

Minding change, changing mind

As long as we see a need to know the truth, to understand things as they really are, there is a place in our lives for the Buddha's teaching. We all need to awaken to true reality, so that, untroubled by greed, hate and delusion, we are able to bring true happiness and security to others, too.

The greatest challenge to being a true Buddhist is our own ideas of ourselves. Such self-views are often conditioned by our culture (how we behave and speak as a race), childhood (family conditioning and peer influence), work (which we do most of our able waking life), religion (like going to a missionary school), or simply comparing ourselves to others (like thinking that to be rich and successful are blessings from some higher power).

Despite such challenges, more and more people of different religions are finding Buddhism more meaningful and naturally feel it as a part of their lives. We often find something in Buddhism, especially its teachings of compassion and forgiveness, very healing. However, if we are very new to Buddhism, we might still be unsure of a lot of things about it. Our understanding of Buddhism might still be weak. There are a number of reasons that we might be weak Buddhists, for example,

- We may be infants in Dharma (infants are weak).
- We may be sick or diseased (by legalism).
- We may be malnourished (from lack of good Dharma).
- We may lack exercise (we need fellowship).

We might be new to the Buddha's teaching, like newly arrived in a strange foreign place. Since we are not sure of our directions, we simply follow what others tell us. Even then, we often do not hear the directions clearly, or we often misunderstand them. We might keep on going in circles, or move farther away from our true destination.

However, if we are true to ourselves, we will realize that we are lost. But if we keep on moving, we would somehow reach our goal, even if this takes some time. We must go on asking questions about our motives in being religious, and be courageous to question others, especially the preachers and teachers.

Infants are also very self-centred or narcissistic: they need to be, because they are helpless, and need to cry for attention to themselves for their own survival. We sometimes find Buddhism a good way of getting attention from others. Yet we are not always infants. We can grow out of the craving for self-attention, by really caring for others, which means showing lovingkindness, especially to those close to us and those whom we work with.

To best way to grow spiritually, is to be willing and able let go of our old views and past conditionings, even temporarily, and listen to our hearts. There is always something to learn from listening. That is why the Buddha's saints are called "listeners."

"Sick or diseased" here means that as Buddhists or truth-seekers, we might be too careful so as not make any mistakes in our practice. Or, we fear that we might break any of the precepts. For example, we feel that being a vegetarian is the best way of keeping the first precept, which is actually true in some ways. However, we need to carefully

examine the Suttas and related learning for the real reasons and purposes for such conduct.

Or, we could be taking the Dharma too literally, word for word, without examining the proper context and meaning behind the words. The problem with taking Buddhism, or any religion, at its mere word, is that different people understand the word differently. That is why even in the same religion, there are many sects and groups.

This is also true of Buddhism, which is 2600 years old. It has spread into various countries, and changed into many new Buddhisms. We might mistake what are cultural or ethnic to be more important than the actual teaching itself. Or, we are simply shopping for something that suits our pet views or plans. Or, we merely want to be part of a group and be accepted by others. The best reason for learning Buddhism is for our own inner peace and true happiness.

We might begin learning about Buddhism from books, the internet, or from well known speakers. Everyone has their opinion on Buddhism. Yet Buddhism, like our breath, is a very personal thing. First, it is about keeping our body and speech wholesome: we begin by respecting our body and being harmonious in our communication with others.

Next, we should spend some time examining and reflecting on the true teaching of the Buddha himself. This is the best place to begin because it goes right to the point, without the squint of later biases, strange rituals and cultural baggages. These early teachings or the Suttas also give us very clear and simple teachings on mental cultivation. When we are well informed on the Buddha's Dharma, we are better prepared to recognize helpful teachings and teachers, and recognize our own weaknesses before it is too late.

As Buddhists, we are our own best teachers. We need to do three basic things for ourselves, and only we can do this ourselves.

(1) We need to know our own mind for what it really is: this is the beginning of self-knowing. Notice how quickly our mind thinks and changes its ideas and feelings. Views are change, and meant to change.

(2) We need to train our mind to be less lustful, less hateful, less fearful and less deluded. A good way to do this is to constantly reflect that our mind and body are *impermanent*. Occasionally, simply clear the mind of all ideas and views, and notice how peaceful it is.

(3) We need to free our mind by less believing, to more knowing, to most feeling. To simply *believe* is to walk in the dark. To *know* is to turn on the light and look around. Then, to *feel*; to know what is just right to do next. This is called directly knowing.

When we emerge from such a personal training, we can think better. This means that our ideas no more control us, but we decide what to do with our ideas. This is a very vital early training that we need. If we neglect this, then our thoughts would seem to take lives of their own, and we begin to believe they are actually real and out there. This is called dementia.¹

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¹ Your mind, use it or lose it (preventing dementia): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/64-Your-mind-use-it-or-lose-it-111109.pdf>