

The Buddha, one and only

As long as we are Buddhist, we will never awaken. Indeed, if we profess any religion, we will never be free from that religion. The more fervently we believe in religion, the more we are caught up in belief, the further away from self-awakening we are. Views simply limit, blinker and tint what we see, if we are able to see at all.

In this sense, early Buddhism is not a religion. It is the quest of the young kshatriya, Siddhattha, for meaning in this troubling world. Not finding the meaning externally, even through depriving his body of all worldly pleasures, he realizes that the answer must lie within, in his own mind. He goes on to master the meditations of his days, reaches their peak, the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, where consciousness is so subtle that it cannot be said to exist or not.

Despite this peak of mental attainment, he does not find the answer he is seeking. The reason is that all these philosophies and meditations were fundamentally flawed in rooting themselves in the belief in some kind of eternal essence or abiding soul. Realizing that neither the extreme of sensual indulgence nor the extreme of self-mortification can ever liberate us in any way, the Buddha takes the middle way and realizes the liberating truth.

The most obvious fact is that everything is impermanent. We may deny God, but we cannot deny impermanence. What is impermanent can never be satisfactory, especially when we see pleasure and satisfaction as having some “thing.” We cannot “have” any “thing,” because there is no thing that we can ever have. There is no essence or soul underlying the principles of impermanence and suffering.

Everything exists interdependently with one another, conditioned by and conditioning one another, like all the atoms of this universe. This is the Dharma, the liberating truth, realized by the Buddha. This Dharma makes him buddha. We only need one such awakened one and awakener, and only need to practise what he has realized.

Within a century or two after the Buddha’s passing, some monks and scholars were putting together texts “about the Dharma,” commentaries on the Buddha’s teachings, so that we can understand them better. As time passed, these texts became more lengthy and technical, and sounded systematic, even “scientific.” Their adherents began to take these texts as being taught by the Buddha himself. These teachings “about the Dharma” became “Higher Dharma” – Abhidhamma.¹

While the proponents of Abhidhamma regard it, or much of it, as the “ultimate truth,” the Buddha’s own Dharma declares itself to be merely a raft for crossing the dangerous waters of craving and ignorance. It is not that the Buddha Dharma is inferior to the Abhidhamma. Even if we “know” the ultimate truth, but do not use it to free ourselves of views, we are still caught in it. The true Dharma is not only simple and direct, but it is something practical. We “come and see” it, and use it like a raft and paddle with all four limbs of mindfulness across the waters to reach nirvana, or head for it, in this life itself.

¹ See eg Analayo, *The Dawn of Abhidhamma*, Hamburg University Press, 2014. [Download](#).

Around the same time that the Abhidhamma was starting and growing, some other people and groups were also coming up with their own views of Buddhism, writing their own sutras, and revising the Buddha, even turning him on his head. So radically different were such ideas that they went as far as to claim that arhats were not really enlightened, and needed to become Buddhas! The arhats were labelled as being “inferior” (*hīna*) to the Bodhisattvas (who were not even real beings).²

These imaginative and polemical writers put all kinds of words into the Buddha’s mouth, so that the gullible and faith-inclined mistake them for the Buddha’s own teachings. In **the Abhaya Rāja,kumāra Sutta** (M 58), the Buddha declares that he would speak only what is true and useful, whether they are *pleasant or unpleasant*, and *at the right time*.³ In short, the Buddha would never speak any lie, of any kind, the way the Lotus Sutra Buddha seems to do, as in the case of the parable of the burning house. The parable is invalid and fundamentally flawed for a very simple reason: it is based on a brazen lie. This also reflects on the rest of the Sutra and its writers.

Yet, we are told, for example, in this Lotus Sutra parable (declared by its proponents to be the Buddha’s “King of Sutras”), that he “pretended” to teach the “inferior” vehicle (early Buddhism) because the people then (including the arhats like Sāriputta, Mahā Kassapa and Mahā Kaccāna, and others) were not intelligent enough to understand the Dharma!

So, these polemicists claimed, for our benefit, that such teachings were hidden in some fabulous place, like the subterranean naga (dragon) world (an imagined world). Only later, when people were intelligent enough (such as the later Sutra writers) to understand them, they appeared to humans. This is great grist for stories by J R R Tolkien and J K Rowling, but clearly this would today winnow away intelligent thinking seekers, leaving behind mostly unquestioning and blinkered believers.

Any informed Buddhist, who has heard or studied **the Neyy’attha Nīt’attha Sutta** (A 2.3.5+6), would know that we need to distinguish between what is truth and what is tale.⁴ The truth helps us practise so that we don’t need the truth any more, when we are able to see true reality for ourselves.⁵

Since the truth is of intrinsic value, it is universal, and not the property of any person, sect or sutra. It certainly would not need to spell any anathema or curse against “any who slander” it, with threats of hell-fire, animal births (as camels, asses, jackals, serpents, etc), constantly suffering hunger and thirst, being “short and ugly, palsied and lame, blind, deaf, and hump-backed,” and the list of curses that go on for some 6 pages!⁶ Anyone who rejects true reality would naturally suffer on account of their own delusion – not because of any curse!

² See Reflection, “Why early, rather than late,” [R380](#), 2015; also Analayo, “The arahant ideal in early Buddhism -- the case of Bakkula.” *The Indian International Journal of Buddhist Studies* 8 2007:1-24. [Download](#)

³ Abhaya Rāja,kumāra Sutta (M 58,8), [SD 7.12](#).

⁴ A 2.3.5+6/1:60 @ [SD 2.6b](#).

⁵ See esp the parable of the raft in **Alaggadūpama Sutta** (M 22,14), [SD 3.13](#).

⁶ *The Threefold Lotus Sutra*, tr Kato et al, Tokyo, 1975:103-108.

Tales only point to truths, and need to be interpreted. The parables of the Lotus Sutra are certainly of instrumental value. But to whom? They are “skillful means” or clever devices to win us to their ideology, which includes the false views that arhats still need to become Buddhas (which is revisionism), that the Buddhas are eternal beings (which is eternalism) and the Buddha’s predictions about our enlightenment (which is predestination).⁷

The Buddhas in all the universes may be as countless as the Ganges sand. This is an imaginative glance at infinitesimals. Spiritual liberation is not about numbers: it is a quantum leap into the unconditioned. We need only one buddha, the true historical Buddha, as our teacher and liberator.⁸

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

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⁷ On the extreme views of eternalism and annihilationism (which includes predestination), see **Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta** (S 56.11,3), [SD 1.1](#). See also **Notion of *ditthi***, [SD 40a.1 \(2\)](#).

⁸ See also Reflection, “Why early rather than late,” [R380](#), 2015.