

Poetry in Prose

Some say that we can never know the Buddha's Teachings through books, or even the Suttas. They might be right, but the question remains whether this is for the wrong reasons or the right ones. Jealous gurus, for example, often teach us not to read anything at all, because listening to their teachings alone is sufficient, indeed necessary, for salvation. This is an effective way of preventing extra-curricular learning that may make the followers wiser than their guru, or to doubt him.

On the other hand, it is unlikely that many of us could ever read everything there is on Buddhism. Still, we need to be well informed on our living values. The point is that many of us tend to look Buddhism only on the surface, and leave it at that. This is our "view" of Buddhism. We have never really looked any deeper into the heart of Buddhism, so to speak, so that even when we do hear some truly insightful teachings, we might fail to see it.

Even a teaching in Dharma language (an explicit teaching) is at best "conceptual" to the unawakened, especially the intellectually-inclined or inattentive. Indeed, when the Buddha teaches using Dharma language, it *sounds* the same to all his listeners but it *means* differently to each of them depending on our wisdom and readiness.

A remarkable example of this is the story of **the weaver's daughter of Āḷāvī** (DhA 3:170 ff). When the Buddha gazes at her, it is said, she intuitively knows that he wants her to approach him, and the following dialogue (called **the Four Questions**) ensues before the gathering:

Buddha: Where do you come from, young girl?
Girl: I know not, venerable sir.
Buddha: Where are you going?
Girl: I know not, venerable sir.
Buddha: Do you not know?
Girl: I know, venerable sir?
Buddha: Do you know?
Girl: I know not, venerable sir. (DhA 3:172 f)

The four questions respectively mean:

"Where were you before you were reborn here?"
"Where will you be reborn?"
"Do you know that you will surely die?"
"When will you die?"

The crowd that "listen" only conceptually to the Buddha do not understand his words; but the weaver's daughter understands him intuitively. She answers the questions correctly and gains the wisdom-eye that sees reality directly.

The Buddha's teachings preserved in the early texts are so deceptively simple that we might skim through them without ever feeling what lies between or behind the words. These words are the guardians and door-keepers of the true Dharma. Of course, we need to befriend these guardians first, but we should not fraternize with them, nor get

lost in word-play with them. We should move on into the Dharma Palace and taste the teaching for ourselves.

Some of us may find the repetitiveness of the Sutta passages boring, but they were not put there to bore us. It is our own defilements that bore us! The point is that these texts are not so much to be read as they are to be *performed*. These are precise details on how to direct our minds to see beyond the prose into the poetry of awakening.¹

The Buddha teaches the ascetic Bāhiya how to reflect on the body, feelings, the mind and mental phenomena just as they are. When this is properly done, says the Buddha,

then, you are “not by that”;
when you are “not by that,” then you will “not be therein”;
when you are “not therein,” then you will “be neither here nor beyond nor in between the two.”

The phrase “**not by that**” means that we would not be aroused “this or that” lust, hate, delusion, or fear.

“**Not be therein**” means that we would not be caught up *in* any experience, such as in visual forms, sounds, etc.

“**Be neither here, nor there, nor in between the two**” means that we would not be reborn anywhere, not into this world again, nor into some heaven, nor be caught in any intermediate state. Bāhiya became a layman arhat.²

We may not become arhats after reading this, but we may be better prepared to use the suttas in a spiritually effective way. We should first carefully read the instructive parts of the sutta that we like, reflecting on them a sentence or a phrase at a time. After each reflection, remain silent for a while to let the meaning arise, and then let it sink in. Don’t think the Dharma: feel it. Stillness will follow: stay with it joyfully as long as you wish. You will soon see the bright moonlight in the flowing stream.

Revisioning Buddhism 25

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

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¹ For a helpful reading, see Rupert Gettin, “Mythology as meditation: From the Mahāśudassana Sutta to the Sukhāvativyūha Sūtra,” *Journal of the Pali Text Society* 28 2006:63-112, esp 95 f.

² See **Māluṅkya,putta S** (S 35.95/4:72-75) & SD 5.9 Intro (2) & **Bāhiya S** (U 1.10/6-8) = SD 33.7