

Dord

The second edition of the Webster's Third New International Dictionary (1934: 771) contains perhaps the most notable error in the history of lexicography. It contains the word "dord," which is defined as "density." It is a ghost word that actually has no sense, but has been mistakenly included in the prestigious dictionary. How did this happen?

On 31 July 1931, Austin M Patterson, Webster's chemistry editor, sent a slip reading, "D or d, cont/-density" ["cont" being short for "continued"] which was intended to add "density" to the existing glossary of abbreviations under the letter "D." The slip went astray and the phrase "D or d" was misinterpreted as a single word: *Dord*. This mistake could have arisen because the headwords on slips were typed with spaces between the letters, making "D or d" look very much like "D o r d."¹

It was only after 5 years that the error was detected. On 28 February 1939, an editor noted that "dord" does not have an etymology, and after an investigation, the truth was out. In 1940, the new prints of the dictionary began appearing without "dord."² Such errors are incredibly rare in a major dictionary on account of their fastidious care and accuracy. What is worrying about this remarkable story is that apparently the person who inserted the pronunciation and the categorization, "Physics & Chemistry," seemed to have done so with no research whatsoever.

Figuratively, we can take a "**dord**" to be a factual error that got away. More technically, I take "dord" as a figure referring to a new or innovative idea, especially one that arises quirkily, based on a misunderstanding or misperception of some basic or original truths.

An alleviating way of looking at Buddhism today is that much of it is a "dordification" of the Buddha's teaching of "letting-go." From a simple self-training in letting-go, it has become a subtle system of philosophies, rituals, riches, groups, and dords. Dord as a metaphor helps us understand how religion, here specifically Buddhism, starts off with the founder's teachings, and in due course is re-defined and reified into various personality-centred and dogma-based systems.

Essentially, we can see the spirituality of Buddhism as the **renunciation** on socioeconomic, psychological and emotional levels. This is the true meaning of renunciation, a spiritual letting-go. Taking up the cloth (becoming a monk or nun) is a public expression of a full personal commitment of such a renunciation. At least, this was the original idea as intended by the Buddha, as recorded in the suttas and Vinaya.

The idea of being a practising Buddhist begins socially with true-hearted friendship. First we avoid people who are negative, and then make friends with those who really care about us. We do this by showing our unconditional concern for others. On an economic level, we constantly remind ourselves of the nature and purpose of wealth, that true wealth is basically contentment, not numbers. In this connection, too, we reflect on the saying: "Health is the greatest wealth" (cf Dh 204a).

The second level of true renunciation is to let go of our negative emotions. See how the birds fly freely in the air, how the fishes happily swim in the water, how the earth patiently supports everything on and in it. Feel that space, freedom, and acceptance. This practice is greatly helped by cultivating lovingkindness, unconditionally accepting ourselves. We begin where we are right now, just as we are. Peace is right here and now, even as we read this. But do not stop here: it is always there in our own hearts.

All negative emotions are mind-made. It is our negative reaction to some events that we relate to in our past. If we can let go of the past, the negative emotion ends, too. Or, we could reflect that this

¹ Philip Babcock Gove, "The History of 'Dord'," *American Speech* 29, 1954:136-138.

² http://www.fun-with-words.com/websters_dord.html.

emotion is fabricated by my own mind; as such, it is impermanent. Mindfully say: "I'm letting go of it; I do not want it."

On the wholesome side, each day (or when we are inclined to), think of someone and the happy times we had with this person, or a kindness that he has done for us. Or, visualize a time when we were really happy; feel that happiness fully now in our body and mind. Let go of the words and memory, and feel only the happy feeling. Make a habit of this, and we will discover our beautiful heart.

Emotional renunciation is the most difficult, but with practice it comes easier and more fun. The most negative of our emotions are greed (what we like), hatred (what we do not like), and delusion (the ignorance that keeps us in this rut of liking and disliking). Such emotional reactivity is often seen in our views of life, of others and of ourselves. These negative emotions also root and rule our views of Buddhist teachers, teachings, meditation, rituals, and liberation itself. It is a Buddhism of views and virtual reality.

There are only two types of Buddhism: My Buddhism and Your Buddhism. My Buddhism is the only right and true one; yours is wrong and false. On the other hand, we would try to avoid taking any side, and declare that everyone is right; that all religions are true and good. Such a person might be just a sweet talker.³ For, a friend to all is a friend to none.

Reflections like this one invite us to think and feel. It is like the ancient sphinx that guards the entrance to the ancient city of Thebes (southern Greece). Any stranger who reaches that spot must answer the riddle: "What creature has only one voice, walks sometimes on two legs, sometimes on three, sometimes on four, and which, contrary to the general law of nature, is at its weakest when it uses the most legs?"

The sphinx has a ravenous appetite for the ignorant. It is said that Oedipus, the lost son of the Theban king answers rightly (that it is "a man," who as a baby he crawls on all fours, then walks on two legs, and when old, uses a walking-stick), and the defeated sphinx throws herself down from the heights, killing herself. Oedipus thus appears as a kind of liminal hero, marking the death of the old gods and the rise of the new generation of gods.

The Buddha is sometimes depicted as a "sphinx," that is, as the "man-lion" (*nara,sīha*), a dord found in late Pali literature.⁴ While the sphinx has a lion's body and a human head, the Buddha is often regarded as a superhuman. In the metaphor of the man-lion, the Buddha Dharma is a lion-roar feared by the beast in us. This lion-roar is able to tame our baser instincts (greed, hate and delusion), bringing about their death, giving rise to new positive emotions of charity, love and wisdom.

If we hear the Buddha's lion-roar clearly and regularly enough, we are thus empowered to recognize the Buddhist dords for what they are. More importantly, we begin to rid ourselves of self-view and self-rooted views. When we are rid of the ghosts of the self, we are transformed into true individuals, emotionally independent beings who are by nature happy, capable to making others truly happy, too. Peace is right here and now, even as we read this. Like love, you are truly at peace when you give it away.

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

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³ See **Sigāl'ovāda Sutta** (D 31.18/3:186) = SD 4.1= <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/4.1-Sigalovada-S-d31-piya.pdf>

⁴ This is a late Pali term that first appears in the *Kathāvatthu* (an *Abhidhamma* book).