

Why early rather than late

My very first impression of Buddhism, as a young boy in Melaka, Malaysia, was a hodge-podge of local Chinese culture and ad lib Sunday Dharma school Buddhism in a noisy local Baba association temple, laced with mother-chaperoned worship at Cheng Hoon Teng (the oldest Chinese temple in Southeast Asia), which also housed Daoist deities (like the Tiger God). Since my schooling was almost exclusively in the English-medium just before Malaysian education was nationalized to be Malay-centred, my speaking and thinking language has been English ever since. So was the Buddhism I grew up with up to my young adult life: an English-speaking Theravada of the Sinhalese missions.

However, local Buddhism, both in Malaysia (where I lived in the first half of my life) and Singapore (where I lived as a lay-person, with my wife and 2 sons, from 2000 onwards), are Chinese Mahayana-dominated. After a long search for qualified teachers to learn Buddhism from, having passed my A-levels (the culmination of the local secondary school education), I decided to become a Theravada monk, and ordained with the Thai order, spending the mandatory 5 years of tutelage (*nissaya*) in Wat Srales, one of the largest and oldest temples in Bangkok. It was then one of the leading (if not the leading) Pali temple of Thailand.

Upon my return, my mission field included both Malaysia and Singapore. Since most of the audience and students who attended my talks, classes and courses were more familiar with Chinese Mahayana than Theravada, and the fact that I had many Mahayana friends, monastic and lay, I decided to fervently study Mahayana, and to some extent, Vajrayana. An important reason for this was to be able to properly answer the numerous public questions about Buddhism beyond Theravada, such as about Guanyin, the Mahayana Bodhisattvas, the differences between these three main schools, and so on.

After studying key Mahayana doctrines and sutras, I ran week-long residential national courses at various venues in Malaysia and Singapore, teaching not only the Pali suttas, but also special lecture-series focused on the Heart Sutra (1980), the Platform Sutra (1980), the Sutra of 42 Sections (1981), the Lotus Sutra (1981), the Amitabha Sutra (1981), the Tibetan Book of the Dead (1982), and the Sutra of the Golden Light (1982), and “The One Way” (1982).

Besides educating the local Buddhists in our ethnic Buddhist legacy, I also emphasized on local Buddhist fellowship. “Local” here meaning both Malaysia and Singapore as a common mission field, but running separate courses for them. These courses always had well over a hundred participants each, almost all of whom lived together for a week in a retreat routine of morning and evening puja and meditation, fellowship activities and discussion groups, group dynamics, and sutta lectures morning and evening.

During my 20 years as a Theravada monk (1970-1990), I taught both Theravada and Mahayana to a small community of dedicated young lay Buddhist workers to give them the fullest benefit of our Buddhist legacy. They became effective teachers, some of them even working full-time. As pioneers, we faced numerous odds, such as a lack of good and complete translations of the Pali suttas, and a proper training centre.

In due course, I decided to leave the monastic order and work as a lay teacher. I realized that my Buddhist grounding was too diverse, and so decided to go back to the basics. That is, to deepen my knowledge of Pali and further my study of the Pali suttas. This was when I discovered **early Buddhism**. While most of us are driven by visions of cosmic and mythical Buddhas, I decided to go in quest of the historical Buddha, our one and only true spiritual ancestor.

This led to my full-time translation of the suttas, known as the Sutta Discovery (SD) series, beginning in 2002 and is still going on. After 12 years of continuous work, the SD has become the most annotated modern commentary on the Pali suttas and contemporary Buddhism available today. The popularity of

the SD series is also due to its clear focus and direction in promoting a better understanding of early Indian Buddhism, the practice of meditation as taught in its texts, and how we can rise above our human fancy and foible.

On a broader social level, my sutta experience serve well as the foundation of what I have called simply “Buddhist psychology,” which includes the effective use of meditation therapy in counselling and self-help. Thus, I see sutta work and people-helping (we cannot really separate the two) as a great commission that would take the rest of my life and beyond.

I’m also confident that this sutta work would inspire new generations of Buddhist teachers and lay workers, even renunciants, who will appreciate the authenticity and vitality of early Buddhism in our local contexts, as well as of our open global community, enriched with Buddhist spirituality.

I have been asked why have I taken up early Buddhism rather than the more ecumenical approach of my early years? Here, I will only briefly mention the doctrinal reasons why I have found early Buddhism more helpful, even authentic, than other forms of Buddhism. The basic reason is a simple one: I love the Dharma, especially its teachings on happiness and awakening here and now. I want to return to the Buddha.

Over the decades, I’ve also noticed what Buddhism can do to its believers: we tend to mold Buddhism in our own image or use it as a pen or wall to hold a tribe of believers. But Buddhism is a living religion, and we have to live it, and to simply live and to openly love all who come into our sight and mind.

As a living religion, Buddhism is still growing, but it is mostly siring chimaeras that harness Buddhism into its service. Such groups put their teacher or race or whims well above the Dharma, if it exists at all in their vision. And so Buddhism continues to grow, and it is impossible to keep up with its growth. And I don’t think there is a need to, if our aim is to awaken in this life itself. The early Buddhist teachings have everything, “**nothing more, nothing less,**” that we need for our spiritual quest.¹

Here are some reasons to consider for the earliness and authenticity of the Pali suttas in terms of personal practice. The Pali suttas are generally simple and consistent in their teachings and, as a rule, right to the point, giving us practical guidelines and clear directions. Mahayana, on the other hand, tends to be mainly Book-based and Word-based. The Lotus Sutra, for example, not only belittles the arhats,² but also is the basis for the idea of an eternal, self-existent Buddha. In the beginning was the Buddha, and the Word was with Buddha, and the Word was Buddha.³

For those who are seeking the meaning and purpose of life, early Buddhism teaches self-liberation through an understanding of how views arise and hold us down with some kind of desire for identity (emotional, social, religious, professional, and so on). Religious⁴ forms of Buddhism tend to work on faith, even subtly demand it, so that there is really no room for understanding the nature of doubt, except, ironically perhaps, as another religious habit, virtue or dogma. Above all, religious Buddhism is deeply rooted in rituals and vows, which do not truly reflect the real nature of the lives we live. We

¹ See **Pāsādika Sutta** (D 28,16.4), [SD 40a.6](#).

² See eg **Mahā Assa,pura Sutta** (M 39), where the Buddha declares of arhathood, that “There is nothing further beyond this” (M 39,21.3), [SD 10.13](#).

³ The last 14 chapters of the Lotus Sutra presents such a primordial eternal Buddha, embodied as the Sutra.

⁴ “Religious” here is not a category but *a habitual tendency* in a Buddhist group to directly, subtly or unwittingly highlight faith at the cost of wisdom, instead of balancing them through mindfulness. A Buddhism that balances the 5 spiritual faculties (faith, effort, mindfulness, samadhi, and wisdom) is said to be spiritual. On the 5 spiritual faculties, see **Pañc’indriya**, [SD 10.4](#).

mostly hear a lot of good or glorious explanations of doctrine or ritual, but little actual personal experience or example of the deep spirituality, or even friendliness, that Buddhism has to offer.

The early Pali suttas, on the other hand, are characterized by repetitive passages (*peyyāla*), and recurrent emphases on how our minds work, the need to understand the nature of views, and how to outgrow or renounce them. These repetitive passages and refrains, like a computer programme, keep us in a loop of goodness, taming and freeing our minds from old bad habits or latent tendencies. If religious Buddhism works at group conditioning and social control, then early Buddhism teaches us to be emotionally independent “true individuals,” who would inspire and heal others.

Religious Buddhisms tend to be ethnic, even race-based. Buddhisms prefixed with “Sinhalese,” “Tibetan” “Chinese,” or “Japanese” tend to stunt themselves, by putting race before, even above, Dharma. Here, culture controls, even limits, our growth and freedom, while early Buddhism teaches personal growth and spiritual liberation, so that a wholesome global vision of non-selfish goodness is possible. Culture, in other words, can and should wisely and habitually tease out our genius and good to strengthen us as a spiritual community and to benefit the many.

Religious Buddhism tends to be teacher-based, while early Buddhism is clearly **Dharma-based**, with even the Buddha himself placing the Dharma above himself.⁵ Religious Buddhism promises other-help, such as calling on Amitabha’s name or performing ritual “karmic-cleansing,” but early Buddhism teaches **self-help**, and that the supreme prayer is our own Dharma practice. If religious Buddhism provides us with a life-saver (a good answer to the God-religions), early Buddhism gives us a better choice: we are taught to skillfully **swim**, and make rafts and boats, so that we can safely brave the troubled waters of life, and head for the safe shores, even here and now.⁶

Mahayana speaks of billions of Buddhas, as many as the sand on the Ganges banks, a beautifully grand vision. However, we only need **one** Buddha, who sits alone courageously and radiantly under the Bodhi tree. That aloneness brightly reflects true and total renunciation of crowd thinking and blinkering views. It reminds us not to trivialize **personal effort** in our quest for spiritual liberation. The greatest and most liberating moments in our lives must be experienced alone, by and for ourself. Only then, we can make sense of what is self and other, transcend both, and so help the madding crowd.

Religious Buddhism tries to capture the free-flying butterflies of our hearts and the moths of our minds, piously pin them down onto the board of faith, and give them long glorious titles that don’t really mean anything to the pinned specimens. Early Buddhism is a cocoon, one for every chrysalis that we each are, to safely grow in, and in our own time, to be free of the very same cocoon of moral virtue and mental cultivation to fly on our own wings of calm and clarity with the fresh winds of wisdom in the garden of nirvana.

Religious Buddhism speaks of myriads of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, like the Ganges sand. If they were like river sand, then the historical Buddha is unique and precious like **a diamond**. If Buddhas were like sand, then they would have the worth of sand.⁷

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s example and teachings]

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⁵ See **Gāraṇa Sutta** (S 6.2), [SD 12.3](#).

⁶ See the parable of the raft, **Alagaddûpama Sutta** (M 22,12-14), [SD 3.13](#) & **Udakkûpama Sutta** (A 7.15), [SD 28.6](#).

⁷ View Piya Tan, “Sand and diamond,” a video talk at the Lotus Sutra seminar, Poh Ming Tse, Singapore, 21 Mar 2015.