

## True genius

The purpose of early Buddhism, it can be said, is to produce geniuses, those who are liberated from the crowd and from crowded thinking. But, first, some background ideas.

A **genius** is a person who displays exceptional intellectual or mental ability, creativity, or originality, typically in the achievement of unprecedented and liberating insight. In this sense, we could say that the Buddha is *the* true genius because he discovered and proclaimed the teaching and method for human liberation through personal effort, one that is free of any God-idea or even religion itself.

Understandably, there is no precise definition of genius, and the notion itself has been a subject of generations of debate. The word is used in various ways to refer to a particular aspect of an individual, or the individual in his entirety; to a polymath or master of many subjects (eg the Renaissance man, Leonardo da Vinci or the German polymath, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz),<sup>1</sup> or a specialist in a single subject (eg Isaac Newton of classical physics, or Albert Einstein of modern physics).

In ancient Rome, the *genius* (Latin plural, *genii*) was the guiding spirit or tutelary deity of a person, family (*gens*), or place (*genius loci*).<sup>2</sup> The noun is related to the Latin verbs *gigno*, *genui*, *genitus*, meaning “to bring into being, create, produce.” By the time of the first Roman emperor, Augustus Caesar (ruled from 27 BCE to 14 CE), the word acquired a secondary meaning of “inspiration, talent.”<sup>3</sup>

A genius, then, is not only a creative person (one who is full of new ideas), but uses them to discover great new insights in learning or life. Or he would use such insights to invent the instruments that facilitate human living and promote new learning. This is as far as a learned or worldly understanding of genius goes.

In Buddhism, a genius is one who is ahead of his times, liberated from the crowd. How is such a genius “ahead of his times”? Now, if we look around us, we must say that whatever we sense (see, hear, smell, taste, or touch) are all in the past. It takes a fraction of a second for us to sense the world. By the time we sense it, it is already passed on, so to speak.

In most cases, such past realities do not really hamper our perception or actions in any significant way. However, we tend to linger on in the past so that they define our present by our past. We tend to project our past onto almost every present experience. Hence, most of us have no sense of the present; we are ever dwelling in the past. We are “behind time”!

Or, we could be dreaming of the future. What we dream of here is again puppeted by the strings of past pains and pleasures. This is not saying that we should not dream at all. Rather, we should envision a “future” of being a happier person or of a better world. Such visions are worth pursuing if they can help us break through the shell of the past. Indeed, such visions are liberating in that we see meaning in our past and purpose in our future. The two are linked in the presence of effective action. It all depends on what we do or do not do now. We are then living “in time,” we are each an “in-genius”!

We can look deeper still. The English plural for this usage (“genius” as an unusually gifted or brilliant person) is “geniuses.”<sup>4</sup> The Latin plural “genii” (related to the Arabic jinnī, plural

---

<sup>1</sup> Catherine M Cox, *The Early Mental Traits of Three Hundred Geniuses*, Palo Alto, CA: Stanford Univ Press, 1926. See also <http://www.iqcomparisonsite.com/cox300.aspx>.

<sup>2</sup> Dictionary.com: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/genius>.

<sup>3</sup> Oxford English Dictionary (digital ed): genius.

<sup>4</sup> Pam Peters, *The Cambridge Guide to English Usage*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ Press, 2004:226.

jinn) is only used in reference to mythical beings, as in “the genii of the lamp.”<sup>5</sup> For our purposes, it is sufficient to say here, what is well known in popular culture and folklore, that the genii is a kind of guardian spirit or one who is capable of granting our wishes.

In terms of early Buddhist spirituality, the genius is a guarded individual and one whose wishes are all fulfilled. More accurately, a true individual (according to early Buddhism) is both self-guarded and self-fulfilling, yet selfless.

To be “self-guarded” means our body and speech are both cultivated and refined so as to invite personal development and spiritual awakening. The “self” here is a synecdoche<sup>6</sup> for the five physical senses (the eye, ear, nose, tongue and body), along with their respective consciousnesses (the mind). For a true individual, his senses are well-trained (in the sense of being well disciplined and well directed) as not only the instruments for sensing the world, but of learning and liberation. These are the bases for true genius, namely, a wholesome body in a wholesome mind.

“Self-fulfilling” refers to the true individual’s wholesome mind. Such a mind is neither fettered to the past nor nose-led by the future, but liberated from both: he is omnipresent, ever present before realities as they arise. To live in the present is to be truly and fully engaged with the world: he is in full control of his senses. Since he is fully engaged in the present, he has no wishes, and no need of hope.

Interestingly, our Buddha’s personal name is Siddhattha (Pali; Sanskrit, Siddhārtha), meaning “wish-fulfilled,” which comes from *siddha* (“fulfilled”) and *attha* (“wish”). Not only is his father’s wish for a son fulfilled, but more importantly, as the Buddha, a fully self-awakened one, he has no wishes, no need of hope. The Buddha is fully liberated, a true genius.

A true genius is “selfless” both philosophically and spiritually. He understands and accepts that there is no abiding entity anywhere. All “things” exist to us as concepts, without which we can never apprehend anything. Nothing in this universe exists in itself. Whatever exists must exist in relation to other things. We need concepts to understand other concepts, and so on, in an interconnected network, where time, like a clock-face goes in a circle.

Like the Greek philosopher, Democritus (c460-c370 BCE), and the atomists, the Buddha’s teaching does not claim any divine purpose, prime mover, or any first cause regarding life or the universe. However, while Democritus argues that if we go on slicing a piece of bread, we would come to a point where the final “piece” is “unsliceable” (atomos), the Buddha rejects any such fixed or final entity. Everything is in a flux; every thing is impermanent.

Indeed, we could say that it is easier for a quantum physicist (like an Einstein) to understand this aspect of early Buddhism than a pious traditional Buddhist fixed in his ideas of certain chants, texts or dogmas. This may not sound so novel or cavalier if we understand that ultimately we have to be free of all our views before we can taste the full fruit of nirvana.<sup>7</sup>

Yet we need not have Einstein’s mind to be a true genius: we must allow our minds to go back to basics. The Dharma (the Buddha’s teaching) teaches us the most basic truths of life and true reality. It is the Dharma that makes us true geniuses.

A true genius is a man well ahead of his times: he is free of the past and the future. He is also free of even the present. For the present is but a moment, an ever-flowing river. In becoming a self-cultivated individual (wholesome in body and speech), the true genius is freed

---

<sup>5</sup> See “New lamps for old?” <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/45-New-lamps-for-old-110525.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> A synecdoche is a figure of speech where a part of something is used to represent the whole of something, or vice versa, eg referring to monastics as the “sangha” or to the police as “the law.”

<sup>7</sup> See esp **The Notion of *ditthi***, SD 40a.1: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/40a.1-Notion-of-Ditthi-piya.pdf>

from the crowd: he is a *good* individual. In being mentally cultivated (calm and clear in mind), the true genius is freed from crowded thinking: he is a *true* individual.

Indeed, thinking tends to crowd the mind. The true genius is able to rise above thinking, to harness his feelings to open the doors of true reality and highest bliss. A worldly person only has thinking (words and concepts) as his tool. A genius, on the other hand, is liberated by his positive feelings, directly experiences true reality. He need not think about happiness: he is truly happy, as he is awakened, or nearly. Hence, he is a living and liberating light, a true genius, from whom we have much to benefit.

R295 Simple Joys 113

Piya Tan ©2013 130520