

The road less travelled

The less Dharma we know, the more we are likely to want to change it, trying to fit a round peg into a square hole, as it were. So we end up damaging either the peg or the hole, usually both. When we try to change Dharma to fit our fancies, we are doing this only on account of our weaknesses, not our strengths.

The Buddha reminds us not to turn away, much less disrespect, the Sutta teachings.¹ For the less Suttas we know, the more we are likely to take our profession or ideas, even another religion, as our standard of truth and action.² This is not helpful at all because we remain the same self-centred person, while our chance to grow in the Dharma has been weakened or disabled.

The more we see the Dharma (especially in meditation), the more we evolve into a wholesome individual. As we delve deeper into this, we feel a greater joy and stillness, so that we realize that we *are* change itself.

The awakened masters, the arhats, beginning with the Buddha himself are truly great because they teach us that we need not make the same mistakes that they have made. They are like path-finders who have discovered an ancient highway to a glorious lost city, and have cleared this path for us, so that we can safely journey on it, rather than use the muddy, unsafe and long winding and hilly side-roads.

A road “less travelled” sounds challenging but is not always safe, nor does it always reach the right destination (except perhaps for poets). In all fairness, we might say that in artistic creation, the road less taken might bring freshness and variety in our expression of beauty and truth, but such expressions mostly remain on the sensuous level.

In the spiritual cultivation of our mind, the well beaten path is the safest path. This is like learning the tools of the trade, mastering them, and then using them to refine our senses for seeing directly into true reality.

“Keep to the pasture, bhikshus, the haunt [range] of our forebears.³ Keeping to your pastures, the haunt of our ancestors, Māra will not descend upon you, Māra will not find you as an object of his consciousness. Bhikshus, it is on account of undertaking wholesome mental states that this merit thus grows.” (Cakka,vatti Siha,nāda Sutta, D 26.1c/3:58) = SD 36.10.

The true road less taken is that inward journey we keep postponing on account of self-gratifying pursuits. One of our greatest tragedies is to age with over-confidence that we have taken more salt than others have. Taking too much salt is not good for the health, anyway.

The joy of aging is one of recalling our follies wryly, laughing at how we were easily fooled when we were younger. This is the humour of the spirit: to heartily laugh at life in the face. Yet we remain a child at heart, that is, as long as we do not awaken

¹ The Sugata Vinaya Sutta (A 4.260) = SD 1.10(3.5). Link: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/1.10-Dharma-ending-age-piya.pdf>

² See Anāgata,bhaya Sutta 2 (A 5.79) = SD 1.10(3.3): Link: same as note 1 above.

³ *Gocare bhikkhave, caratha sake pettike visaye*. Here the Buddha is adapting brahmanical language, referring back to the 4 focusses of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*), “Do not stray away from the focusses of mindfulness, the way of the Buddhas.” *Pettika* means “departed ones,” but here refers to the past Buddhas.

from our self-induced dream-world. We keep making the same mistakes, becoming more sophisticated at them, better at rationalizing them.

We have still to learn to stop crying, to walk, to sit and to close our eyes. As we learn to walk mindfully, to sit still, and open our inner eye, we begin to cry less at others' faults and our own. We begin to discover delightful goodness in ourselves, erstwhile hidden by our loud over-confidence and misknowing.

The Dharma itself is change, and we need not change that understanding. Let's say that early Buddhism is a fresh simple piece of Baroque music or a delightful self-expressive jazz jaunt. As the decades and centuries pass, people interpret and reinterpret such beautiful music, using new musical ideas and new instruments. The fact remains that nothing can replace the original piece in all its freshness and simplicity, and its power to forever delight us.

Even so, nothing can replace the freshness, simplicity and efficacy of the early Buddhist teachings. Later Buddhisms are often chimaeras, burdened with culture, philosophy, triumphalism and tribalism. Their external forms, ritualism and hierarchy, are potent sources for investing charisma upon ourselves in our quest for success and wealth, which is all well when done in good faith and with lovingkindness (but this is not always the case).

However, if our hearts seek inner peace and clarity, and we wish to put down the burden of culture, philosophy and vanity, then we might as well go back to the unlabelled Buddha and his unbranded teaching. Their efficacy is that they are like the basic notes and theory we need to learn before we can produce good music. The point is that there must come a time when even symphonies, nocturnes and divertimenti, delightful music, tire us, and we crave for simple silence. There is nothing more still and clear than the heart of the early Buddhist saints. We can still walk their paths... for the moment.

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