

Safe bets¹

The dangers of wrong views. When we have right view—even theoretical one — it inspires us to take full responsibility for all our actions through the 3 doors: body, speech and mind. This self-accountability is based on an understanding and acceptance—“wise faith” (*aveccappasāda*)—of the truths of **karma** and **rebirth**, the possibility of goodness in oneself and others—and our need for awakening in this life itself.

On a worldly level (when we are still unawakened), we need to be diligent in trying to understand **the 4 noble truths**, at least in theory (*pariyatti*), that is, learning about them from all that the suttas and Dharma-based teachings. This theoretical level of understanding of the 4 truths is rooted in the acceptance of the universal truth of impermanence, whether by faith or through wisdom (depending on our spiritual faculty).²

Safe bets. The best way to learn the Dharma is to practise it—this means that we examine the various teachings and see whether they are good and true, and really work to make us “unreasonably” (for no reason at all) happy so that we naturally let go of wrong and unhelpful ways. If we have been hurt by bad teachings and worse teachers, we may be more suspicious even of what is really good and true in the Dharma.

Or, if we are new and eager followers, we may easily fall for all the false teachings and fake gurus who are only spiritually shallow but pocket-deep into religion. We are merely gullible customers for a lucrative market of blessings, meditation and easy answers to hard problems. The first safe bet, then, is to only trust oneself with the suttas and our own practice: *nothing outside is worthy clinging to*—this is the Buddha’s advice to Moggallāna.³

The Aṇṇaka Sutta (M 60) is a classic work on safe bets in the Dharma. Please read the Sutta carefully to benefit fully from it. Here, we will look at only two key “problem” teachings which can test some of our most dedicated Buddhist practitioners—karma and rebirth. As unawakened Buddhists, it is very difficult for us to verify them; they are at best only right “views” for us. It’s wise to be careful and honest not to claim we know for sure about them when we lack any direct experience of them.

Yet, to prevent this from becoming a fetter of doubt—which prevents us from attaining even streamwinning in this life—we simply need to test the pudding by eating it. The Buddha’s “wager” is simple enough: if karma and rebirth are *false*, we have nothing to lose by accepting them when we have done nothing wrong. On the other hand, if we reject karma and rebirth, and they are *true*, then we have a lot to lose, even when we have done other good deeds. The wrong view will prevent us from benefitting from the full goodness that we have done. The point is that even some trust (*vissāsa*) in the potential goodness of such teachings is a great help to our spiritual lives.⁴

¹ This reflection is from *Ariya Aṭṭh’āṅgika Magga*, SD 10.16 (1.8).

² This is either the faculties of faith (*saddh’indriya*) or of wisdom (*paññ’indriya*): see *Pañc’indriya*, SD 10.4. On the streamwinner’s faith, see SD 3.3 (5). See *(Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta* (S 25.1), SD 16.7.

³ See SD 10.16 (1.4.3.1).

⁴ See M 60 @ SD 35.5 (4).

Rightly diligent. Right view —especially on a worldly level—should be the ability and willingness to differentiate between right and wrong manifestations of the path-factors (the limbs of the eightfold path). This is best done with the support of the monitoring qualities of right mindfulness and right effort. **Mindfulness** is the diligence in carefully examining what purports to be Dharma. **Right effort** is essentially rejecting the false teachings and wrong ways, and cultivating what is right and good.

What is to be rejected here? **The Buddhism of greed** should be rejected. All organized affairs—including Buddhist ones—need funds to run, and their organizers need basic life supports, unless they are the leisurely wealthy who have dedicated their wealth and time to spread the Dharma. However, when Buddhism is only a means, even a subtle and noble one, to raise funds, especially by those who claim “not to use or have need of money,” it is better for us to politely retreat into our own sutta study and meditation.

The Buddhism of hate shows itself mostly when organized Buddhists or some over-zealous monastic or priest forget their vows and training to take a violent stand on some political issues.⁵ The task of Buddhist leaders, monastic or lay, should be to promote dialogue and understanding with those of other faiths or leanings. This is becoming more common in a world with greater mobility and easier communication. But this does not mean we should take the easy Procrustean⁶ way out. This is the kind of Buddhism we should avoid.

The Buddhism of delusion is difficult to detect if we are already deluded by its teachings. This delusion may be in the form of the superiority or priority of a race, or the preservation of a culture or the hubris of sectarianism,⁷ or even some modernist notion of Buddhism that “Buddhism needs change,” when the real issue is our desire to promote some worldly schemes. The real task is not to change Buddhism, but to better ourselves.

Reject bad, promote good. Both **the Sammā Diṭṭhi Sutta** (M 9) and **the Dvedhā Vitakka Sutta** (M 19) highlight the fact that right view is cultivated and enhanced by the recognition of the wholesome or the unwholesome for what they really are. What is unwholesome produces suffering of some kind, often in subtle ways, even deceptively by appearing to be good and helpful. By the time the scam or rot is discovered (if it is at all discovered) may simply be too late.⁸

A rule of thumb is that whatever is person-centred is neither likely to last nor to present the Dharma of the suttas. We are often warned against personality cults and religious fan clubs. **The (Ahita) Thera Sutta** (A 5.88) warns us that even elderly, famous, learned, successful and respected teachers can have wrong views.⁹ **The Rūpa Sutta** (A 4.65) advises us not to judge a person, especially a monastic or a teacher by his looks, voice, austerity or even teachings. We

⁵ Such negative examples incl the stand by some worldly monks against the Tamils in Sri Lanka (1980s), and the violent rhetoric of certain radical monks against the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar (2012). See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhism_and_violence.

⁶ On the Procrustes myth, see [SD 21.6 \(1.2.2.3\)](#); [SD 36.1 \(4.3\)](#).

⁷ Ethnic Buddhism are historically important, but mostly in a worldly way; they are generally beneficial to their own adherents and culture, but to truly progress Dharma-wise, they need to happily give priority to the Buddha Dharma over racism and ethnicism.

⁸ Respectively, M 9 ([SD 11.14](#)) & M 19 ([SD 61.1](#)).

⁹ A 5.88 ([SD 40a.16](#)).

should carefully observe whether he has moral virtue, mental cultivation and wisdom, and to accept and follow him only when he is truly wholesome.¹⁰ **The Puggala-p,pasāda Sutta** (A 5.250) speaks of the dangers of being devoted to a single teacher.¹¹ Instead, we should place the teaching above the teacher.¹²

Our ability to recognize what is really wholesome and the willingness to accept it into our lives conduces to greater freedom from suffering. This diligence in pruning the Bodhi tree and debugging it helps to strengthen the foundation and facility of the path. If the crowd is going the wrong way, we should then turn around and go our own way. We should not be deceived into being led by another traveller with his glib travel talks or taken for a ride in his grand vehicle, when the path is wide and clear, and we should ourselves know where we are going. It is of course a common joy and safe comfort to be able to travel with the like-hearted walking the same way.

As unawakened practitioners, the eightfold path we take should be founded on the “grounds of merit-making” (*puñña,kiriya,vatthu*). These are key qualities that a worldling should cultivate to promote right view, that is, to practise giving (*dāna*), moral virtue (*sīla*) and mental cultivation (*bhāvanā*).¹³ Generous giving is an expression of unconditional acceptance of others, and a great way to make loving friends. The joy of giving helps us nurture moral virtue, which, in turn, hones us to experience and share the best of our actions and speech. Both—the joy of giving and moral virtue—conduce to mental cultivation, which in turn helps us to cultivate right view.

Directly seeing. The key reason that we have views is because we are unable to directly see true reality even when it confronts us. When someone dies, for example, we rarely ever see the actually decaying process of the remains. The deceased is made up to look almost alive and our language of denial does the rest: “He is going to a better place,” “He is with God,” “She is going to be a Bodhisattva,” and so on.

Even when we make an effort to see some reality, we only look at one aspect or angle of it, like looking at one side of a mountain. This may not be so bad if we accept the reality that there are other aspects and angles of that mountain we have not seen. However, we tend to think, even demand, that *our* view is the only right one. The parable of the blind man and the elephant is instructive here.¹⁴ Nirvana is only seen when we have no views at all, even the notion of “no-view.”

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

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¹⁰ See also **Vīmaṅsaka Sutta** (M 47), [SD 35.6](#), where the Buddha says that this same measures should applied even to the Buddha himself.

¹¹ A 5.250 ([SD 3.14\(9\)](#)).

¹² See **The teacher or the teaching?** [SD 3.14](#).

¹³ D 33,1.10(38). More fully, these are the grounds for merit-making based on (1) giving (*dāna,maya puñña,-kiriya,vatthu*), (2) moral virtue (*sīla,maya puñña,kiriya,vatthu*), and (3) mental cultivation (*bhāvanā,maya puñña,-kiriya,vatthu*). See **Puñña,kiriya,vatthu Sutta** (A 8.36), [SD 22.17](#). At **Mā Puñña Bhāyī Sutta** (It 22) they are called (1) giving (*dāna*), (2) taming (*tama*) [equivalent to *bhavanā*] and (3) restraint (*saññama*) [equivalent to *sīla*] (It 22), [SD 2.11b](#).

¹⁴ On the parable of the blind men and the elephant, see **Nānā Titthiyā Sutta 1** (U 6.4,10-19) + [SD 40a.14](#) (1.1).