

## **Buddhism for real**

Is it possible to really know Buddhism today? Did the Buddha really exist? Is the early Buddhist scripture authentic? It depends on whom we ask such questions. It is not helpful that some scholars claim that we can never know anything about the Buddha since he lived so long ago. Some even think that we can never know what the Buddha really said because even the early Buddhist texts were composed long after the Buddha was dead. Such views have been called “Buddhist denialism” or “Buddhism without Buddha.”<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps, we might say that there are Buddhas in Buddhism who do not exist, that is, the numerous Buddhas, as much as the sand on the Ganges river banks. They do not exist in the sense that you and I exist. But this does not seem to matter for those who regard such Buddhas as part of their pious devotion or their meditation practice. After all, such Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are embodiments of various qualities of the Buddha, such as compassion, wisdom, the noble truths and so on.

These “beings” have been invented by pious Mahayana Buddhists who, for example, are aware of the difficulty of teaching the early Buddhist suttas. Most people lack the time, wisdom or inclination to delve into such “difficult” texts. It is easier to simply chant the names of these different Buddhas, or even the titles of sutras, just like the Hindus chant their mantras. This can be called “first aid” Buddhism: we turn to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas for succour just as God-believers turn to their God in times of need.

However, if we seriously look into the huge collection of early Buddhist texts, we see a different story. The early Buddhist teachings are so cohesive and unified that they can only have come from one person. And from the word and spirit of these teachings, that person must be a teacher who is truly a great genius, to say the least. And if we do put these words into practice, we see more and more of their truth and beauty, so that we are progressively transformed in better, even liberated, individuals. This alone is sufficient to accept the early Buddhist texts for what they are.

If we are serious Buddhists who know the value of the early Buddhist texts, it is sufficient for us to accept that the historical Buddha did exist. If the proof of the pudding is in our eating it, then surely the Buddha existed because his teachings can transform us into wholesome individuals, even awaken us from our sufferings. After all, early Buddhism is a path for personal development and spiritual awakening. The proof of the path is in our travelling it and reaching the destination. We could say that the Buddha is the first traveller, the pathfinder, who points the way to us in the early Buddhist texts.

Besides the early Buddhist texts, we have other religions, especially Brahmanism (the predecessor of Hinduism) and Jainism, whose texts also mention the Buddha (although not in such pious terms, but they accept the fact that the Buddha lived in ancient India). Then we have the various edicts of Asoka who lived about a century or so after the Buddha. These edicts, carved on pillars, rocks and open places, speak of the Buddha and his teachings. The Asokan pillar edict that famously declares the spot where the Buddha was born can still be seen today in Nepal.

Not only is the Buddha a historical person, but the early Buddhist texts are records of his teachings. If we carefully look at a sutta passage, we will find direct quotes, that is, the spoken words of the Buddha himself. This can be said to be *the Buddha word*. Notice also that the key explanations are also, as a rule, given in direct speech. It is as if the Buddha is speaking directly to us. In fact, if we truly put these teachings into practice, the Buddha has effectively spoken to us through the millennia.

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<sup>1</sup> On “Buddhist denialism”: see <http://sujato.wordpress.com/2013/11/08/the-triumph-of-buddhist-denialism-buddhism-without-the-buddha/>.

The rest are mostly narrative context and explanatory materials. In other words, we can say that these are transcriptions and editions of the Buddha's oral teachings. It's like some recording of lectures and sessions given by the Buddha if he were alive today, and then transcribing them into books and writing. Some editing is needed here, giving us an idea of the date, the audience, and the context of the teaching or event that the sutta records.

While the early Buddhist texts are edited works, this cannot be said of the later Buddhist works, such as those of the Mahayana and other schools. Almost all of these are new "Buddhisms" promoting local culture and prioritizing their own teachings and agenda, making use of the Buddha's light. Where such teachings do not go against the early Buddhist texts, they would be helpful for our personal development. Otherwise, they are simply ethnic Buddhism – in other words, race and culture come first, and the Dharma serves these ends.

While the early Buddhist texts are *edited* works, the works of later Buddhisms are composed works, despite their using the qualifier "Sutra" and using the Buddha's name. In some cases, they are meant to be literary works, criticizing some old-fashioned monastics who were seen as not being "socially engaged," so that they were labeled the "arhats" of the "inferior vehicle" (*hīna,yāna*). Clearly, we cannot take such works as Buddha word, as the Buddha is himself an arhat, and he always speaks highly of the arhat in the suttas.

Another important characteristic of early Buddhism is its orality. The Buddha word was handed down orally, personally from teacher to pupil, down through the ages, like the teachings of an ancient martial arts school. We have to be there to learn it, and we are transformed body and mind, head and heart, to become a better or even awakened person. The texts of the Buddha's teachings were written down around the beginning of the Common Era.

The texts of the later Buddhisms, such as the Mahayana, arose when writing was widespread. The later Buddhisms, in other words, are religions of the book. This is a vital strategy because many of these schools were very competitive and had to attract followers and supporters, and are mostly urbanized, or had large town-like monastery complexes. For such a new approach to work, they had to change the Vinaya rules, or simply to disregard them.

The most important feature of the early Buddhist texts is that they are the root teachings common to all schools and forms of Buddhism worthy of the name. Their teachings and practices developed from early Buddhism. Even the Seon monks of Korea, for example, despite their priding in a tradition "outside the scriptures" still have to learn the tenets of early Buddhism before they can understand and apply what their Seon masters are teaching.<sup>2</sup>

Despite all these differences, later Buddhisms (with a few exceptions) have one thing in common – they are rooted in early Buddhism. However, their other teachings differ, sometimes radically, so that it is meaningful to regard them as different Buddhisms, even religions, like the different forms of Christianity: orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, denominational and evangelical.

The bottom line is: Why are we Buddhist? Is it to find a means of living? To seek and court a life partner? To enhance our kungfu? Because we love the ethnic language and culture? Or, we want to overcome suffering and awaken in this life itself? If it is the last, then obviously the best choice would be early Buddhism. And the early Buddhist texts are the best way to learn and practise the early Buddhist teachings.

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<sup>2</sup> See Robert E Buswell, *The Zen Monastic Experience*, 1992:217. See **How Buddhism Became Chinese**, SD 40b.5 (5.5.1): [link](#).

For the early Buddhist texts only teach moral virtue, mental concentration and insight wisdom – the Buddhism of the Buddha, the Dharma-Vinaya, has only one taste: the taste of freedom.<sup>3</sup>

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

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<sup>3</sup> Further see Sujato & Brahmali, *The Authenticity of the Early Buddhist Texts*, 2003:  
<http://dhammaloka.org.au/files/pdf/authenticity.pdf>.