

## Dangerous knowledge

Buddhism can be dangerous knowledge. It is capable of unravelling many of our pet views and beliefs; that is, if we are mentally healthy and truly honest to ourselves. Or, it could make us hate it (or the person teaching it), because it smarts us as our views and beliefs are being challenged or proven wrong, and we are unwilling or unable to accept this for some reason.

The Buddha's teachings (especially in the suttas) can be liberating to the ripe and ready, even at first blush. However, for most, it might invite some rough or rude remark that gives us a better idea of the speaker than the teaching. The Dharma is indeed like a sharp pin that readily bursts our ego if we approach it close enough.

The more opinionated or faith-blinded we are, the harder it is for us to breathe, so that we are stifled, suffocated, by our views and beliefs, unable to even really see what is right before our very noses. Our ego becomes bigger from our holding our breath, puffing ourselves up with the bad air of views and beliefs. But all our views and beliefs, wrong or right, are deflated when we learn to breathe rightly.

It seems to be a Catch-22:<sup>1</sup> we cannot happily live with views or beliefs, we cannot happily live without them. If we think we are happy with our views and beliefs, we forget or don't care how others feel. Or worse, we think we are better than those who think differently, or that we will be going to a better place than them. Then later, we somehow change our views, and expect others, even the whole world, to change with us.

When a view appears true (eg the sun rises in the morning and sets in the evening, in most places in the world), then we call it knowledge. Simply put, knowledge that makes us happy and makes others happy is *useful* knowledge. It helps us get things done, and prevents or cuts down suffering.

We might say that science deals with useful views, with knowledge that helps the advancement of more exact knowledge. As a result society progresses, and we become better educated, and more free, than say, a few centuries ago when religion was more powerful than free knowledge.

Science is helpful because it is ever willing to change its views. In fact, science gives different names to its views: hypothesis, theory, and law. A hypothesis is a probable situation; a theory can be proven true and is generally useful (like relativity); a law is an established universal truth (like the speed of light).

Religion, on the other hand, is practically based on hearsay. If we examine our religious views and beliefs, and we are honest and wise enough (at least to ourselves), we will realize that they are almost always what *other* people tell us. And those informants, too, receive their religious views or knowledge from others, and so on ad infinitum.

Then, there are holy books, in which many claim to have faith in. This can, in fact, be good, if our resulting beliefs translate into actions that bring more peace and happiness to an ever greater number of people without harming or belittling those who choose not to follow us.

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<sup>1</sup> A "no-win" situation, originating from Joseph Heller's satirical and historical novel *Catch-22* (1961).

Imagine we're amongst good friends: A does not like curry, but likes chicken rice; while B likes curry, but dislikes chicken rice; C is vegetarian. They can still be friends, and work, even live, together despite such differences (and many others).

What is it that is a greater power that can rise above views, and bring people with different views or beliefs together, despite their differences. This power is called *love*. In its highest form, it is called "unconditional love."

Most Buddhists (or anyone for that matter) would easily relate to the parable of the good Samaritan, one of the Jewish teacher Jesus' greatest parables, and perhaps the most difficult, found in only in the gospel of Luke. The parable is told by Jesus in response to a question regarding what kind of "neighbour" should be loved. The parable is about a traveller (who may or may not be Jewish) who is beaten, robbed, and left for dead along the road.

First a priest and then a Levite (a hereditary priest) come by, but both avoid the man (due to purity concerns). Finally, a Samaritan comes by. Samaritans are despised as outsiders by the Jews, but the Samaritan helps the injured stranger. First he takes care of his wounds, then puts him on his own animal, and brings him to an inn, where he takes care of him. On the next day, before he departs, he gives money to the inn-keeper to further care for the stranger. If there is not enough money, he says, he will pay him more on his return.

Portraying a Samaritan, in such a positive light would have shocked Jesus' audience.<sup>2</sup> In Jesus' culture, a dead body was believed to be defiling, and so the priests were reluctant to help the stranger, assuming he was dead, thinking, "What would happen to me, if I were to help him." The priest and Levite were concerned with ritual cleanliness. The Samaritan, however, thinks, "What would happen to *him*, if I do not help him."

Buddhists familiar with early Buddha stories, would recall at least two separate accounts of how the Buddha himself, assisted by Ānanda, nurse a dying monk, one with festering wounds all over his body, and the other stricken with dysentery, lying in his own filth. Later, the Buddha declares before the assembled monks, "Whoever, bhikshus, would tend me, he would tend the sick."<sup>3</sup>

The point of all this is that being truly religious is not merely about having true faith or right views or ritual purity (like the priest and the Levite). Buddhist training begins with keeping our body and speech moved by lovingkindness for others (by way of the five precepts). Then we work to bring true peace and light into our own hearts so that we not merely hear the *words* of scripture, but fail to be moved by its *spirit*.

The spirit of the Dharma (the highest good) is about being at peace with our bodies (or physical existence), or keeping ourselves physically healthy so that we are capable of happiness here and now, and inspiring happiness in others, too. But this is only the beginning.

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<sup>2</sup> On the Buddha's use of language that challenges conventional wisdom, see **Dh 97 Religious language** = SD 10.6: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/10.6-Dh-97-Religious-language-piya.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> The story of Tissa of the festering body is at DhA 3.7/1:319-322) and that of the monk with the stomach disorder is at Mv 8.26 @ V 1:301 f. For both, see **Love** = SD 38.4 (5.6): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/38.4-Love-piya.pdf>

Then, understanding the Dharma, we touch its spirit, so that our hearts are truly peaceful and liberated. When we understand our own hearts, we understand we are so burdened and bloated by our views and beliefs. Knowledge is mostly a stopgap, a short break from our prevailing ignorance. When all that knowing ends, we truly see everything, the all, in and around us: we are truly free.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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