

Let go, get it

In **the (Kassapa) Ovāda Sutta 3** (S 16.8), the Buddha warns Mahā Kassapa (who assembled the first Buddhist council three months after the Buddha's passing) of the future decline of the sangha (the monastic community) and Buddhism as a whole:

Formerly, Kassapa, there were elders of the order who were forest dwellers, almsfood eaters, rag-robe wearers, triple-robe users, with few wishes, content, lovers of solitude, aloof from society, exertive, and energetic—and they spoke in praise of these qualities.

Then, when such a monk visited a monastery, he was warmly welcomed and honoured as being dedicated to the practice of the Dharma. Then the newly ordained monks would also strive to emulate him in his way of life, and as such would lead to their welfare and happiness for a long time.

But now, Kassapa, the elders are no longer forest dwellers, nor almsfood eaters, nor rag-robe wearers, nor triple-robe users, nor are they with few wishes, nor are they content, nor do they love solitude, nor are they aloof from society, nor are they exertive or energetic—nor do they speak in praise of these qualities.

Now, it is the monk who is well known and famous, one who gains robes, almsfood, lodgings and medical requisites, that the elder monks invite to a seat, saying, “Come, bhikshu. What is this monk's name? This is an excellent monk. This monk is keen on the company of his brothers in the holy life. Come, bhikshu, here's a seat, sit down.” Then the newly ordained monks will also strive to emulate him, and that leads to their harm and suffering for a long time.

Kassapa, one would be speaking rightly to say, “Those leading the holy life are ruined by the ruin of those who lead the holy life. Those leading the holy life are defeated by the defeat of those who lead the holy life.”
(S 6.18/2:208-210), SD 88.5

The main drift of this warning or prophecy is that the decline and fall of the monastics—as it is, too, in the case of lay Buddhist leaders and teachers—occur on account of the wrong Buddhist examples they emulate or set, or holding wrong views or promoting them.¹

At the time of writing, there is some discussion on the possibility of “compassionate violence” on an academic forum. Take, for example, this assertion from Asaṅga's Bodhisattva, bhūmi, that,²

“If I extinguish the life of that evil sentient being I will fall into hell; if I don't, numerous heinous crimes will be committed (by him) so he will experience great suffering (in the future in recompense). I will kill him and fall into hell so that in the end he won't have to experience interminable suffering.

The Bodhisattva deeply ponders whether his intention toward that sentient being is with a karmically-wholesome mind or a karmically neutral mind. Knowing what the future [fruit] of this affair will be, he feels profound shame; with a sympathetic mind he extinguishes that one's life. For that reason, nothing is transgressed, but, instead, numerous merits issue forth from the Bodhisattva's moral discipline.”³

¹ For a fuller study, see **Dharma-ending age**, SD 1.10: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/1.10-Dharma-ending-age-piya-pto.pdf>

² Buddha-L forum: <http://mailman.swcp.com/mailman/private/buddha-l/2013-May/018676.html>.

³ It should be noted that such teachings are not found in the early Buddhist suttas.

If nothing is transgressed, responds another scholar, why does the Bodhisattva go to hell? Going to hell isn't usually portrayed as a consequence of doing a deed from which numerous merits issue. This sounds like a typical muddle of the sort we often find in the Bodhisattva literature.⁴

There is only one true purpose in becoming a Buddhist, or more correctly, in following the Dharma, that is, to awaken like the Buddha. The Dharma has only one taste, the taste of spiritual freedom. This is the freedom of awakening from our worldly sleep to nirvanic wakefulness.

We can call ourselves by any name we like – Theravada, Mahayana, Vajrayana, Zen, or their various sects and schools – or align ourselves with any cultural form of Buddhism – Indian, Sinhala, Burmese, Thai, Khmer, Vietnamese, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Tibetan, Mongolian, or western – or claim to turn the Wheel a second, third, fourth or how many times. These may be useful labels for living in this world, and making friends, even fame and wealth. But the Buddha's teachings remind us to look deeper into ourselves, where true culture lies.

These worldly manifestations of Buddhism are fine if we study them critically as open-minded students or scholars. However, they are not helpful for deeper and liberating meditation, and if we lack living roots in the sutta teachings of the Buddha, then we are just priding and fooling ourselves as weeds and weevils on the Bodhi tree. The perspicacious and posterity will know us for what we really were.

Every view we hold uncritically is a step backwards on the path to awakening. Every negative emotion or clever twist of the Dharma towards worldliness simply keeps us rutted right where we are, chained to our own views like a tortoise turned turtle helplessly unable to move -- because of the very shell that shelters it. Views are dry, dark and dead shells: we need to break through them to live in the light and space of true reality.

If the Dharma does not flow in us like our life-giving blood, then we have not awakened to the Dharma. If we do not breathe the Dharma with every breath, then we are not yet born. We remain unhatched, imprisoned in our self-made shell: the views that we hold so dearly in turn holds us back so dearly. If we do not properly get out of our cocoons, we will never grow into free flitting butterflies.

Our views are the hands of the past that pull our strings, compelling us to perform to please crowds, parasiting on their approval. Without a crowd, we are empty vessels full of holes patched up with labels of views and wants. We become as loud and unthinking as the crowd we depend on. We articulate the words, activate the motions, actualize the emotions, but they are all a well-choreographed pantomime on an empty stage. We are not what we say, do, or think. So we remain rutted in an unthinking, unfeeling loop. We keep biting our own tail, and wonder why it hurts. It is a nightmare we must wake from.

The views we hold on to, even when they are true, are simply echoes of the past trying to hold us back from growing into the open light. When our views are false, they could have been taken from someone else. Either way, it is as if we enjoy remaining as caterpillars, endlessly munching away at the greenery, then being munched up by preying birds and passing beasts. Otherwise, we remain as caterpillars, never moulting into free and flitting butterflies.

Yet, all our lives we have held views, and then giving them up for others. So what is different with the ones we have now? They are just momentary shallows or sand-banks we can stand on in the flood-waters around us. We should never lose sight of the shore, and swim closer to it.⁵ If not, it's just a mat-

⁴ Richard Hayes, Buddha-L forum: <http://mailman.swcp.com/mailman/private/buddha-l/2013-May/018676.html>.

⁵ For a list of related parables, see **Udakûpama S** (A 7.15), SD 28.6: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/28.6-Udakupama-S-a7.15-piya2.pdf>.

ter of time, a strong current would sweep us back into the deep open waters, or some predator would devour us. We need to keep our eyes on the shore, and relentlessly swim with all four limbs towards it.

All views (especially about ourselves and about others) are impermanent, they are unsatisfactory, they are non-self: there is nothing unchanging or eternal. True renunciation is the progressive and joyful letting go of views. It begins now, continues now, letting go now. Feel the joy of true renunciation. Let go, get it.

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

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