

The true individual

Source: SD 48.1 Karma and the afterlife, a contemporary and practical perspective on aging, death and the departed¹ by Piya Tan © 2006, 2015.

5.3.3 The true individual

5.3.3.1 The best way to live this life is to aspire to streamwinning in this life itself, as advised by the Buddha himself in the 10 suttas of **the Okkanta Saṃyutta** (S 25). All we need to do is to understand the nature of impermanence, and then to habitually reflect on it, no matter what happens. This is, in fact, the least we can and must do, as true Buddhists, in this life itself. Otherwise, we might become “purposeless” Buddhists. Or worse, we could be reborn in subhuman realms, where it is almost impossible to do good works, or arise in some inconducive human family or environment, where we are unable to learn the Dharma, much less practise it.²

Once we sincerely aspire to attain streamwinning in this life, we are heading for the path of **individuation**, that is, becoming a true individual, someone who is free from the way of the crowd. The “crowd” here refers to a group mentality or tribalism, which tends to be exclusivist or elitist, and so lacking in lovingkindness and humanity. When we join such a crowd or tribe, we are allowing ourselves to be manipulated and misled by others through selfishness, superstition and stupidity (the 3 S’s of the crowd).

5.3.3.2 In psychological terms, the spiritual maturation on the Buddhist path can be said to be that of **individuation**, the process of becoming a true individual. Why do we need to become such an individual? An important reason is that we are born into a crowd that keeps growing: first, the family, then the community, our society, the country and the world. As we grow in such an environment, it gets more crowded, and we are conditioned and challenged by the crowd.

The crowd wants to absorb us, making us just like it, a faceless statistic. We are easily deluded by the crowd into thinking that if we are not with the crowd, we are against the crowd. But the crowd never thinks, and as such, it is usually wrong.

Or, we could look the other way, at ourself, but can only make sense of our self against others. So, we try to compare ourself with others in the crowd. When we perceive another as having more things, titles, wealth, beauty, power, and so on, we try to imitate that person. But we are only judging others by their public facade, mistaking externality for inner happiness. This is the working of the unwholesome root of greed.

Conversely, we tend to see as undesirable whatever that seems to differ from or oppose these desirable qualities. We then simply reject those realities, refusing to acknowledge them. We show hate and anger towards them. In due course, we taste the bitter fruits of pursuing such passing fancies and living in a false world. We have become very emotionally negative members of the crowd.

5.3.3.3 To be a **true individual** is to rise above the crowd, to see things, not from the crowd or crowded level, but from a higher and bigger perspective. The well-known **Daddabha Jataka** (J 322) is a fable about rising above the crowd. A timid hare sleeping under a vilva (*beluva*) tree is dreaming that the sky is falling. So, when a ripe vilva fruit falls on a palm-leaf, making a loud sound, he at once leaps up and runs, shouting, “The sky is falling!”

¹ SD 48.1, <http://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/48.1-Karma-and-the-afterlife-piya.pdf>

² See **(Anicca) Cakkhu S** (S 25.1), SD 16.7.

The forest animals, seeing him running and shouting, panic, too, and follow and run after him. A growing number of panicked animals followed until it is a sizeable crowd, perilously heading towards the great ocean. A wise young lion, seeing the predicament of the crowd of running animals, stands on a high rock and gives a loud roar.

This stops the running animals in their tracks. Then the lion, asking why they are running, finally comes to the hare. Taking the timid hare on his own back, they return to the scene of the “fallen sky,” only to discover that it is only a ripe vilva fruit that has fallen.³

The crowd never thinks; only the individual is capable of wholesome thought. That is why we see the Buddha sitting alone under the Bodhi tree. Only later, the 5 monks gather around him to benefit from his awakening. The 5 monks, too, have decided to leave the crowded life, seeking the open space of the true Dharma.⁴

5.3.3.4 Once we have sincerely aspired to work towards the attaining of streamwinning in this life itself, we have taken the first step on the spiritual path of **individuation**.⁵ The true individual is one who works to discipline his body and speech, so that they conduce to mental peace and clarity. Such a harmonious mind is attended by a habitually joyful heart.

The habitual joyfulness of the true individual arises from inner stillness, especially from the experience of dhyana. Even without dhyana, the true individual may still enjoy a constantly blissful heart through being in touch with the Dharma, such as studying and understanding the sutta teachings. In this way, the true individual grows to be ever more emotionally independent.

5.3.3.5 The streamwinner is a true individual who is emotionally independent, since his attainment arises independent of others (*apara-p,paccaya*). In other words, his constant happiness does not arise on account of any external source. He is by nature happy, on account of his contemplative habit of cultivating inner calm and clarity.

Even at this very first stage of the noble path, the streamwinner is endowed with compassion and wisdom that benefit others. The reason for this is that he has become a full-fledged true individual, one who is truly emotionally independent. Such an individual has no fear of death, since he is destined for awakening within 7 lives at the most.⁶

Even we, as aspirants to streamwinning, would have no fear of death. Constantly reflecting on impermanence, we are sure of attaining streamwinning in this life itself. Of such a person the Buddha declares, “He is incapable of doing any intentional deed by which he might be reborn in hell, or in the animal birth, or in the ghost realm. He is incapable of dying without having attained the fruit of streamwinning.”⁷ This is an excellent way of not being falling into any subhuman state after death, and of continuing our spiritual progress until we reach awakening.

R918 Inspirations 559

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³ J 322/3:74-78; quoted at AA 2:277.

⁴ For a related reflection, see “Free thinking,” R138, 2010.

⁵ On individuation, see **Me: The nature of conceit**, SD 19.2a (1.2).

⁶ On the streamwinner and his “7 lives at most,” see **Niṭṭha S** (A 10.63), SD 3.3 (1.2).

⁷ S 25.1,4 @ SD 16.7. This is the Sutta’s key statement and clearly refers to what, after the Buddha’s time, is referred to as a “lesser streamwinner” (*culla,sotāpanna*, *cullaka,sotāpanna*). See **Entering the stream**, SD 3.3(6).