that the Library of

29 Buddhism for dummies

this “third field” of spiritual cultivation as the occasion arises. (The first field is that of the monastics, and the second, the lay followers.)

The Dharma or truth is indeed found in all true religions, especially those that teach us to be responsible for our actions, and that there is a higher purpose in life other than worldly works and joys. Every religion, too, is unique each in their own way (otherwise, they would not need to exist). What is unique about Buddhism is its “reality vision”: what prevents us from understanding Godhood, salvation or awakening is *our own sense of self*, which we need to totally let go of. We need to be *empty* of the self so that we can be *filled* with the awakening spirit.

29 Buddhism for Dummies

No, I don’t mean you are a dummy. But if we believe in a Buddhism that is a dummy (not the real thing, or not useful), then we would surely not benefit, or worse, we would be taken for a really bad ride. Religion, in our age of self-anointed gurus, IT and materialism, can be a crowded and dangerous place where any kind of religion (including Buddhism) are peddled, but they are really moneytheistic counterfeits or false teachings. (Try to think what kind of people would do such things.)

Religious scriptures and commentaries are easily available in our languages and media, and this only opens the flood-gates of religion marketing. If we have a flare for out-speaking others, or enjoy an audience of some kind, we can easily start a religion, or at least promote a guru we admire.

Alexandria was destroyed by the intolerant Theophilus, Bishop of Alexandria, in 391 (ed J B Bury, 5:87 ch 28).

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Now, in the evening in my life, having spent some forty years with religion, mostly Buddhism, I must say that religion and evangelism can be insidiously harmful: they can hurt and twist our minds without our knowing it. Even Buddhism, often regarded as the gentlest of faiths, is *too dangerous to be left in the hands of others*. The safest and most effective religion is a do-it-yourself (DIY) teaching. For newbies, Buddhism is best served DIY.

For any DIY, we need manuals. The best DIY religion manual is, for me, the Sutta Pitaka, that is, the early teachings of the Buddha. “Early Buddhism” may not be the exact words of the Buddha, but it is the closest we can get. It works much better than what I can tell you, or what some paperback writer can sell you.

Most importantly, I do not want you to take my word for it here. Search the scriptures, look up the Suttas for yourself. Use a good translation, of which many are available today. Many online translations are freely available.⁶⁷

Start by skimming the texts or listening to them, and look for something that interests you. Read or listen as much as you like. If you look or listen hard enough, you will find cross-references to other Suttas or related writings. Let what you do not know (eg what does *anusaya* mean?) spur you on until you understand the topic or teaching.

It is even better if you can communicate or email with a proper teacher, especially if you are studying his books or teachings. If he is patient and wise in responding to your queries, that is good. The most important topic to learn from a living teacher is, of course, meditation. This is best done face to face, so that you are guided step by step.

⁶⁷ For example, <http://dharmafarer.org> or <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/>

29 Buddhism for dummies

However, if you are living in Peru or Greenland or China, this might be difficult. In that case, try to look for simple guidelines by professional Buddhists, and try out at least two basic meditations, that is, breath meditation and lovingkindness meditation. With such hands-on experience, it is easier to communicate with an experienced and compassionate teacher who is willing to help you out online (as a start).

One caveat. Don't rush panting up to a Buddhist-looking figure on the road or some place. First, we have the problem of the *self-ordained*, who might, overtly or covertly, try to sell themselves as being more than what they really are. If we are fortunate enough, they are merely eccentric guru-figures, or some fund-seeking tale-spinners. Secondly, we have *ordained priests* who abscond once they are given the religious dress, that is, they do not undergo proper training. Thirdly, there might be those with very strange views and habits who promise us easy answers without our having to do anything! For our own safety and sanity, and for the sake of our loved ones, it best we keep away from such gurus.

Every person, lay or ordained, Buddhist or not, has the right to ask the following questions to a monk or priest, to have a good idea that he is bona fide. Ask these two key questions:

- (1) What is your name and in which temple are you ordained?
- (2) Who is your teacher and how many years are you a monk or nun?

How he answers can tell a lot about him. If he is upset, we should at once bid him goodbye. If he launches a sales pitch (Why do you want to know these things? etc), and is evasive, we should leave as soon as possible, too.

On the other hand, he might actually tell us the facts. If he says he is five years or less as a newly ordained monk, then we must tell him that he should be with a proper teacher, and not be freelanc-

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ing. Be firm in telling him that we and our colleagues will never support such monastics or priests. Even if he claims he has been wearing the cloth for many years, you should observe his behaviour, which of course needs a bit of know-how.

If a monastic tells us that we should not be reading or knowing the Vinaya (the monastic discipline), we can be sure something is seriously amiss. The Vinaya is not a business secret “for monastics only.” They contain rules and disciplinary matters, many of which are laid down by the Buddha himself. Good monks have even written such booklets as “The Bhikkhus’ Rules: A guide for laypeople,”⁶⁸ which you are recommended to read and tell others about.

The best way to protect the Three Treasures from “yellow-necks”⁶⁹ and false teachers are for us to study Buddha Dharma and practise it ourselves. A key teaching to look for is how to overcome the idea of “self,” and learning to care for others as we would for ourselves. These are the “five basic Buddhist practices”:

- (1) Love life and living beings; be as non-violent as possible.
- (2) Do not take the not-given; give freely what can truly benefit others.
- (3) Respect your person and that of others; sex is best served with lovingkindness.

⁶⁸ See <http://www.buddhanet.net/cmdsg/layguide.htm>, or download from <http://enlight.lib.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JR-MISC/misc140954.pdf>.

⁶⁹ In the **Dakkhiṇa Vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 142), the Buddha prophesizes that “In the future, Ānanda, there will be members of the religious lineage who are ‘yellow-necks,’ immoral, of evil nature” (M 142.8/3:256) = SD 1.9. People will give them gifts for the sake of the Sangha.” In Pali, *kāsāva, kaṇṭha*, ie those who ritually don the saffron robe, and when they remove them, leave the saffron taints on their necks. The Commentary says that they will go about with only a piece of yellow cloth around their necks or arms, and will support their wives and children by engaging in trade and farming, etc (MA 5:74 f).

30 Buddhism without words

- (4) Tell the truth in a timely and beneficial manner; above all, be true to ourselves.
- (5) Do not take any substance or indulge in any activity that is addictive and dulls the mind: for, our body-mind is the vehicle to inner peace and awakening.

The safest place for the Dharma is in our own hearts.

30 Buddhism Without Words

The academic study of Buddhism has reached such a level today that we have an ever better idea of who the Buddha was, what he taught, and how the disciples of his times (and after him) lived. An important reason for this is that these scholars have applied various disciplined approaches to studying the Buddha and his teachings.

Such scholarly approaches are, of course, mostly Western or westernized disciplines. These scholars are generally aware that we tend to create (or project our own ideas onto) the religion we are studying. J Z Smith, in the Introduction to his “Imagining Religion” (1982), insightfully observes that

“Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study. It is created for the scholar’s analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no existence apart from the academy.” (1982:xi)

We can similarly say that “Buddhism is solely the creation of the Buddhist teacher, the sutta instructor, the titled professional, the undergraduate, the adolescent, the child who tells us about it. But then, don’t we all create our own worlds by projecting our familiarities and fancies onto our experiences?

There lies the rub. We knew things, that is, our experiences, our Buddhisms, our religions, are but expressions and reflections of our

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undead past. We have projected our own imaginings and aspirations onto the present. After all, we are our thoughts; or more exactly, we are what we have thought. Past perfect tense. We are perfectly tensed up by our past.

However, is there a chance that we are not deluding ourselves? Is there a chance that what we have created and projected actually overlaps with what the Buddha himself teaches taught? But how would we know this? Perhaps we could rely on the primary sources (the suttas), or the Abhidhamma, or our perfect guru, or even our favourite speaker.

But, as we have noted, we have merely created and projected our own meanings onto them. They are, after all, what we have been looking for. They are what we want them to be. We have created them in own image. Looks like we have a double-bind here.

We need to get down to basics: we must get down from our Zen cloud, as it were, the wordy fuzz and silly sounds we all are capable of fooling ourselves with. So what if we have tasted a koan? Are we *better* people, or are we merely better at *talking* about koans? We are all, we might say, Zennists at heart: that's the ultimate koan. We are liable to be fooled by words.

Some may charge me as knocking down Zen, but I am only rejecting the intellectual air and cloudiness. As D T Suzuki, the famous 20th-century Zen exponent, humorously observes: "Zen claims to be 'a specific transmission outside the scripture and to be altogether independent of verbalism,' but it is Zen masters who are the most talkative and most addicted to writing of all sorts."⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Intro to Zenkei Shibayama's *A Flower Does Not Talk*, Rutland, VT: Tuttle, 1971:9.

30 Buddhism without words

Frankly, I am completely ignorant of koans, and happily so. My great doubt, I'm sure, keeps me safe from being slapped, finger-chopped and cut in half with koans!

If we are already feeling a bit miffed at this point, that's good :). (It's even more healing to examine what *really* is making us miffed: surely not these dry dead letters.) Let us stop reading for a moment and carefully observe ourselves in the present moment.

Or worse, we might actually like these foolish words from my pre-breakfast epiphany. Hunger has a way of invoking in us what our being fed up deprives us of.

Some might say this is just being clever with words. But we forget that we ourselves could excel so, too, given a chance to speak before an audience, or post something about it online, or write a book. Words, words, words. We can be naked and lost without them.

Imagine we are suddenly deprived of words and language. How then can the Zennist blurb his zen? Or the preacher sell his God? Or the conmen con? Notice how children, not so sophisticated in language, befriend one another as easily as they quarrel. We smile at their childish squabbles, and think we know better. Then we ourselves squabble, only to know much later how childish we are. Aren't we still living in the past?

Amidst the words and noises of our lives, we vitally need to feel a constant silence in between. Wisdom lies in the spaces separating each letter and mark; peace rests in the silence spacing every word. When we are one with our breath, we see real beauty and true reality. This is the vision of emotional independence, of being truly happy for itself and breaking the wall between self and other.

We need to cut down the forest of words, but not the tree of wisdom. Religion is a jungle, Buddhism is a forest; the Dharma is a tree. Avoid the jungle. Cut down the forest, but not the tree (Dh 283).

31 A Truly Buddhist Christmas?

Buddhists are generally a very good-naturedly tolerant lot. We are happy to see others (human and non-human) happy. This is the true Buddhist spirit.

However, when Buddhists greet other Buddhists “merry Christmas” (not uncommon in Singapore and to some extent in Malaysia, too), it makes me wonder how meaningful this is, and how helpful (or how damaging) this can be?

The first thing that strikes me is that I see no Christians wishing any Buddhist “happy Vesak” on our most sacred day. Much less have I ever heard of Christians wishing one another happy Vesak.

Furthermore, if we are so generous in such greetings, we should also wish non-Muslims “selamat Hari Raya,” we should wish non-Hindus “happy Deepavali,” or wish non-Daoists “happy Laozi day” and so on. We are unlikely to do this. Why?

The reasons then become more obvious. Please join me in reflecting on a few of these reasons. Firstly, we generally regard Christmas (consciously or unconsciously) as a great commercial holiday. But would our Christian friends approve of this? Imagine others taking Vesak to be purely a commercial holiday!

The second reason is even more important and worth examining more deeply. For easy reference, I call this the “Christmas syndrome,” that is, our minds are still colonized by Christian influence (the reason for this are worth examining further, too).

31 A truly Buddhist Christmas?

The Christmas syndrome worsens into mental slavery when we are willing to put aside even the Dharma for other things. Let me give a worrying example. Once, at the start of an open meditation class for students, the leader came up to me with a worried look, wondering if we should forego the short opening puja (Namo tassa), and not to mention anything Buddhist at all during the course. Reason: some Christian students were keen to join the meditation class, too. (Let the wise think for themselves the problems of such a statement.)

Then there is the Pinkerton syndrome, when we think that Christmas is great or acceptable because the angmos celebrate it. But there are many angmos who are Buddhists, even monks and nuns, and also come for Sutta classes. Again, there is a darker side here when it becomes mental slavery: once, a temple administrator intimated to me that “white Dharma speakers give better Dharma talks and attract larger groups.” (Again here let the wise think for themselves the problems of such a statement.)

Then again, Christmas is not so merry even for some believers. Associated Press, in early December 2010, reported Philippines Immigration Bureau chief Ronaldo Ledesma as saying that officers at passport counters were banned from saying “Merry Christmas” because they might be misconstrued as soliciting gifts or cash. Philippines children traditionally offer Christmas wishes to solicit gifts from godparents and relatives. The practice was hijacked by corrupt officials who sometimes used it as a code for extortion requests.

In December 2008, I proposed, for the sake of freeing our minds for joy and commitment to the Dharma, by declaring 25 December as “Buddhist Renewal Day.” This idea was inspired by my memories of the times I spent with Buddhists in Europe and California. They told me that during Christmas, many of them would spend the long holidays in retreats studying Suttas or doing intensive meditation. (I can

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see them sitting like meditating Buddhas snugly wrapped in warm blankets in the calm glow of silent candles.)

(While writing this, I happily discovered on the net that on 5 April 2008, Ajahn Amaro of Abhayagiri forest monastery, Redwood Valley, California, too, had used “Buddhist Renewal Day” for upasika training.)

May the Dharma bring out the true meaning of our lives, and inspire us with its true purpose. Let us renew our commitment to the Three Jewels.

32 Words are Drugs

Words are drugs, surely for those who totally rely on them. The letter kills, it kills especially those who define life and truth by it. For wood, hammer, nails and tools alone do not furniture make, but by the hands and heart of a carpenter. Even “carpenter” is just a word; for, a carpenter is what a carpenter does.

The religion of words can only hallucinate us with a false certainty that we, and often we alone, understand them, and we want others, too, to believe us in the exact same way. This is called dogma, a near-synonym for a fear of the real truth.

We don’t need to take drugs to hallucinate: (as we in Singapore say) blur thinking, blur info, blur friends—and those who claim to know God and speak for him—can do worse.

For words are sounds our bodies make, and such sounds rarely reflect what is really in our hearts. For, sometimes we think we know, sometimes we want to move or manipulate others, sometimes we lack the courage to tell the truth, sometimes we are simply ignorant. Often enough, good literature gives us more useful truths than religious books, and if literary works (novels, stories, poems, etc)

32 Words are drugs

more than just entertain, they might even move us spiritually to become better people.

One of the problems with literature, however, is that there are simply too many books and school examinations, but each religion only has, as a rule, a single scripture, which is easier to work with, if we have the freedom and wisdom to do so.

Yet, whatever that is good or great that a religion tries to say, literature can say it better, more beautifully, and without a selfish agenda. This is a rationale for *the study of religious texts as literature*.

Most of us, however, know that religion is not about literary appreciation. Good religious teachings can change our lives for the better. But the best religious teachings, because of their liberating nature, cannot be expressed in words. It would not make sense, just as all talk about music is not music at all. We need to listen to the music and feel it. And we need to be really silent to fully enjoy good music.

The Buddha's teachings begin with words because they are the basic and best communication tool for us. But, as we have noted, this is like talking *about* music. We may have some idea about the teachings, but the beauty and truth are still not fully felt.

We need to climb this ladder of words that we call Buddhism, and to rise above the limits of our senses, as it were, to directly see the Buddha Word with the inner eye. Wittgenstein⁷¹ (one of the greatest philosophers of our times) puts it quite aptly in a philosophical way:

“My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed

⁷¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, tr C K Ogden, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955: 189 (§6.54).

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through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.)”

We are reminded of the Buddha’s remark that **the Dharma is like a raft**, to be used to cross the waters of suffering, and then, on reaching the far shore, to be discarded. We need, in due course, to discard the raft of words and religion, to be truly free.

However, if we are still on this bank, or mid-stream, we are only fooling ourselves if we think that we can rid of the raft right away. We have not even built it yet, much less sit on it, to paddle it with all our limbs to cross the waters. We are still addicted to the drug of words, drowning ourselves in a sea of self-delusion, views and conceit. The internet and the handphone are only making us better at it.

When we finally tire of spewing the lava of words and clouding our minds with the volcanic dust of beliefs, in our dormant moments, we might just taste a calm respite, sweet silence. It might be the stillness of a beautiful place, or the bliss of a happy memory, or simply the peace of our breath.

And if we allow ourselves, we might just open the breath-door into the realm of wordlessness and unsaying. Our physical senses are useless and unnecessary here. Only our hearts live here. We begin to gently fall through the silent spaces in between our breaths, as it were, into a timeless space, where there is no here nor there, no coming nor going, no self nor other, no words, no views. Only true joy, true peace.

33 Why Monastics Wear Robes

Why do monastics wear robes? The first and most obvious answer is clearly so that they are not indecently or unwholesomely expos

33 Why monastics wear robes

ed. This may sound banal, but in **the Sabbāsava Sutta** (M 2), the Buddha gives this reflection⁷² as one of a monastic’s methods for overcoming defilements for the sake of liberation. A monastic is to reflect on his robes thus:

“Wisely reflecting, he uses the robe: | only for the sake of warding off heat, | for the sake of warding off cold, | for the sake of warding off the touch of mosquitoes, flies, the wind, the sun, and creeping creatures; | for the purpose of covering up the privies, out of moral shame.” (M 2)⁷³

The basic Buddhist monastic clothing is called *cīvara*. As it is a large but simple piece of saffron or ochre dyed cloth with paddy-field patterns, it is often translated as “robe.” It is also called *kāsāya* or *kāsāva*, meaning “yellowish-red, yellowish-orange,” due to its being usually dyed in water boiled with some astringent bark. The point of these definitions is to show that the early Buddhist monastic robe is one of a kind, and should not be confused with lay clothing.

In the Buddha’s times, the monastic robes were simple pieces of cloth, often bits of rags and parts of a discarded shroud (that is, cloth that have no owner) stitched together. In fact, such a garb was no different from that of other monastics or from those of the followers of other sects. In other words, the monastics had shaven heads and dressed more or less alike, and the Buddha was almost indistinguishable from other monks.

One thing is certain, however, the robes of such renunciants (that’s what they really are) are clearly different from the richer dress of the laity. The message is clear: *monastics are a life apart from the laity*. The monastic robe is part of a simple spiritual lifestyle that

⁷² One of the 4 reflections on the basic life-supports, ie, monastic robes, alms-food, lodging and health.

⁷³ M 2.13/1:10 = SD 30.3, <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/30.3-Sabbasava-S-m2-piya.pdf>

Revisioning Buddhism

one has freely vowed to live by, and as such should not fall back on one's word. More importantly, the simple robes are to remind renunciants (and non-renunciants) that their relevance is in *being apart from the world*, so that they can truly be able to help and heal it without getting caught up in it.

As Buddhism spread abroad and became mainstream in some cultures, the robes evolved into rich and elaborate uniforms, reflective more of *power and prestige* than of humility and renunciation. We might as such understand why one of Singapore's richest priests, who was jailed for gross mismanagement of public funds in 2010, refused to give up his monastic gear for proper civvies. This is symptomatic of a larger problem of a heavily moneytheistic "monasticism" and devotee-exploitation. Although such a problem is also found in Western Buddhism, it has been able to solve it more readily and more effectively than the ethnic Buddhists have. Oriental Buddhists surely would benefit from learning such problem-solving skills and moral will of our Western siblings.

If we are morally weak, Māra the evil one will treat us like switches: we will be turned on or off without our ever knowing it. If the Singaporean Tartuffe⁷⁴ had refused to give up his robe, a Siyam Nikaya chief high priest in Malaysia had no qualms about removing his cloth to don an elegant lounge suit, topped with a bald pate, to receive his "Datuk" title from the Palace. Perhaps, the ironic, no less ominous, message is that worldly power is incompatible with monastic renunciation.

In February 2011, Ajahn Brahmali, a respected forest bhikkhu in the line of Ajahn Chah, recalled: "...a few years ago, while visiting one of my old university friends, I found myself being a bit apologetic about my strange appearance. What he responded really opened

⁷⁴ After **Tartuffe**, a consummate religious hypocrite a play of the same name by Moliere (1664). See **Me: The nature of conceit** = SD 19.2a (2.3.2).

33 Why monastics wear robes

my eyes. He said the robe of a Buddhist monastic is a fairytale in 'branding,' a marketing manager's dream. He said that the positive image most people have of Buddhism coupled with the very distinct appearance of Buddhist monastics is a combination that any business would be willing to pay huge amounts for. In a sense, it is a very distinct and valuable brand.

After that incident I have looked upon my monastic robes quite differently. I now believe that the beautiful message of Buddha's teachings in fact is enhanced by our unusual appearance. Our robes can probably help get the message out that there is something worthwhile in these teachings." (2011)⁷⁵

Ajahn Chah was clearly aware of the monastic robe's vitality and ingenuity, as attested by British anthropologist Sandra Bell in her article on "Being Creative With Tradition: Rooting Theravāda Buddhism in Britain" (2000), on how Ajahn Chah successfully planted forest Dharma in the West. She warmly records:

"By all accounts that have been offered to me, the laity was impressed by the fact that the monks were prepared to venture forth every day in all types of weather wearing only thin cotton robes to walk single file carrying their alms bowls, receiving nothing but jibes or indifferent incomprehension from the majority of members of the public. The monks' tenacity was viewed as a sign of devotion and obedience to their revered teacher..." (2000:14)⁷⁶

The laity has always, and should, continue to be a "quality control" factor regarding monastic conduct, as repeatedly attested in the Vinaya. Such a voice, in the spirit of the divine abodes, only serves to inspire monastics with ever greater sense of meaning and purpose of renunciation and spirituality. Otherwise, we deserve the kind of

⁷⁵ <http://sujato.wordpress.com/2011/02/11/monks-in-suits/#comment-7768>.

⁷⁶ <http://www.globalbuddhism.org/1/bell001.html>.

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Buddhism we get, as we euphorically add more fuel into the fire of the burning house. Let us work hard to douse the flames.

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