

Discovered dharma, invented Dharma

Buddhism is as natural as sunrise and sunset, the rise and fall of all things, as natural as our breath. The Buddha declares:

“Whether buddhas arise or not, this reality and fixed course of things, the order of things, is that all things are impermanent. The Buddha is one who comes to fully awaken to this truth. Having fully realized it, he makes it clear to the world that all things are impermanent.”¹

When we understand the impermanence of all things, seeing directly into true reality, then we see this pattern within us, and in all things. For, to exist is to exist in time. Time is change. Whatever exists must change. Change gives meaning to what is happening in and around us, what we really are, and what others are, too. When we see this meaning in change, then we have a clearer and truer purpose in life. We understand, accept and rejoice in the natural flow of things.

All things flow through past, present and future: we are that past, present and future. However, when we are unmindful, we tend to see the past as fixed: often this is how we view ourselves or others. We tend to identify with our past.² But our past is conditioned and constructed, too. Actually, all we have are memories of the past. How we remember the past is how we view ourselves. Memories are not always accurate, and often false. Or, we change and edit them as we age. Our self-views,³ in other words, also change over time. If we are willing and able to accept just this much, then we are more ready to truly know ourselves and be free from suffering, even here and now.

The present is what is before us, but it is just a moment, a thought-moment. If we do not pay attention to the moment, we miss it. Some other idea takes over what we are thinking now. In fact, we can say that we are never of one mind. We actually have to deal with six competing minds: the mind’s eye, the mind’s ear, the mind’s nose, the mind’s tongue, the mind’s body, and the mind’s state. These are our six senses at work.

How does this work? First, there is the sense-faculty (say, the seeing eye); then, there is the sense-object (say, a sight); and there is the mind, our attention. When these three meet, there is “contact,” a sense-experience. But it does not stop there. Then come the feelings behind every experience: we like it, or do not like it, or don’t care about it.

Here’s the rub: we really need to know this, to begin with, if we do not want to suffer too much. If we like something too much and do not know when to stop, then we feed the unconscious tendency of lust (we keep wanting more, more, more). If we like something too much, it also means that we will not like its opposite or what opposes it. When this disliking arises, we feed the unconscious tendency of hate (which brings on ill will, anger, violence, and so on). And when we see something we neither like nor dislike, we do not know what to do about it, so we ignore it. This feeds our unconscious tendency of ignorance.⁴

Now, we often notice that we still suffer even when we do or have the right thing. What more, if it’s the wrong thing. Maybe we felt not happy doing it, or someone made us do it, or we don’t really know why we did it. Imagine, then, the suffering that comes to us when we have done the wrong thing. Maybe not, we think, but it comes, all the same, drop by drop. Suddenly, we drown in our own flood of pain!⁵

¹ For a full translation and detailed explanation, see **Dhamma Niyāma Sutta** (A 3.134), [SD 26.8](#).

² See **Bhadd’eka,ratta Sutta** (M 131), [SD 8.9](#).

³ On self-views (*attānudiṭṭhi*), see **Is there a soul?**, [SD 2.16 \(15\)](#).

⁴ See **Madhu,piṇḍika Sutta** (M 18,17 f) @ [SD 6.14](#).

⁵ See Dh 121.

One of the greatest Scot philosophers, David Hume (1711-1776) went to university at 14 (or 10, some say), and wrote his classic philosophy work, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, at 26. If he was so thoughtful and observant of his own mind, at such a young age, we should at least find out what helps and moves us to self-discovery at any age.

Without understanding the impermanent and constructed nature of the past, and failing to put together the fractured flickers of the present moments into a clear narrative, we sometimes restlessly, sometimes remorsefully try to imagine or dream a future. But such a future, too, can at best be only glimpses and glimmers of hope or despair, of images as if having lives of their own, and we are not yet a part of it.

For most of us, then, the past endures in our present, but neither seems to be in our grasp. So we invest our future in bubbles of self-promoting interests, effervescent ripples of friends, occasions, words, music and sounds. The more we look into the future, the less we see of the present. Opportunities knock unheard on our doors, shut tight to the light of the day.

Technology distance us even further from others. We can be really busy with our not so smart phone, reducing people to blips and flickers on a flat tiny box. We ourselves become self-chatting self-smiling zombies undead amongst the living. We talk to others on the computer without any eye to look into nor any smiling together. We look at the blinking screen, we smile at it, we laugh at it, we talk to it. Yet to those people-savvy, technology can bridge more life and love to our own.

The Buddha teaches live: no books, no writings, no recorders, no computers. His best dialogues are often with a single person, sometimes with a few more. When the teachings were written down, and now printed on a massive scale, it radically changed Buddhism. The medium changed the message. From writing and books arose Mahayana, and then Vajrayana, when sounds and mantras were treated like writing and books, frozen into words of power; words and power to change others while we remained stonily unchanged.

Plato records Socrates in *Phaedrus* (360 BCE) as showing serious reservations about the technology of writing. In *Phaedrus*, Socrates says this about writing:

“...you who are the father of letters, from a paternal love of your own children have been led to attribute to them a quality which they cannot have; for this discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners’ souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. The specific which you have discovered is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence, and you give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality.”
(Translated by Benjamin Jowett, 1871)⁶

Writing (including printed and recorded words in our times) cannot answer back no matter how often we open a book, look at a screen, or listen to a recorded talk (or even reading this). It always says the same thing, and we cannot question it to clear our doubts or connect our ideas. This is not an outright condemnation of the written or recorded word as opposed to the spoken living word. Words are valuable in their responses to our inquiries, stilling our minds of doubts, and in bringing some form of connected picture in our hearts. The former is truth, the latter beauty. This can only, or best, occur in a living dialogue.

⁶ <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/phaedrus.html>. For tr Alexander Nehamas & Paul Woodruff, see *Phaedrus* 275a2-b3, in John M Cooper (ed), *Plato: Complete works*, Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997:551 f.

Hence, no matter how good an orator we are, or if we speak simply to persuade another (like a salesman), our words only benefit the self, even promote selfishness. Only living words in dynamic dialogue, as repeatedly shown in the suttas, for example, are not only truthful (hence, they transform our lives and of those in the dialogues), but are also beautiful (they move us to goodness). True beauty transforms and liberates us. Truth and beauty, then, not only better our lives, but also free us from our lack and suffering.

A true Dharma dialogue helps us discover Dharma. After all, the Buddha's true teaching is "discovered dharma" (the small "d" means it is a naturally true reality). In "Invented Buddhism," sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches and thoughts become statues, mantras, incense, sacred food, impressive uniforms, and imaginative dogmas. We may marvel at these, like the pious gaze glassy-eyed at incomprehensible gurus in a darshan. It seems that we only need to worship images, make vows, offer fragrances, take pure foods, wear our status, and utter or mutter profound teachings, without ever truly transforming ourselves to taste the inner bliss and light, the true source of happiness and liberation.

The true Dharma helps us free ourselves from our senses, and see into our mind directly. This can only be transmitted from teacher to pupil in a living dialogue. The liberating silence, like beautiful music, is carried in between and behind the notes. The teacher is one who clears the forest of words so that we can see the bodhi tree of wisdom (Dh 283). He leads us over the dangerous waters of words and darkness of language onto the white-sand shores of clear vision and space.

if we cannot find a good teacher or a true spiritual friend, then it's better to be alone in our living inner silence. It is better to be by ourselves than to follow a crowd, no matter how big, a crowd that is going in the wrong direction. The good that we have done, the good that we are, have brought us thus far, so that we glimpse at the reality before us and the light ahead. When we find a safe and shady tree, we should then sit under it, as the Buddha has done. If we have gone this far, we can journey a little farther, each step closer to the Buddha's light.

Cut down the forest, but not the tree.	From the forest arises fear.	
Having cut down the forest and growths,	O bhikshus, you are forest-free!	(Dh 283)

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

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