

Does Buddhism matter?

More and more thinking Buddhists are questioning Buddhism, especially the way that it is taught and practised today. Imagine we are going to a beautiful open natural park with vibrant space, beautiful flowers and trees, refreshing nature, with her streams, rocks and hills. At the entrance to the park, we meet various salespeople, with their canned music and loud-hailers, who hand us brochures and sell us guidebooks on what we should or should not do in the park, which places we should go to and what to do there, and so on. And we have to pay for such unsolicited advice. The point is that we simply want to explore and enjoy this wonderful natural space.

Buddhism is this beautiful open natural park, which has been colonized by various peddlers and spivs with their brochures, guidebooks and packaged tours. If we listen to them and follow them, and keep doing this every time we come to the park, we see only a bit of the park in the same old way, and never really enjoying it.

So, the next time we visit the park, we quietly enter and explore it by ourself. We begin to notice that there are also other very happy sportsmen and explorers who enjoy the park, taking their time to exercise in the fresh air, or see and smell the flowers, or meditate under the trees, or sit by the stream, or walk amongst the trees.

Do these peddlers, spivs, and their peddling matter? Does Buddhism matter? If we really listen to the historical Buddha; we find that the temple buildings don't matter; the images of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and deities don't matter; the noisy chanting, singing and praying don't matter; the strange rituals don't matter; and many of the teachings, too, don't really matter.

Of course, they may have their meaning and purpose for some people or groups of people, that is, to those who wish to "belong" somewhere, to be members of a group, or to raise funds. This, of course, has its benefits. After all, ultimately, Buddhism is about buildings and money.

Buddhism, then, is not essential at all if we are seeking to awaken here and now. We must do only these 4 things:

- (1) We need to understand our limitations to personal growth and awakening;
- (2) We need to understand the conditions that limit us;
- (3) We need to remove those conditions that limit us; and
- (4) We need to attain full personal growth and spiritual awakening.

Buddhism then does *not* matter, but the Dharma does. Ultimately, the Dharma is about right understanding and self-awakening.

While Buddhism teaches us the 4 noble truths as *dogmas* to believe in, the Dharma is *a path* we personally take to diligently perform the "4 tasks" that are these noble truths. While Buddhism comprises belief-systems (Theravada, Mahayana, Vajrayana, and their offshoots and new cults), the Dharma is a method of personal cultivation. While Buddhism is a building or group we go to for acceptance or for succour, the Dharma is our own way of living and seeing by which we learn more about ourself, better understanding life and connecting with others wherever we are. The Dharma, then, is a path of true freedom.

Once we join any Buddhist group, we are likely, even compelled, to see other Buddhist groups as holding and teaching wrong views and delusions. Or, we can tolerantly accept all these wrong views and delusions. From outside these groups, we can see that many of them are sincerely struggling to cultivate moral virtue, mental cultivation and wisdom. But they are facing an uphill task because of the numerous baggages they are burdened with – their beliefs, rituals, buildings, traditions, cultures and worldly engagements.

Many, if not all, of these Buddhist groups probably started off with very noble aims of following the historical Buddha's teachings. However, in time, they introduced their own images of the Buddha, new wonderful Buddhist philosophies, new methods of meditation and techniques of mind-control, elaborate and captivating rituals, chants and songs, motivating talks by well qualified and charismatic speakers, and various sets of beliefs to define and contain their members. Such systems – because they are so well organized – work very well for them, at least.

One of the big problems with Buddhism is that it gets compartmentalized. We are “Buddhist” only when we are with the group. If we do not keep to the rules of the group, or at least appear to do so, we will find ourselves isolated or even ostracized. Even when Buddhists are gathered together, they are not always very friendly with one another. In other words, Buddhism is often a fragmented way of beliefs and rituals, with which we often find little or no connection, or only momentary connection. Buddhism, then, is something outside of ourselves; it is found only in the group.

Hence, if we are seeking to know the historical Buddha, live happy lives with peaceful minds, and be free of suffering, *we have to look elsewhere*. If we are seeking more than mere consolation or acceptance by a group, *we have to look elsewhere*. If we want to experience for ourselves the truth and beauty of the Dharma that the Buddha himself experienced, *we need to look elsewhere*.

Where do we look for all these vital things? There's only one place we should begin looking, that is, in **the suttas**. They are the best records we have of the teachings of the historical Buddha. The first thing we must do is to study and understand their meaning and purpose. It is very easy for us to fall into a Facebook of sutta chat, where we accumulate, show off, and exchange information, and collecting Likes and Loves. We basically remain unchanged, untransformed, throughout the process. Or, worse, we feel as if we want more Likes and Loves: we are still dependent on the group.

We begin to understand the suttas better as we progress in our meditation. In fact, our sutta understanding helps our meditation, and our meditation helps us better understand the suttas. They work like the two wings of a bird, giving us lift to rise above the madding crowd, and to see our true self with peace, joy and wisdom. The suttas, then, teach us how to let go of the inessentials of life. We let go of what is not ours in the first place.

It's like that beautiful park we talked about at the start. Imagine when the park workers come to remove the cut grass, dry sticks, fallen leaves and broken branches from the park, and burn

them, or do what they like with them. Do we say that they have taken away the park? Not at all: the park is still there, always there, so to speak.¹

So, too, we lose nothing by letting go of the inessentials in our life. How do we know what are really essential to us? They are our life, happiness, freedom, integrity and mindfulness. How do we know this: they are the values rooted in the 5 moral precepts of Buddhism.² These essentials are the bases for our mental cultivation and personal growth which awaken us in this life itself. This is the Buddhism that matters, because it is the Dharma, the path of awakening in this life itself.³

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

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¹ This is an application of the beautiful "Jetavana parable," see **Alagaddûpama Sutta** (M 22,41), [SD 3.13](#).

² On [the 5 precepts](#), see Reflection R29, "Say yes, say no, be silent," 2008: see [Simple Joys 1](#), 2009:5.1.

³ On how to awaken in this life, see **(Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1), [SD 16.7](#).