

Back to Buddha

Those who have been following this series of reflections might have noticed that often enough the title gives the essence, a good idea, even a teaser, of the reflection itself. The title is a kind of anchor or mirror that helps me to put together my thoughts and feelings within the usual length comfortable for most people to read and reflect on.

These reflections have been sent out every week without fail for the last 8 years (the first was written in January 2007): this reflection you are reading is number 367. In the earliest years, most of the reflections were about a page long, then it was about two pages, currently it is often three pages, and rarely four. The length is, of course, dictated by the desire to present the reflection in a short but coherent self-contained reflection aimed at either inspiring us, or challenging us to look deeper into some interesting or relevant spiritual issues.

The title of this reflection has, in fact, been coming to my mind in a number of quiet moments. However, very early one morning in September 2014, I woke up with this title, “Back to Buddha,” floating in my mind, and the words began to emanate from it. It’s interesting how such a feeling can be so overwhelming (not to say, blissful). It seems just a momentary flash of insight, but when I tried to flesh it out with words as a reflection, it takes days, at least a few hours. This challenge is inevitable because words have an embalming effect on living thoughts and feelings, and have to convey this living warmth and, often enough, *samvega* (an angst-like questioning).

The phrase “back to Buddha,” essentially summarizes a spiritual challenge, an angst-like question, that a thinking and informed Buddhist would face with regards to how we view Buddhism today (or even since post-Buddha times, as this is not a new pattern of religious responses). In an interesting way, we are examining here what can be termed as “a grammar of spirituality.” This is a subtle but vital aspect of the Buddha’s teaching on how our views create our own world and atmosphere, limiting our creativity, growth and awakening.

If we take “back” as a verb, “back to Buddha” can mean “to return to the Buddha’s teachings,” away from a jungle of views, a forest of religion, or a market of religions, so enchanting as to delude us into lingering and languishing on. Or, if we take “back” as a noun, then “back to Buddha” means that we have “turned our backs to the Buddha and his teaching,” by being caught up with the letter of texts and the words of teachers, at the cost of the spirit of the Dharma.

On a “verbal” level (taking “back” as a verb), we have rightly placed the teaching above teacher, but on a “nominal” level (taking “back” as a noun), we have idiosyncratically let the teacher usurp the place of the teaching. In other words, the path has become the goal, or that the medium is the message. “**The medium is the message**” – a phrase coined by Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980), a Canadian philosopher of communication theory – means that the form of a medium (say, advertisement or any object, eg, a light bulb: see below) embeds itself in the message, creating a symbiotic relationship by which the medium influences how the message is perceived.

The phrase was introduced in his best known book, *Understanding Media: The extensions of man*.¹ McLuhan proposes that a medium itself, not its content, should be the focus of our attention. He says that a medium affects the society in which it plays a role, not only by the content delivered through the medium, but also by the characteristics and nature of the medium itself.

¹ M McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, NY, 1964; reissued 1994, with an introduction by Lewis H Lapham, editor of American monthly, *Harper’s Magazine*.

McLuhan frequently punned on the word “message”, changing it to “mass age,” “mess age,” and “mass-age.” A later book, *The Medium Is the Massage*,² was originally to be titled *The Medium is the Message*, but McLuhan preferred the new title, although it was believed to have been a printing error.

The title is a play on McLuhan’s oft-quoted saying, “the medium is the message.”³ McLuhan adopted the term “massage” to denote the effect each medium has on the human sensorium or perception, taking inventory of the “effects” of numerous media in terms of how they “massage” (manipulate) the sensorium.

The Medium is the Massage has an experimental, collage style with text superimposed on visual elements, and vice versa. Some pages are printed inversely, meant to be read in a mirror. Some are intentionally left blank. Most contain photographs and images, both modern and historic, juxtaposed in startling ways. The book was intended to present McLuhan’s philosophy of media and communication in a more accessible manner to a wider readership through the use of visual metaphor and sparse text.

According to McLuhan biographer, W Terrence Gordon, “By the time it appeared in 1967, McLuhan no doubt recognized that his original saying had become a cliché and welcomed the opportunity to throw it back on the compost heap of language to recycle and revitalize it. But the new title is more than McLuhan indulging his insatiable taste for puns, more than a clever fusion of self-mockery and self-rescue – the subtitle is ‘An Inventory of Effects,’ underscoring the lesson compressed into the original saying.”⁴

McLuhan sees “medium” in a broad sense. He, for example, uses the light bulb as a clear demonstration of the notion of “the medium is the message.” A light bulb does not have content in the way that a newspaper has articles or a television has programmes, yet it is a medium that has social effects. A light bulb enables people to create spaces during the night that would otherwise be in darkness. He describes the light bulb as a medium without any content, but “creates an environment by its mere presence.”⁵

In Buddhism, we can understand how a Buddha image, for example, is a medium that has social and psychological effects on others. Yet, it is still a medium, not the message. When we read a message into this medium – that it is “powerful,” because it is such and such a Buddha or Bodhisattva or being, then we have read a message into it. The reality is that an image is simply wood, plastic, metal or some visual medium.⁶

McLuhan’s ideas regarding the nature of media and communication are vitally helpful in our re-examining of the ways we see and do Buddhism today, and correcting ourselves where necessary. In **the Neyy’attha Nīt’attha Sutta** (A 2.3.5+6), the Buddha reminds us to discern two kinds of teachings – the explicit (“whose meaning has been drawn out,” *nīt’attha*), and the implicit (“whose meaning needs to be drawn out,” *neyy’attha*).⁷

These terms clearly distinguish between what is a *direct denotation* or reference to reality, such as impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, non-self, aggregate, and awakening, and what is of *indirect connotation* by means of concepts (“person,”), names (“Vessantara”), stories, parables and figures. The rule of

² Full title: *The Medium is the Massage: An inventory of effects*, Bantam Books, 1967, 160 pp. This book was co-created by McLuhan and graphic designer Quentin Fiore. It became a best-seller with a cult following.

³ McLuhan also coined the expression “global village,” and predicted the World Wide Web almost 30 years before it became a reality (P Levinson, *Digital McLuhan: A Guide to the Information Millennium*, London, 1999).

⁴ W Terrence Gordon, *Marshall McLuhan: Escape to understanding*, NY 1997:175.

⁵ M McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, London 1964:8.

⁶ This is, in fact, a reflection on the 4 elements (earth, water, fire, wind): see eg Reflections, “We are the world,” R195, 2011: [link](#); “Meditate naturally,” R300, 2013: [link](#).

⁷ A 2.3.5+6/1:60 @ [SD 2.6b](#).

thumb is that all teachings, all things, are rooted in the principle of non-self. In other words, even the Dharma itself is “empty,” as declared in **the Dhamma Niyāma Sutta** (A 3.134).⁸

An important meaning for us is that, to truly understand the Dharma, we must empty ourselves of all views, so that we are like a clear mirror, only reflecting what is before us, without projecting any self-constructed image or idea. We might, if we are honest enough, admit that we are unable to understand or appreciate the early suttas because we have not emptied ourselves of views, especially in the religious and ethnic senses. We laud emptiness, but we are still full of it!

This also means that Buddhism itself, whether ethnic or convert, are social constructs, and serve as portals and rest-houses for the world-weary truth-seeker. If we remain on this social or worldly level, we are at best, ritual Buddhists; at worst, caught in the rut of the superstitious.⁹ For, the temple is a medium, the Buddha image is a medium, ethnic teachings are media. We should not take the medium as the message. The consequences of such a fixation on rituals and superstitions are either a predictable, gullible, need-driven animal existence, or a violent, self-destructive hellish state, even right here and now.¹⁰

The Dharma is “out-of-the-world”: it is the way out of the world of ignorance and suffering into a joyfully wise life. Buddhism, in its worldly forms (whether ethnic or convert, eastern or western, and so on) are portals, starting-points or media for our Dharma practice. However, we do not stop (not too long, anyway) at the portals of a university, no matter how impressive it is. We need to enter its hallowed halls and sit attentively to listen to the lessons.

The Dharma is said to be “well-taught” (*svākkhāta*) (realized and taught by a self-awakened buddha). It is “visible here and now” (*sandiṭṭhika*), so that we do not have to wait for the hereafter to enjoy its benefit. It has “nothing to do with time” (*akālika*), making us aware of a deeper personal level of experience. It “invites one to come and see” (*ehi,passika*), meaning that we are free to try it for ourselves, without it being forced upon us. And it is “to be personally known by the wise” (*paccattam veditabba*), we need to cultivate some level of intelligence and wise receptivity, so that we can evolve socially, personally and spiritually.¹¹ This is the true message; all else, marketing media. The true message brings us back to the Buddha.

R367 Revisoning Buddhism 105

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

Copyright by Piya Tan ©2014

⁸ A 3.134/1:285 @ [SD 26.8](#).

⁹ See Reflection, “Superstition,” R251, 2012: [link](#).

¹⁰ These are the self-inflicted painful consequences of wrong view: see eg (**Sāla,vatika**) **Lohicca Sutta** (D 12,10/1:228) + [SD 34.8 \(3\)](#).

¹¹ These are the 6 virtues of the true Dharma: see **Dhammānussati**, [SD 15.9](#).