

Dharma is Music to the Ear

We are living in an age that is seeing what might be called the “fourth turning of the Dharma wheel,” the nudges of which began with the 17th-century western colonization of Asia and gained significant momentum in the post-colonial era (within living memory). Such a reinvention, so called because of its widespread innovative ideas, is an attempt at bringing Buddhism closer to the people and society. But the question arises whether such gestures actually push them further away from the Buddha-centred Dharma.

Academic scholars speak of “historical revisionism,” which they define as the reinterpretation of orthodox views on evidence and motivations, and what they decide to do thereafter. On a more personal level, we can say that each of us, at some time, have attempted to reinterpret, even redefine, Buddhism in our own image.

Those intellectually inclined to Buddhism sooner or later would be drawn to fall back on the Chan notion of the “great doubt.” Recently I came across this allusion in an article by Stephen Batchelor (*Insight Journal* winter 2010:22), whom I admire as one of the great living Buddhist seekers. I like people who set me thinking about the philosophical and spiritual significance of my own Buddhist views.

By “philosophical” I mean it sets me thinking and examining the value or disvalue of such views and how it affects my own way of thinking. By “spiritual,” I mean how clearer or fuzzier do I feel about my own convictions and experience of the Buddha’s teaching.

Philosophically, I am aware that scholars often criticize that traditional Buddhist masters often make statements without being properly aware of Buddhist history. By this, I think the scholars are asking, “You said this thing, which has been said before by so-and-so (usually a significant Buddhist figure), but do you really know what he meant by it, and are you using this idea in the same way?”

The notion of “great doubt,” historically, I think, started with Dàhuì Zōnggǎo, one of Chan Buddhism’s most colourfully ambitious figures,¹ who in a moment of insight, came up with this teaching tool. He took the idea of **doubt** very seriously and warned his students that *they must always doubt words, so as not to be fooled by them*. In fact, they should doubt their very existence. He said, “Many students today do not doubt themselves, but they doubt others. And so it is said, ‘Within great doubt there necessarily exists great enlightenment’.”²

Coffee table Buddhists might take such pithy remarks as cream in their coffee, but I am also curious what happens when we put too much cream into our coffee. My point is that surely such adages do not stop here: the value of an adage is that of moving us on from our ignorance or self-confidence to an inspiration to know better, not to stagnate with the notion we were right. There

¹ See Piya Tan, “How Buddhism Became Chinese” = SD 40b.5 (5.1.3.1-2).

² T47.1998A.886a27-28; Jap tr: *Chūgoku zenshūshi* 100.

is no worth, I'm sure, in what is truly wrong being proven right, even by a great master. As the (Ahita) Thera Sutta (A 5.83) says, even famous teachers can have wrong views.³

A common powerful trend in the later wheel-turnings is that the wheel-turners have to deal with their cultural baggages. The ancient Chinese, proud of their culture and beliefs, invented Chinese Buddhisms, which became the wheel-forges of the Buddhisms of Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and their diaspora.

A similar cycle is now occurring in the west and the westernized world. We see Buddhism being treated, often in a procrustean manner, mainly as a result of our cultural conditioning and intellectual pride. However, if we are to closely survey, as evidence allow, the leg-stretching and leg-chopping by Procrustes, is more carefully, even less painfully, done today. But sadly, such an enterprise still leaves us maimed and foreshortened in many ways.

Surely the predominance of such teachings as karma and rebirth in the early canon is sufficient reason to accept that the ancients knew something we are yet to know. Indeed, with the current global access to the early texts, the excellence of Buddhist scholarship, and availability of the contemplative tradition, we have less excuse for making Buddhism lie on Procrustes' iron bed.

I am completely comfortable with the teachings of karma and rebirth. They are like two musical instruments in an octet playing the Buddha's musical compositions. As I silently sit in the cavernous Dharma chamber listening to this octet, the music is so soothing, healing and enjoyable.

Occasionally, I wonder if I could play the instruments better, or give a better interpretation of the pieces. But whenever I do that, I only hear noise in my ears; the music is gone. Only when I let go of my thoughts and ambitions, I truly feel the music and beauty.

When we merely think the Dharma, we will see what we want to see. When we feel the Dharma, we will have an ever more direct experience of true reality. I am beginning to understand what the wise poets mean when they say beauty is truth, truth beauty, and that is all we need to know.

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³ A 5.83/3:114-116 = SD 40a.16.