

Buddhism for life or for a living?¹

Interesting and valuable as scholarly studies of Buddhism may be, they all have a shelf-life. Scholars, as a rule, are *professionals*: their teachings and writings have a price. Although there are those who do *profess* the Dharma in the old sense,² their success is often measured by how well they construct their own Buddhisms or throw light on certain aspects of a particular Buddhism.

No scholar has the final say on Buddhism. Some, the more published ones, however are more quoted than others. However, every new generation of scholars tends to debunk older theories and scholarships, the debunking sometimes occurs within the same generation itself. Not all scholars, even the best, are always right, but they are generally amenable to correction.³ This is academic progress.⁴

Scholars are always interested in new or controversial ways of looking at Buddhism, and often exchange views, even if they do not always agree, on the subject. Whether such approaches are archaeological, buddhological, historical, legal, literary, medical, philological, psychological, scientific, sociological or interdisciplinary, they are always of some value to informed and open-minded Buddhists, providing a better focus on Buddhist history and realities. Indeed, such disciplined studies are valuable in debunking whatever the Buddhists themselves have constructed of Buddhism that is outdated, false, or exploitative.

Buddhists generally have a high regard for those who specialize in Buddhist studies, even if they are not avowed Buddhists. It is rare that a Buddhist would even ask another, especially in a Buddhist gathering, if he is a Buddhist. There seems to be common wisdom, some might say naivete, that if you are *there*, then you are at least for that moment a “Buddhist,” that is, a practitioner or one sympathetic to Buddhism. That’s good enough. After all, actual Buddhist practice, such as meditation, is a very personal matter. For such reasons, it is understandable that Buddhists are generally very tolerant.

In fact, Buddhists who love suttas generally have a great admiration for **professional scholars** of Buddhism. Most “sutta Buddhists” (as we might loosely call them) are laymen who need to earn a living to support themselves (and their families), but have a great love for the Dharma, too. They regard the professional Buddhism scholars as very fortunate on two counts. The first is that they are *well trained* in the field so that they often produce valuable insights into Buddhism. Secondly, they are *paid* for studying and teaching Buddhism, so that their work is both a profession and a vocation.

¹ Source: **(Tathāgata) Acchariya Sutta 1** (A 4.127) @ SD 36.15 (3.4.2.1; 3.4.2.2; 3.5.1).

² See esp (ed) R Jackson & J Makransky, *Buddhist Theology*, London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2000.

³ See eg how K R Norman rectifies himself: “Pāli lexicographical studies IX,” JPTS 16, 1992:83 f = *Collected Papers* 5, Oxford: PTS, 1994:77 f; also see Sn:N2 287 620 & Dh:N 158 n396, where he changes his opinion on the tr of *bho,vādi*.

⁴ In Dharma studies, we do try to rectify errors of past teachers and teachings by checking with the suttas and our own contemplative experiences, but more importantly, the insights of our forebears are to us like doors or windows looking into the Dharma garden.

Here I have used “vocation” in the old sense of “calling.” And if such scholars are avowed Buddhists, they are given even greater respect, because they are then members of a global Buddhist community, but enjoying the status of a teacher. Lay Buddhists who have a great love for the suttas understandably would like to emulate these academic specialists of Buddhism. If such “**vocational Buddhist scholars**” could in some way dedicate their lives, or a significant part, to specializing in Buddhist studies with a high academic standard, and are also committed to Buddhist practice, they would be even more valuable to the Buddhist community.

Buddhist teachers and practitioners who follow the contemplative teachings have no difficulty with such scholarly enterprises. We should respect what the scholars have to tell us: they have dedicated their lives to seeking truths in Buddhism. There are scholars who have a deep respect for Buddhism and who are practising Buddhists themselves. With their minds in academia and their hearts in the Dharma, their teachings are even more valuable to our own understanding of Buddhist scriptures and society.⁵

Yet, even *the Buddhism of the scholars* changes, because ideas and views change. So we need to be ever mindful of such changes, of watching and learning from new developments in academia. Indeed, Buddhism is about *change*; Buddhism itself *is* change. As practitioners, we need to regularly look at ourselves to see if we have risen like a lotus from and above the mud of our greed, hate, delusion and fear. We need to look within to see if we have cultivated some strength of stillness to weather the inclemency and storms around us. And in all this only *we* can work it out for ourselves: neither scholar nor scripture can help us here.

One important difference between the *Buddhism* scholars and the *Buddhist* practitioners, however, is that while the scholars generally strive for *conceptual excellence*, using ideas and events to present their *reconstructions* of Buddhism, the more serious practitioners would strive for the *deconstruction* of Buddhism itself, aspiring towards experiential realization, that is, the transcendence of ideas and events, in a quest of inner peace and liberation. The final difference, we might say, is that scholars, on reaching the end of their shelf-lives, may retire to their gardens or arm-chairs, but the true practitioners relentlessly move on with the Dharma right to the end. For them, learning Buddhism is not a job, but life itself.

Revisioning Buddhism 54 (Reflection 12 0606)

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

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⁵ See eg R Jackson & J Makransky (eds), *Buddhist Theology*, London: Curzon, 2000.