

Close your eyes, see better

Whatever original teachings of the Buddha we can know mostly comes from the Pali Suttas and the Chinese Agamas (the first two volumes of the huge Chinese Tripitaka). This is of course to simplify a complex problem, as scholars would tell us that parts of ancient passages or teachings can be found in the canons of a number of other Indian Buddhist schools.

Although the Buddha has himself not written down any of his teachings, we can know enough from the Suttas and the Agamas to reconstruct a good working idea of his teachings. And we also have the living experiences and teachings of the forest monks of today. Using the discipline and imagination of Buddhist scholarship and what we can learn from other related disciplines, even other religions, we can look ever closer into what really happened in the Buddha's life and teachings.

All this is of course "constructed" from various records and sources, which must be tried and tested by our own practice and meditation. It is like keeping our telescope directed in the right quadrant of the heavens. All we need to do now is to keep the telescope steady as we focus closer onto the heavenly body we wish to study. The final true picture of the Buddha Dharma can only come from the calm clarity of our inner peace. Only when we experience this inner peace can we truly know what the Buddha is talking about, and to become Buddha-like.

Buddhism today is an open forum. Anyone who can talk or click a computer keyboard can express his knowledge of Buddhism. This would of course benefit others who know less. But if we do not go beyond this, it is like spending our time chatting with our travel guide or reading travel guides, and missing the real journey to our destination. The Buddhist journey can only be made on our own. For, it is an inward journey to explore inner space.

In our inner journey, there is no one we can trust, no one to trust. For, all we have are the mind and the body. Whatever exists is either physical or mental. Either way, everything is impermanent. To exist is to be impermanent. Nothing eternal exists, even if we try to define it with deep faith or great power (religiously or politically). The point is that we cannot define anything into existence.

If we carefully examine the experiences of the great mystics in religious history, we often hear of how they feel a sense of "abandonment" or "alienation" by the very goodness they believe in or by the very people they are helping. It is as if we are ignored, even discouraged, when we try to do good. Our heart, as it were, is enshrouded in a dark night. Darkness, however, is simply the absence of light.

Let us constantly recall and reflect on the radiant image of the Buddha meditating under the Bodhi tree. Let every tree we see joyfully remind us of the Buddha. This is the epitome of the whole universe, of all being at peace with itself. Despite being abandoned by those very friends who have avowed to serve him, he continues to shine alone like the sun lighting up the universe. In the night of worldly ignorance, we must be like the full moon reflecting this light in a cloudless sky.

A Christian pastor once privately asked me how he could teach Buddhist meditation to his flock. (He was sadly disappointed that his congregation expected God and the pastor to answer all their prayers, some of which were simply unrealistic, and wondered if meditation could appease their hearts.) I recall the Udumbarika Sihanada Sutta (D 25)¹ where the Buddha replies such questions in terms of the latter's understanding. Look at Christ crucified, I said, and you might just see that he appears to be in deep meditation. He is poised mid-air spanning earth and heaven, as it were, yet untouched by both, and looking deep inwardly.

In a way, a meditator must "crucify" himself, or rather, leave the self behind. The cross is a powerful reminder for me of the Buddha Dharma. It is a giant "I" cancelled out with a great bar. When this cross turns, it becomes a Dharma wheel with eight spokes. But when a wheel is really spinning, really working, it appears empty. In spiritual life, we need to empty ourselves of all bodily actions and all thoughts. The more we can do this, the more inner stillness and oneness we feel. In meditation, to feel is to directly experience true reality.

Pearl S Buck, in a brief scene in her classic, "The Good Earth" (1931, ch 14), gives us a dramatic and moving angle of human perception. During the sojourn of Wang Lung and his family in Nanking, he is confronted by a tall, thin, foreign man who hands him a piece of paper. The man has blue eyes, a hairy face and arms, and "a great nose projecting beyond his cheeks like a prow beyond the sides of a ship." Wang Lung sees characters on it that he is unable to read, and the picture of a half-naked dead man "who hung upon a crosspiece of wood."

Wang Lung is horrified, and later that night, he discusses the bizarre picture with his father, who offers the only plausible explanation reflecting pre-Revolutionary China: "Surely this was a very evil man to be thus hung." This is a logical surmise for someone who has never seen an image of the Crucifixion, and so can only interpret the image from his own painful experiences. A Western religious icon is seen merely as depicting a gruesome execution.

Sadly, some of the most peaceful sacred moments in spiritual faith become lost in the tyranny of worldliness, wordiness and missionary measuring. There are, for example, those who misconstrue the still Buddha under the Bodhi tree as a figure who rejected the world. But his eyes are not closed to the world. The Buddha rejects what the eye fools us of the world, so that he truly sees into our hearts. He teaches us to look deep into our own hearts, and heal ourselves. Wherever something truly beautiful or deeply sacred is depicted we can see this profound joy and peace, if we look deep enough.

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¹ Link to Udumbarika Sihanada Sutta: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/1.4-Udumbarika-Sihanada-S-d25-piya-proto.pdf>