

My Influence on the Buddha

All right, so I've got you started on reading this write-up by an impossible, even dishonest, title. Yet I don't think I can be more honest than what I am trying to express here. Let me state my aim more clearly before I pique those who have greater influence on the Buddha to write to me demanding clarification.

How sure am I about what I know of the Buddha? What are my sources on Buddhism? Do I really *know* Buddhism, or do I only know *about* Buddhism, or do I only know *of* Buddhism? Reflecting on these questions might well whet our interest in not being tricked into becoming a blind believer.

To know *about* a religion is merely to rely on the five physical senses here. The eye (eg reading books on religion); the ear (eg listening to sermons); the nose (eg smelling incense); the tongue (eg singing hymns); the body (eg doing prostrations). But less often, we use the mind (we need to examine all this more deeply).

To know *of* a religion is even less helpful, that is, to learn about it from those who only know *about* it. More positively, either way can be a good start to learning Buddhism, that is, if we continue to work in experiencing Buddhism directly. The Buddha, soon after his awakening and just before his passing, that is, his first and last message (it's the same message) to us, admonishes us to place the teaching above the teacher, the Dharma before any guru.¹

Look for a guru, you will find a cult. Look for the Dharma, you will find good teachers. A guru is often like a dirty mirror: we cannot see ourselves clearly in it, but take the distorted image to be mystifying. The Dharma is a clear mirror in which we can see our true selves, and a good teacher is one who helps us clean this looking-glass so that we see even better.

Then there are those who might laugh it off or joke it away, telling us that there is no looking-glass, so what cleaning is there? If we fall for such empty words, we will return to square one. We have fallen down the ladder and are swallowed up by the snake.

Religion is often a manifestation of our desire, hate, fear or delusion, a projection of our unfulfilled wishes or preconceived view, even a denial of everyday reality.² We need to question ourselves often and honestly about our faith, so that we do not go on to mislead and hurt others with our views. The healing starts with mindfulness, that is, elevate our unconscious or repressed states into the conscious mind, dealing with them for what they are, and freeing them forever.

Otherwise, we could fall deeply in love with a power-figure, or run after our past that we see in a guru. For example, some of those who are enthralled by the Star Wars movies have started a Jedi religion: there is even a Jedi Church with a global following. Admittedly, this is more fun, and

¹ **Gārava Sutta** (S 6.2/1:138-140) = SD 12.3 & **Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16.2.26/2:100 f) = SD 9.

² See **How Buddhism became Chinese** = SD 40b.3 (Cosmic Buddhas and Paradises):

<http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/40b.3-Cosmic-Buddhas-and-Paradises.pdf>

definitely less harmful, than most cults. However, once we realize that the Force is not really with us, we should move on.

Buddhism, as a religion, uses stories, myths, parables and figures to present its message. Such messages often instruct us to do something or not to do something. In other words, we are expected to behave and believe in a certain way so that we become better people. As such, it would be strange if we were to, say, merely frame up or enshrine this message and worship it.

The Lotus Sutra, for example, is full of interesting parables, stories and ideas, but it was written around two hundred *after* the Buddha's time. We do not know its author or authors (could they be like the highly motivated graduates and professionals of today?). But the way the Sutra demeans the historical Buddha and the early saints leaves informed Buddhists wondering what was their real agenda. Buddhism unquestioned is like a dead cult.

Perhaps, post-Buddha writings like the Lotus Sutra are what we today call a "statement" on social engagement. Some highly-motivated people those days might have felt that the monastics were not doing enough in spreading Buddhism or alleviating suffering, and wanted them to be more "pro-active." Or, on the other hand, could it have been written by those who wished to sabotage the historical Buddha's teachings?

Now, the Buddha had passed away, but there are those who could not accept his death. They fell into a state of denial of cosmic proportions, and created an eternal cosmic Buddha, like a God-figure. The habit is catching: we tend to create gods in our own image. In fact, our influence on the Buddha, for example, seems to grow with the generations. Shouldn't we try to correct this image problem, or at least examine why it arose in the first place?

In the last century, we have a new, even more influential, way of looking at the Buddha: that of the academic scholars. We now have the scholars' Buddhism. British author, David Lodge, in his novel, "Small World" (1988), a humorous campus romance, makes one of its characters, Persse McGarrigle, write a thesis on the influence of TS Eliot (1888-1965) on Shakespeare (1564-1616)!

Many scholars are as sure of themselves about their Buddhism as some traditionalists are about their Dharma. The point is that both of them have their valuable insights, and we need to learn from both. Better still, we should search the suttas and let them speak for themselves.

Some may think that this reflection is "narrow"; I would prefer to take it as being more "focused." We all have heard of the proverbial frog in the well or under a coconut-shell. But do the frogs really mind being safely in a well or the water or under a shell? For, that's where all the nutritious mosquitoes are, and where they are safe from predators.

In fact, there is a beautiful story of a frog in the water who becomes awakened: the Maṇḍuka Devaputta Vimāna Vatthu (the Mansion Story of the Frog Deva) (Vv 5.1). Once, while the Buddha is teaching, a frog listens captivated by his soothing voice. A farmer, standing nearby, accidentally pokes him with his stick, killing him.

The frog, dying with a peaceful heart, is reborn immediately as a beautiful deva, as though waking up, in the heaven of the Thirty-three. Recalling his good karmic fruit, he appears before the Buddha to show his gratitude. The Buddha then teaches the Dharma to the deva, and he attains streamwinning.

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

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