

Dharma trains

Notice how we have to do the things that we do: either we *have* to do them or we *love* to do them. Either way, it seems we cannot but do them. We have to feel, think, work; we have to play; we love meeting people (or certain people), or we don't; we believe in certain things and not others. We have no choice, but to hold on to our views and opinions.

Whether we do anything or we don't, we don't really have a choice. Like flowing water, we simply follow the troughs and turns, from a higher level to a lower one. Then the momentum of the waters pushes us through the flat alluvial planes. We move a little more slowly, meandering around with eddies and backwaters, but we simply move on.¹

We flow on and on until we lose ourselves in the open sea of death and rebirth. Then, our molecules and droplets evaporate again in the sun of rebirth, becoming clouds in the open sky, gathering together to form rain-clouds, and then down again we go into the mountains and valleys, over plains, over land, into lakes and oceans, all over again and again.

If we are the waters, our momentum is our beliefs and views, whether it is some learned system like science, or speculative system like atheism, or imaginative system like religion, that pushes us on over the highs and lows of life. We all however end up in the ocean of rebirth, and start our cycle all over again, basically doing the same things that we have been doing before: flowing along with our beliefs, views and habits.

This is a life-cycle metaphor illustrating the essential idea that our lives tend to be cyclic, that we tend to repeat ourselves in different ways, but we have no choice in doing so, although we would like to think we are in control. We have no choice, really, but we think we do! This is a classic example of delusion.²

A pair of metaphors will help us examine another perspective of our religious life, or life based on some kind of learning or belief. We can call this our self-view, when it refers to our roles in life, or our world-views, when we try to include everyone and everything else in it. In many ways, the two views overlap: we tend to project our views, even ourselves, into the world we have created.

The two metaphors are those of the merry-go-round and the funicular train. Most of us are happily caught in **a merry-go-round** of scientific over-confidence, speculative confidence, or religious faith. We somehow have an explanation for everything. Notice how when we talk in this mode, we tend to be on autopilot. Understandably, we attribute such a gift of the gab to God, Buddha-nature, Insight, or perhaps we are simply respected or admired for the relief we give others when we stop speaking: the applause tend to be louder then.

Curious as all this may seem, this is a vital human learning process for both sides of the gab, and not all such exchanges (gabs tend to breed gabs) are frivolous. Fortunately, most of our teachers and informers do not simply repeat the gabs of human history. We only tend to quote some of their more salient ideas, which catch on and are perpetuated by those who have the love or the luxury of listening to them.

However, whatever is humanly communicated amongst us, or transmitted down the ages, often takes on a life of its own. In fact, even the best recorded teachings or texts tend to be translated and interpreted. Indeed, every translation is an interpretation. Understandably, we can make anything we want out of such translations or interpretations.

¹ For a special study, see **Free will and Buddhism**, [SD 7.7](#). See also R82, "The sunbird and free will," in [Simple Joys](#), vol 1:7.5.

² Delusion (*moha*) is the deepest and most difficult of the 3 unwholesome roots (*akusala, mūla*) of greed (*lobha*), hate (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*): see **Mūla Sutta** (A 3.69), [SD 18.2](#).

In most societies, however, such translations tend to be carefully screened and selected. Hence, the best holy books are the best edited ones to suit a tribal ambience or some personal need. In such societies, those who interpret the sacred texts try to legitimize themselves as leaders and authorities. This is, in fact, the most natural developments in all societies centred around any religion, including Buddhism, especially ethnic Buddhism.

Such religions or faith-systems tend to have a strong self-identity (self-identity view), such as a race or church or group, it tends to have a strong ritual tradition (attachment to ritual and vows). And it demands undivided faith (which means doubt is repressed). Such a system, understandably, would not bring us even to streamwinning,³ the first stage to self-awakening.

The key action in such a tribal system is “salvation through membership.” We are “saved” (or at least accepted by others of the tribe) as long as (1) we keep up the self-identity in terms of the group, (2) follow the rituals (going to our religious centres or groups on appointed days or occasions) and perform the obligatory rituals even on our own, and (3) keep to the fellowship, that is, do not question the ideas and actions of our fellow tribesmen, but take them as religious mysteries or tests we must endure so that we remain in the loop.

After all, this is a merry-go-round system, from which no one is allowed to get off, or we can only get off with some effort, even pain. But the freedom and light are worth our every effort and pain to be free to think for ourselves in a wholesome way.

Happily, there is an alternative system, represented by a **funicular train**, one which goes up and down an inclined plane or a cliff railway (like the Penang Hill train in Malaysia). Early Buddhism is a good example of such a spiritual funicular system. Such a system, however, can only incline upwards towards self-restraint, self-knowing and self-liberation.

The early Buddhist Dharma works on an upward spiral by first pointing out that we really have no control of ourselves, once we step onto the train. We may not be able to help ourselves, but even a bit of self-knowledge allows us to let go of the perks of self-helplessness and tribal security for self-knowledge and true freedom.

The point is that we can never be free in a group. We need to respect others, or at least fear them. But in the Buddhist moral training, restraint of body and speech is seen as healthy for social growth for the sake of general harmony that conduces to mental cultivation or individual growth. The crowd never thinks; only the individual thinks, and so only an individual can become truly wise.

The “spiral growth” teaching (known as the 3 trainings)⁴ in early Buddhism is found throughout the suttas. These texts are in Pali, and need to be translated. As we know, all translations are interpretations, so that anyone can make anything out of them. So, there is a real danger of losing ourselves to “free will” again.⁵

We are caught in a merry-go-round sense of security if we rationalize our beliefs and practices merely on the word of the suttas. Not many of us, however, actually gaze at the Buddha word and read in between the lines, feel the peaceful spaces in between the breaths of the Dharma. We rather hear the loud whispers from famous teachers and powerful gurus, who themselves have been hearing or reading teachings from other famous teachers and powerful gurus.

³ See **(Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1), [SD 16.7](#).

⁴ On the 3 trainings, see **Sīla samādhī paññā**, [SD 21.6](#).

⁵ See **The unconscious**, [SD 17.8b](#).

This is often a telephone game of “Chinese whispers” (or we might call it “English whispers,” since we use English). Remember, as kids, we used to whisper a message down a line or circle of players. By the time the message reaches the last person, or even those in the middle, it is significantly garbled, very different from the original message. So it is with the whispered tradition, no matter how loud.⁶

The Buddha word is best read with closed eyes, and felt in between the blissful spaces of the breath. This is the ultimate commentary and epiphany of the true teaching which we have to each experience for ourselves. How different this is from the busyness and business of Buddhism and religion today!

We need to return to the fresh green forest and keep to the straight path through it, leading on to the city of Nirvana. We need to carefully read the map, follow the direction signs, heed the warning markers, and befriend, even help, co-travellers.

It doesn't make sense to worship or collect such maps, signs and markers, or even to chant them piously! We must only, indeed must only, follow their instructions and leave them behind. This is an inward journey that is best travelled light, free from beliefs, views and thoughts. This is the only way we can really enjoy the beautiful landscapes and vibrant nature around us as we move on. This is how we experience the Dharma, by living it for ourselves.⁷

If we are diligent and heedful in our journey, we will soon catch sight of Nirvana city in the distance. It's just a matter of time we will reach our destination.⁸

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⁶ See **The notion of *diṭṭhi***, [SD 40a.1](#).

⁷ See **Dhamma, vihāri Suttas 1+2** (S 5.73+74), [SD 44.4](#) + [44.5](#).

⁸ See **the parable of the ancient city**: see **Nagara Sutta** (S 12.65,19-21/2:105 f), [SD 14.2](#).