

Buddhism without Buddha?

Academic scholars, like all of us who work to earn a living, must keep themselves relevant. Not all scholars of Buddhism are Buddhists. Those who are Buddhists, meaning that they also practise Buddhism and meditate in some way, are valuable sources of critical studies of Buddhism. Very often, they help us understand the Buddha word better. In some cases, the works of such scholars are also pleasant reminders and pointers to the Buddhist spirit.

Those who are unable to see good things about Buddhism, or run out of options, say bad things about Buddhism. If this is done with the hallowed professionalism of academic scholarship, the scholar is likely to be successful in and out of academia. Buddhism, in other words, can be a great way of making money.

The question still remains how an academic or scholar is able to talk bad about Buddhism as a professional (that is, being paid for it). This is because of the notion of “free expression,” that is, that there is really no “right” or “wrong” to an idea. As long as we present our “evidence” in a scholarly or sound way, we should be seen as being right, or at least worth criticizing.

In fact, we find that, as a rule, even the best scholars have wrong views, or are proven to be wrong. The following generations thrive on this. Indeed, this is the essence of academic scholarship. If some scholar can debunk what was held right and universal by a previous scholar, or at least challenge his ideas, intelligently or idiosyncratically, he would gain significant points in the academic one-up-manship.

One of the greatest ironies in academic scholarship is that when everyone is right about a discipline, say the study of early Buddhism, then that discipline or subject will become redundant or uninteresting. Once a subject or field is perceived to be saturated with “success,” the academic must present a different view or vision of it, so that he remains relevant. This is one important reason why early Buddhism as an academic subject seems to have run out of steam in academia.

We might also mention in passing the problem of scholars switching loyalties midstream for a better-paying field, even if totally different from Buddhism as a subject. Or, that the specialist is not even a Buddhist. It is strange that we can profess “not” to be a Buddhist,¹ and yet be professionally relevant and earning a living from teaching about Buddhism or some Buddhist practice, especially meditation.

Buddhist studies has today matured and branched out into various academic disciplines. We have the field of Buddhology (which seems to have died), Buddhism as history of religion, or as sociology/anthropology of religion, as philology, as literature, and now as psychology – just to highlight some key developments. But where is the Buddha in all this scholarly examinations of the Buddhist specimen?

Indeed, if we check out any Buddhism course in academia, or attend any Buddhist seminar for scholars, we are likely to see that nothing is mentioned of the Buddha or of the first 500 years of Buddhism. Concerned Buddhists are wondering, for example, “How has an entire academic discipline so completely lost the plot? How is it possible that we can even begin to speak about ‘Buddhism’ while studiously avoiding paying any attention whatsoever to the Buddha?” complains Sujato, a courageous Dharma protector, in his paper aptly entitled “The Triumph of Buddhist Denialism: Buddhism without the Buddha” (2013).²

Apparently, says Sujato, there are a number of influences on contemporary Buddhist studies that we can identify:

- The pragmatic tendency of American philosophy, as opposed to the classical, pure-knowledge approach of Europe.

¹ See eg (Tathāgata) Acchariya Sutta 1 @ SD 36.15 (3.4.3.2): [link](#).

² <http://sujato.wordpress.com/2013/11/08/the-triumph-of-buddhist-denialism-buddhism-without-the-buddha/>.

- The prevalent influence of Sino-Japanese and Tibetan Buddhism in America, as opposed to the colonial experience of England, which exposed it to the Indic cultures (but Germany is also a major player in early Buddhist studies).
- Trends in academic approaches, specifically postmodernism, with its distrust of overarching narratives (except, of course, the overarching narrative of postmodernism!), and focus on the local, diverse, and specific.
- The jobification of education, which prioritizes fields with immediate financial opportunities, and marginalizes disciplines such as early Buddhism, which require long disciplined study in obscure languages with little prospect of employment.

And more specifically, as we have mentioned above, there is the personal influence of particular academics who define Buddhism, as it were. Hence, each academic their Buddhism.

A key problem here may be funding. Where a university or institution is fortunate to receive a bequest, endowment or donation, for some field of Buddhist studies, then that field would thrive, at least as long as funds and student response last. Such fundings are usually bona fide with no strings attached.

In other cases, Sujato highlights the case of “Dhammakaya,³ where there has been serious concerns regarding academic objectivity, which has resulted in their funding being rejected by at least one major Australian university. I wonder whether American universities receive funding from Chinese/Japanese/-Tibetan sources, and whether this influences the direction of their studies?”

However, none of these reasons seems to explain the neglect of the academic study of early Buddhism. Apparently, attempts in this vital field have all failed, and the entire field seems discredited. This is exemplified by a remark in a recent essay by Steven Collins, an Oxford graduate (in the fields of Greek and Latin literature, psychology and philosophy) who first taught Buddhism in Britain and is now with the University of Chicago, in the US. Collins writes:

“It is my view that, given the complete impossibility of knowing what ‘early’ Buddhism was, the practice of offering speculative pictures of it inevitably casts all subsequent Theravada history in a pejorative light, which is a bad thing.” (2013)⁴

Knowing anything about early Buddhism is “completely impossible”? What about, for example, the 10 million words of text, as well as the substantial archeological finds of Asoka and the like, retorts Sujato: “Frankly I think it just seems too hard, so, rather than getting on with the job, it’s easier just to issue some ex-cathedra proclamation that it’s all useless.” This is a good example of “denialist” rhetoric, charges Sujato.

Most astonishingly of all, says Sujato, Collins claims that the attempt to understand early Buddhism is “immoral” because it makes later forms of Buddhism look bad. Indeed it does: the Buddha was the greatest spiritual leader of humanity, and Buddhist cultures have struggled to live up to his ideals. This is common sense, and is accepted as axiomatic by all Buddhist traditions. So says Sujato. He is probably over-reacting and Collins is only playing Māra’s advocate. Still, I fully agree with Sujato but I also understand what Collins is attempting to do.

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³ On the notoriety of the Dhamma,kāya system, see R M Scott, *Nirvana for Sale*, SUNY, 2009; also Reflection “Aliens and UFOs in Buddhism” (R146) 2010: [link](#).

⁴ “Theravāda civilization(s)? Periodizing its history,” Univ of Chicago, Jan 2013: http://theravadaciv.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Theravada-civilizations_.pdf