

## **The prophet**

Early Buddhism teaches the Buddha Dharma that is **the living truth**. It is the truth and the way to awakening that is itself clear and complete as teachings, which, when properly lived, leads us to a vision of true reality that we each see for ourselves. The Buddha himself is only a shower of the way, who points out (*akkhāta*) to us the path to self-awakening (Dh 276).

Even though the Buddha has passed away and is not physically present as a person to teach us, his guidance is still with us in the Dharma that he himself upholds as his own guide, depending on which he dwells – as he declares in **the Gāraṇa Sutta** (S 6.2).<sup>1</sup> If we carefully study the suttas and diligently follow the Dharma, we are as good as being guided by the Buddha himself, not blindly or drunkenly following others.

Understanding the Dharma fully and clearly through **the suttas**, the teachings of the historical Buddha, we are directly in touch with the liberating truth, which moves us in wholesome ways and directions. Our spiritual life is founded on **a cultivated body**, of wholesome action and speech. We are inspired to cultivate lovingkindness, which moves us to be charitable to others. Lovingkindness empowers us to truly love and give *life*; to provide others with wholesome *happiness*; to treat others with dignity as *free* individuals; to communicate and commune in *truth*; and to keep our *mind* clear and calm. It empowers us to keep all the 5 precepts.<sup>2</sup>

With all our senses alert and our speech wholesome, our body is ripe and ready for **mental cultivation**. Our growing understanding of the Dharma through the suttas then hones our mind for greater calm and clarity, joy and wisdom. Then, we can rightly say that we are *cultivated in both body and mind*, that we have a wholesome mind in a wholesome body. We are then bright beacons of the Dharma, inspiring others by just our presence, like Assaji to Sāriputta.<sup>3</sup> And changing lives for the better, by our action and speech.

We are then true messengers (*dūta*) of the Dharma. We have become **prophets** (*akkhāta*), showers of way to the true teaching. This is not a title or status we can take or give to others: we have to *work* for it, and it blossoms within us, raising us like a lotus from the dark depths of the world into the light of the Dharma sun. We live the Dharma so that others can see it for themselves.

This training as a Dharma messenger, as the Buddha's prophet, is found in **the Dūta Sutta** (A 8.16). Therein, the Buddha lays down 8 qualities that we have to cultivate. First and foremost, we must be **a good listener** (*sotā*). The word for “disciple” in Pali is *sāvaka*, which also literally means “listener,” that is, one who has heard the Dharma so clearly and fully that he walks the path to awakening as a saint.

As a “good listener,” we learn to hear the cries of the world, the sufferings and needs of others. We listen deeply, and look deep down into the very roots of their cries and pains. The more we are touched by the sufferings of others, the more clearly we are able to read their minds, too.

---

<sup>1</sup> S 6.2 ([SD 12.3](#)).

<sup>2</sup> On the 5 precepts, see **Veḷu, dvāreyya Sutta** (S 55.7), [SD 1.5 \(2\)](#); **Sīlānussati**, [SD 15.11 \(2.2\)](#); [SD 21.6 \(1.2\)](#); [SD 37.8 \(2.2\)](#).

<sup>3</sup> On Sāriputta's first meeting with the arhat Assaji, see [SD 42.8 \(1.2\)](#).

We begin to better understand how they live and why they suffer. We are then more effective in teaching and healing them.

As we deeply listen to others, they, too, are moved to follow our example, to learn to **listen** (*sāvetā*) to the Dharma. We must learn to speak their language, gradually reaching out to them – just as the Buddha does with his gradual talk (*ānupubbī,kathā*).<sup>4</sup> With words and warmth, we instill in them the joy of the moment, helping them see the way of charity and courage, of the benefits of good, and bringing heaven right now down to earth. We teach them to stand in their own goodness and to rise above themselves.

Their cries for solace and succour are the music of compassion to which we sing and dance in harmony. This way, they learn to hear the truth and see the beauty of their own pains. We then inspire them with words and ways so that they see themselves as they truly are, and uplift themselves through self-understanding.

Their sufferings are sacred and we must bow low before these living lessons, to humbly learn from them. For, suffering, ours and theirs, is our true teacher: we are still **learners** (*uggahetā*), that no matter how bad we may feel we are, there are others who are worse. Our purpose, then, is to learn as we serve and succour others.

To effectively help others, we need to **remember** (*dhāretā*) them, just as Sāriputta recalls those in need of succour or guidance.<sup>5</sup> We must wisely recall how they have suffered, how they are relieved, how they are wiser now, and happier. With such recall, we remind them of their own strength and goodness.

Doing all this, we have an ever deeper **understanding** (*viññātā*) of life itself. Helping others is a sacred privilege; our duty is to learn and understand what we are doing and why we are doing it. We must not measure others, but accept everyone as he is – just as we accept ourself. When we understand them, we understand ourself even better.

As we teach, so we learn; as we learn, so we teach. We work to share this understanding. For, the greatest gift is that of the truth that frees us from the fetters that chain us to our unhappiness. As we understand others, so we toil to **help them understand** themselves (*viññāpetā*).

By now, we have a better understanding of what helps others and what hinders them, what is wholesome and what is unwholesome (*kusalā sahitāsahitassa*). The unwholesome is not to be rationalized, but to be corrected or avoided; the wholesome is neither to be dismissed nor idealized, but to be lived.<sup>6</sup> So here, we remind ourselves to avoid all bad, cultivate the good, and purify the mind. For, this is the teaching of all the buddhas (Dh 183).

And all this we do in peace. Even with all our best wishes, some may still quarrel with us. But **we do not quarrel with them** (*na kalaha,kāraka*) – just as even when the world quarrels with the Buddha, he does not quarrel with the world.<sup>7</sup> For, we come in peace, seeking peace, giving

---

<sup>4</sup> On the gradual talk (*ānupubbī,kathā*), see **Mahā'padāna Sutta** (D 14,3.15), [SD 49.8a](#); [SD 21.6 esp \(1\)](#); [SD 46.1 \(4.1\)](#); [SD 30.8 \(3.4.2\)](#).

<sup>5</sup> See the story of the brahmin **Rādha** in Piya Tan, *The Buddha and His Disciples*, Singapore. 2013: 5.24a, and **Dhānañjāni Sutta** (M 97), [SD 4.9](#).

<sup>6</sup> See **Sevitabbāsevitabba Sutta** (M 114), [SD 39.8](#).

<sup>7</sup> See **Puppha Sutta** (S 22.94/3:138), SD 72.5.

peace. We bring them the true word (*saddhamma*), the good news that opens a path in our lives to the free space of awakening. We are messengers of the Dharma, prophets of the Buddha.<sup>8</sup>

R436 Revisoning Buddhism 144

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

Copyright by Piya Tan ©2016

---

<sup>8</sup> On the **Dūta Sutta** (A 8.16), SD [46.7](#).