

Be Buddhist, not a Buddhist

Many, if not most, people think that being a Buddhist is like joining a club (that is, going to a temple or Buddhist centre), or do things (like praying, chanting or listening to Buddhist speakers). Of course, if these are good places and better actions, there are advantages in doing so. However, these may make us merely “a” Buddhist, yet we may still not be “Buddhist” at all. In short, we are only a statistical Buddhist, one of many, but here is how we can *become* truly Buddhist.

To be “Buddhist” is to transform ourselves from being bad to less bad, to good, or even better. This means becoming less lustful, more contented, more charitable; becoming less hateful, more kind, even loving; becoming less deluded, more wise, even open-minded; less fearful, more courageous in thinking good, and which is expressed through speech, even actions. We cannot become all this merely by becoming a “member” of a group or tribe.

Indeed, we don’t even need to go to a temple to seek Buddhism, especially if it is a place where idols are worshipped and we put money in boxes. Of course, we are not idol-worshippers: we only look up to them (they are often very big and tall images). The boxes we are told are “merit boxes,” through which we send our money ahead to the next life. These are great ideas if we believe in a “money gospel.”

Ironically, nowadays many of those who “leave home,” do so to find a bigger palace to live in greater comfort, supported by tax-free public funds. The rationale behind this seems to be a twisted view that if by giving up a lesser happiness, we gain a greater happiness, we should do so (Dh 290). Many of us would be contented with such simple joys of life, like a palatial home and lots of money. The Dhammapada, however, offers a much greater wealth than all this put together. We can never be satisfied with what we have externally; we might even lose all our worldly wealth. The Dharma offers us inner wealth: peace of mind, habitual joy and liberation (Dh 178).

This wealth is not found by going anywhere, not even to the holiest of Buddhist places. A dear friend who went on pilgrimage to Bodh-gaya shared her experiences. Being a serious meditator, she was very excited to have the chance to sit under the Bodhi tree, the very place, it is said, where the Buddha himself once sat. But, to her dismay, the place was very noisy, day and night! Groups from various countries led by monks paraded with blaring loud-speakers. There were a lot of shouting, too, because people were talking and phoning at the same time, and could not hear one another because of the noise.

Then in the morning, another group was beating drums and chanting a Japanese mantra! Others were burning huge amounts of incense, so that it became hard to see or breathe. And again, those loud loud-speakers! This time, they were playing a recording loudly for all to hear. And others were chanting loudly, too. Nearby there was another amplified chanting of Amitabha’s name. At least it was different: it was Tibetan. Near the Bodhi tree, a group was knocking a wooden fish and chanting the Great Compassion Mantra. Pali chanting was also done at the same time by monks from Sri Lanka and Myanmar. And modern Buddhist songs could clearly be heard coming from local tourist stalls not far away.

We might wonder what the Buddha would have said or done if he were still alive and living under that Bodhi tree! The Buddha surely has foreseen all this. For, in **the Vatthûpama Sutta** (M 7), when a brahmin tells him about a sacred river at Gayā which purportedly could wash away our bad karma on certain holy days, the Buddha replies:

For the pure at heart, everyday is a holy day! For the pure, it is always a precept day!
What need is there to go to Gayā, for any well is your Gaya! (M 7,20), SD 28.12¹

¹ See **Vatthûpama Sutta** (M 7), SD 28.12: [link](#).

These are broad hints from the Buddha himself that true Buddhism is not a place or a building: it is our own peace of mind. The holy land is not a place but wherever we sit and meditate in lovingkindness. The best way to keep the precepts is with compassion, charity, contentment, truthfulness and mindfulness.²

It helps to understand the real meaning of renouncing “the world.” It starts with our accepting that awakening is possible in this life, even for a lay person. For, true renunciation is learning to calm our hearts so that we can let go of the world we have ourselves created and live in. This is the world of our senses. This is our first step, the renunciation of the body, that is, calming our senses completely to fully see our own minds.

Then, comes the second step: the renunciation of thoughts. We notice that our minds are crowded with thoughts, most of which are unnecessary and troubling. We show them lovingkindness by freeing them. This is the real thing, better than freeing recycled birds on Vesak Day.

The third renunciation is the most difficult, but still possible, that is, the renunciation of all our views. Just as a clear mirror has no images of its own, but only reflects what is directly before it, so too our mind becomes calm and clear in deep meditation. This is the time when we are free from all views, at least for that duration.

When we emerge from such a meditation, we remind ourselves that all these wonderful experiences are mind-made. As such, they are impermanent. Whatever is impermanent is also unsatisfactory. Whatever is impermanent and unsatisfactory means that we have no real control over them (we cannot tell our body not to fall sick, not to decay, not to die). In short, there is no abiding essence or eternal soul anywhere (except perhaps in our imagination and wishful thinking).³

Those of us who have tasted this inner peace, or even a first blush of it, will know that it is a remarkably profound feeling. It is simply joyful. It is with this simple joy that we are able to know others who are also simply joyful. When we meet we can easily connect, like some wonderful people we meet for the first time in the beautiful silence of a meditation retreat. Although we are embraced by meditative silence, we can feel their goodness, and become fast spiritual friends even after the retreat.

We may live in different necks of the world, but the memories of our meeting is like being in the Buddha’s presence. Indeed, we have connected in the beautiful stillness of our hearts, which continue to beat together despite the distance. For, the Dharma always keeps us close together at heart.

In **the Gadrabha Samaṇa Sutta** (A 3.81), the Buddha humorously declares that there are those who think that they are monastics or priests merely because they wear robes or are members of an order. This is like an ass following a herd of cows (regarded as precious in the Buddha’s time) and thinks that it is a “cow,” too! But an ass neither looks nor sounds like a cow at all!⁴

In **the Saṅghāṭi,kaṇṇā Sutta** (It 92), the Buddha declares that even if a monk (or anyone) “should hold on to my outer robe’s corner, following closely behind me, step for step,” but if he were still lustful, controlled by sense-desire, and unmindful, “then, he is far away from me, and I from him!”⁵

Even if we live a great distance from the Buddha, but our hearts covet not, with senses restrained, and mindful, then we are before the Buddha, and the Buddha before us. This is because, says the Buddha, when we see the Dharma, we see the Buddha.⁶ This is the meaning when we say: “Be Buddhist, not a Buddhist!”

R342 Revisioning Buddhism 94

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

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² These are the 5 virtues or positive aspects of keeping the 5 precepts: see SD 1.5 (2): [link](#).

³ See **Atthaka,nāgara Sutta** (M 52), SD 41.2: [link](#).

⁴ A 3.81,2 @ SD 24.10b: [link](#).

⁵ It 92 @ SD 24.10a: [link](#).

⁶ See **Vakkali S** (S 22.87,13), SD 8.8: [link](#), & **Saṅghāṭi,kaṇṇā S** (It 92), SD 24.10a: [link](#).