

Believing makes it true?

Whatever is based on talk or words alone can be misheard or misread, or we could have heard or read rightly, but it is simply wrong and false in the first place. In other words, we can easily be conned into believing something is good, true or right, if we are not careful in how we listen or read something. This especially applies to religion, including Buddhism. For this reason (amongst others), the Buddha has given us teachings in **the Kesa,puttiya Sutta** (also known as the Kālāma Sutta) (A 3.65), thus:

- (1) Do not go by tradition (aural tradition, including revelations and prophecies).
- (2) Do not go by lineage (or received wisdom).
- (3) Do not go by hearsay.
- (4) Do not go by scriptural authority (merely because the holy books say so).
- (5) Do not go by pure reason (logic).
- (6) Do not go by inference (and deduction).
- (7) Do not go by reasoned thought (or by specious reasoning).
- (8) Do not go by acceptance of a view after pondering on it.
- (9) Do not go by another's seeming ability.
- (10) Do not go by the thought, "This recluse (holy man) is our teacher" (or "This recluse is respected by us").

When you know for yourselves, "These things are unwholesome. These things are blamable. These things are censured by the wise. These things, fully undertaken for oneself, bring about harm and suffering" —Then, you should abandon them....

When you know for yourselves,

"These things are wholesome. These things are not blamable. These things are praised by the wise. These things, fully undertaken for oneself, bring good and happiness."

—Then, you should live cultivating them.

—So I have spoken; it is for this reason that I have spoken thus. (A 3.65 §§3+14.2), SD 35.4a

Here, we shall examine points (3), (4), (9) and (10), which are especially relevant today.

In our own times, we can, for example, argue that Buddhism (or any religion) is good, right or true (we are often uncertain which!) because a popular movie actor or a famous scientist is "Buddhist" (what kind of Buddhist is another matter). Or, what message is someone projecting when he advertizes a picture of himself with a US President? We might think that he is a "celebrity" Buddhist, or that he likes Presidents, but little else.

Such an argumentation con is common in politics, too. Politicians often try to get the endorsements of certain large or influential religious groups, so that (amongst other things), this would give the impression (often a false one) of being the better, or even the best, candidates, and that we should vote for them.

On a simpler level, such an argument may go this way: first, someone is praised; then, that person is held up as an authority in a field unrelated to the area in which the person has been praised. It's like saying:

A is popular movie actor, or a famous scientist.

A is a Buddhist (or follower of any religion).

× Therefore, Buddhism (or that religion) must be true, good, or right.

Ironically, although we keep lip-servicing “teaching above the teacher,” as a rule, Buddhists, even mainstream Buddhist teachers, tend to declare their teachers are always right; indeed, they are arhats, too, so we claim. Which means that we claim to be arhats, too!

These are examples of an “appeal to authority” (Latin, *ad verecundiam*, “out of deference”).¹ This is a very common con in religion, even Buddhism, especially one that is book-based or faith-centred. The con is a very simple one: it is written in the holy books (even a Sutra). Here, the argumentation con is that since the words of holy scripture say so, such and such a view or situation must be true, right or good.

Some Buddhist teachers, for example, declare of a certain Sutra passage, or even the whole Sutra, that every word of it has a meaning; not a single word is redundant, and so on. Is this really true? Is the translation like this, too? Isn't this the case with newspapers, too? Anyway, who gives the meaning to these words? They do not jump out of the pages: those meanings are in our own minds, and we project them onto the Sutra according to our own acumen or agenda.

A related argumentation con is when we declare or assume that soap A is widely used, or religion A is widely practised. Therefore, it must be good, true or right. This is not a valid argument because there are a number of reasons that people buy such a soap (it is cheap, on promotion, the soap is most widely distributed, etc), or that people follow a religion (people are born into it, or through social or cultural dominance, or there are palpable economic or political advantages, etc). This kind of argumentation con is called “consensus gentium” (common consensus).²

Then, there is the argument from “**hearsay**,” which can occur like this: famous actor X appears in an advertisement and declares that he uses product Y; or someone tells a moving story that he has found the one and only true religion Z. Therefore, says that hidden message (in the advertisement) or open declaration (by the religious “witness”) that Y should be purchased or we should convert to Z. At best, we can say that X has his personal preference, or simply that he is deluded. We might as well get a famous person who says, “Eat more salt; it is good for me. So it is good for you, too!” Should we follow such an advice or advertisement?

As such, we need to carefully examine: What does the teaching or the teacher really mean? What do the scripture text and context mean? Are these teachings useful in our daily lives? Are they really true, right or good? Otherwise, we might end up turning Buddhism into a God-religion, a blind-faith cult.

In Buddhism, the Dharma is often referred to as a “path,” which means that one has to walk on it towards a destination. In other words, the Dharma is a means of personal development and liberation. **The Alagaddûpama Sutta** (M 22) is an important discourse on the true purpose of

¹ See I D Shapiro, “Fallacies of Logic: Argumentation Cons,” *Etc* 64,1 Jan 2011:80.

² See **Kesa,puttiya Sutta** (A 3.65 §3.1 (3) and commentary), [SD 35.4a](#).

the Dharma, that it is to be properly used and not to be taken as a goal in itself. The Sutta contains two famous parables in this connection: the parables of the water-snake and of the raft.

In **the parable of the water-snake**, the Buddha warns us against the misuse and abuse of the Dharma. “Without wisely examining the (true) purpose [or meaning] of those teachings with wisdom, they are not convinced of it [they fail to see its wisdom],”³ that is, we see the teachings through blind faith, or merely as an intellectual exercise, or for debating with others, or simply for showing off.

Just as a careless water-snake catcher, wrongly grasping it by its coils or its tail instead of its head, is killed or greatly pained by being bitten by it, even so, those who “learn the Dharma only for promoting a sect, or for the sake of criticizing others, do not enjoy the benefits for the sake of which we learn the Dharma. Those teachings, wrongly grasped by them, bring them harm and suffering for a long time to come.”⁴

The parable of the raft points to the true nature of the Dharma as teaching. We make and use a raft simply to cross dangerous waters, and once we are safely on the other side, we have no more need for it. We are then reminded “to abandon even the Dharma, how much more that which is not Dharma!”⁵ Even the Dharma [the sutras] has only *instrumental value*: its purpose is for bringing one to nirvana, which is of *intrinsic value* (good in itself).⁶

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

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³ See **Kesa,puttiya Sutta** (A 3.65 §3.1 (8) and commentary), [SD 35.4a](#). See also D 22,10/1:133 @ [SD 3.13](#).

⁴ **Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta** (D 22,10/1:133 f), [SD 3.13](#). See especially [SD 35.4a \(3\)](#).

⁵ **Laṭutikôpama Sutta** (M 66,26-34/1:455), SD 28.11, & **Mahā Taṇhā,saṅkhaya Sutta** (M 38,14), [SD 7.10](#).

⁶ For details on instrumental and intrinsic values, see [SD 1.5 \(2.7\)](#).