

## Crying real wolves

After spending more half a century studying various world religions, and practising various forms of Buddhism, my understanding of both religion and Buddhism have reached a point where I am most happy to go back to the simple and effective teachings of the historical Buddha. I've also noticed and realized that we can be easily fixated on beliefs or rituals when we like them or when they agree with our preconceived notions, without ever examining how they are affecting us – until it is too late.

Having been a Theravada monk for 20 years, and the following decades, as a full-time lay Dharma worker, teaching and counselling not only Buddhists, but seekers from practically all the religions in Singapore, I sadly noticed that many Buddhists are as fixed in their views as amongst the non-Buddhists, or perhaps even more so. A key reason for this, it seems, is that such Buddhists (perhaps, mostly ethnic Buddhists) tend to believe teachers more than the teachings, no matter how true or right: it is not *what* good is taught, but who teaches it that seems to count.

There are occasions when I would hear a veteran Buddhist remark that a certain very old monk he met looked so senior and respectable that he “must be highly attained.” Obviously, such pious Buddhists have not studied **the Satta Jaṭila Sutta** (S 3.11),<sup>1</sup> or have forgotten it, or worse, disregarded it, and hold the view that *looks* define a saint.<sup>2</sup> This is only the tip of the iceberg of blind piety that weakens Buddhism and embolden the false priests and gurus who plague and parasitise Buddhism today.

We simply choose to believe what we want. This is the essence of *sensual desire*: it begins with our thoughts, which become views, which we then hold to be truths. So, we become spiders weaving our own web of views, waiting for juicy believers to stick to our web and devour them – but we remain webbed spiders all our lives.

One of the questions I often ask myself as I write reflections such as this, is whether I should continue to speak and write about the slings and arrows of outrageous falseness rubbed on us by gurus and talks. Or to be silent and biddable so that I have more friends and supporters, become more respected and donated. My usual response to such a musing would be: What would the Buddha do?

The Buddha is never silent when things are wrong, even in high places (such as the false claims of the powerful priestly brahmins) when truth needs to be told. He is only truly silent when speculations and arguments are likely to ensue: “I do not quarrel with the world, bhikshus, but the world quarrels with me” (**Puppha Sutta**),<sup>3</sup> or when he is in deep meditation.<sup>4</sup>

The Buddha “does not quarrel with the world” means that he agrees with what is right and good taught and practised by the wise of the world. “The world quarrels with me (the Buddha)” means that worldly people who only really care about themselves find fault with the Buddha, or

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<sup>1</sup> Satta Jaṭila Sutta (S 3.11), [SD 14.11](#).

<sup>2</sup> See especially **Rūpa Sutta** (A 4.65) + [SD 3.14](#) (7).

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

<sup>4</sup> See **Silence and the Buddha**, [SD 44.1\(4\)](#).

reject the Dharma, when they feel exposed, or that they will lose their power or benefits when others no more believe in their false views and ways.

After the Buddha's passing, some Buddhists – unawakened, with their own agenda – wrote their own sutras and brazenly misrepresented the Buddha. They claimed that the ancient texts were wrong: actually this was what the Buddha really taught and meant, and so on. These are the teachings that still overwhelm us today in the name of Buddhism. If we remain silent, then we are allowing these false views and wild superstitions to grow and spread.

However, if we keep on speaking out, if we keep on standing up, for Dharma, we have done our part. Even if we put back just one starfish, and then another, as we go along, though there are a thousand starfish washed ashore, it makes a difference to that one that is thrown back: it will spawn more starfish in time.

We must speak up, at the right time, when the great teachers and masters are wrong – and they often are – and the wrong views they hold have even worse impact on us and on them.<sup>5</sup> So we are actually helping a lot of people by this Dharma courage (*vesārajja*) to speak out the truth. We don't have to be Bodhisattvas to do this, but this is the greatest respect we can show the Dharma – by keeping the records straight.

Occasionally, some VIP Buddhists would advise me not to speak out too openly because people's faith in "Buddhism" might be shaken. But what are these "Buddhist" beliefs: they are simply false views. If we keep silent when we know these views are wrong, and we have the ability to correct these views, what does it make us?

Some of us remain silent for the wrong reasons. Once, I was told, a robber broke into someone's house, and was stealthily prowling around the house looking for valuables. The next day, a neighbour told the house-owner, in some detail, about the robber. When the shocked house-owner asked why he did not call the police or message him on the phone, the neighbour replied, "Oh, I better not, the robber might break into my house, then!" Sadly, our house has already been broken into, and being pillaged right now, and we are still holidaying away.

We all know the famous story of the boy who cried "Wolf!"<sup>6</sup> Here's the story with a tweak for our times. Once, our village had a lot of sheep. Then, a wolf came along and tried to kill a sheep. The brave sheep-boy used his stick and chased it away. On another day, two wolves came, and the sheep-boy managed to chase only one away. On yet another day, a few more wolves came, and this time the wise sheep-boy loudly cried, "Wolf!"

Villagers came running with sticks and weapons, and chased away all the wolves; we only lost a couple of sheep. The wolves kept coming, and soon the villagers got tired of running out of our fun activities and comfortable homes. The poor sheep-boy was left to himself to chase away the pack of wolves that killed more sheep.

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<sup>5</sup> See **(Ahita) Thera Sutta** (A 5.88), [SD 40a.16](#).

<sup>6</sup> The English idiom "to cry wolf" comes from The Boy Who Cried Wolf, one of Aesop's Fables, no 210 in [the Perry Index](#). It means "to give a false alarm" or making false claims, with the result that subsequent true claims are disbelieved.

As time passed, a wandering preacher came along and warned us not to rear sheep or eat meat. We would be reborn as sheep, if we did. So we all became vegetarians.<sup>7</sup> No one came to the sheep-boy's assistance when the wolves came again and again. When all the sheep were killed, it is said that the boy, left with no work, disappeared. Some said that the wolves had killed him, too.

Telling others in a proper way, at the proper time, what is really wrong, so that they will not suffer or be at some disadvantage, is a vital aspect of right speech. It's like when we see someone, especially someone we know or love, that he is heading for a deep hole in his path as he walks in the dark. The right urgent thing to do is to at once warn him of the danger. Silence is no option. If we had been silent and he falls into the hole and hurts himself, he would ask us in time: "Why didn't you tell me of the danger when you could?"

R466 Revisioning Buddhism 161

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

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<sup>7</sup> This does not reflect anything bad about being vegetarians, but for the preacher who terrified believers into it, and not really understanding why they are vegetarians.