

The Teacher's Shadow

[Revised and expanded version of fb180827]

The Saṅkhitta (Dhamma) Sutta (A 8.63) tells us that once, when a certain monk asks the Buddha for a “brief teaching” for his solitary retreat, the Buddha replies:

“It is just in this way that some hollow persons beseech me, but when the Dharma has been spoken, they think they should still follow me around.” (SD 46.6)

It is like in social media when we ask Dhamma questions but when the answers, that is, the suttas are given, we neither study them nor practice their teachings. Then, we go on to ask other questions, without ever reflecting how all this learning should be put into proper practice. This is a sign of the fetter of **doubt** (*vicikicchā*), the third of the 3 fetters that prevents our attaining of streamwinning.

Our teacher, our past karma

Similarly, when we meet a teacher, we continue to ask questions, or maybe we will just listen because it is “interesting.” This may simply mean that we are attracted to the teacher, or feels that he agrees with our views, or that he is popular and famous—hence, it is “good” and “right.” The teacher is taken to be an object of admiration.

When we follow a certain teacher and think that he is the best, even enlightened, and so on, we are stuck with our **past karma**. The teacher we meet is the result of our past karma, good and bad. In the past, in many lives, we have been listening to the same teacher we now admire. Hence, we are stuck with our past karma, rooted in our teacher's wisdom as well as his ignorance and defilements (but blind to the last two and blinded by them).

However, when we rejoice in the Dharma and practise it, then, we will see the goodness of the Dhamma, which points to the Buddha, our one and only true teacher. This joyful and liberating Dhamma is our **present good conditions**.

The teaching is above the teacher

A good teacher knows that even the Buddha places the Dhamma above himself (**Gārava Sutta**, S 6.2, SD 12.3). Even the Buddha dies, thus authenticating the truth of the reality of **impermanence**. The Buddha Dhamma lives on. Our worldly teacher is like the cover of a Dhamma book. When we admire only the cover, even worship it, call out its name piously, we are but a fan of his. We are stuck right where we were or even worse. We have wrong views, which block us from progressing in Dhamma.

When we admire a teacher, instead of truly listening to the Dhamma he is teaching and practising it, we are likely to spoil and hinder the teacher, too. As long as a teacher is unawakened, he is vulnerable to gain, honour and praise, which the Buddha declares to be (for a monastic) “bitter, vile, an obstruction to attaining the unsurpassed security from the yoke [nirvana]” (**Bhindi Sutta**, S 17.31), SD 46.24.

Green from indigo

A Chinese saying goes, “Green comes from indigo, and is bluer than blue” (青出于蓝, 而胜于蓝 qīng chū yú lán, ér shèng yú lán), which means that when a student truly masters the teacher's teaching, he should go on to become better than the teacher himself. This is how learning progresses. Since our teacher is not yet awakened, he is merely like a container for the Dhamma, and he needs the Dhamma just as we do.

However, the student, as a rule, outlives the teacher, and faces new challenges. He has to master the Dhamma to be able to inspire others in his own time. If the pupil does not see the Dhamma for himself but merely perpetuates the unawakened teacher's teaching, then, he is but a warehouse for Dhamma containers, not the Dhamma! Then, we are stuck in the past.

The Dhamma, present good conditions

The Dhamma is our opportunity to free ourselves from our **defilements**, our burden of the past. With the Dhamma, our present becomes wholesome conditions for changing and bettering ourself. When we fully understand the Dhamma (through the suttas) then we begin to see our true teacher, the one and only historical **Buddha**.

Then, we have truly respected our teacher. To **respect** someone is to accept the person as he is. He is a “**teacher**,” he is not the Buddha; our unawakened teacher is but a container for the Dhamma, and not the Dhamma itself. The Buddha is both our one true teacher as well as the one true Dhamma. He is our true refuge, as the true Dhamma is our true refuge.

Our own refuge

When we see directly into the true reality of impermanence and become a **streamwinner** (at least), then we are part of **the noble sangha** who are walking the path. If our teacher is not awakened, not even a streamwinner, then, he is only a member of the conventional sangha, a monk or a nun, not yet a member of the noble sangha.

When we are a streamwinner, even as a lay person, we are now part of the noble sangha (*ariya, saṅgha*). Thus, we have truly become **our own refuge**—as advised by the Buddha in his last teachings. This is also the deeper meaning of “green comes from indigo.”

R573 Revisioning Buddhism 216

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

Copyright by Piya Tan ©2018