

## **The way to true awakening**<sup>1</sup>

In the **Cūḷa Sīha,nāda Sutta** (M 12), the Buddha exhorts us to make a lion-roar of the true teaching, as he himself has taught it in the early suttas. A **lion-roar** (*sīha,nāda*) is a public statement of the true teaching, the Buddha Dharma, proclaimed with faith and courage. The Sutta opens with the Buddha simply stating that “Only here” (*idh’eva*), in his early historical teaching, are found the 4 kinds of recluses (*samaṇa*), that is, the streamwinner, the once-returner, the non-returner, and the arhat.<sup>2</sup>

Other religions and those “Buddhisms” that degrade the arhats (saying that they still need to become Buddhas) are empty of these 4 recluses. In other words, they do not teach the true teaching nor lead us to true awakening. “Empty of recluses are the outside doctrines,” declares the Buddha in the Cūḷa Sīha,nāda Sutta. In other words, we must avoid false teachings, especially “false Buddhisms,” of which the number is growing today.<sup>3</sup>

What does it mean to say that the “4 recluses” are found only in the Buddha’s true teaching? The simple answer is that the 4 recluses are those who have fully rejected and overcome (1) self-centred views, (2) reliance on rituals and vows, and (3) doubts about self-reliance. These are the 3 mental fetters (*samyojana*) that enslave us to false religion, false Buddhism and to the world of suffering (*samsāra*).

Of the 4 recluses, the streamwinner should be our first aspiration for awakening, whether as a monastic or a lay person, so that we start to be free from suffering in this life itself. The Buddha’s teaching is like a gentle **stream** and our practice like a sure boat in which we sail down the stream and cross the sea of suffering to the safe harbour of nirvana.

In simple terms, to be true Buddhist practitioners, we need to reject self-centred views (understand our minds), avoid rituals and vows (give up superstitions), and overcome our doubts about the Buddha’s true teaching (study the suttas and be mindful). We need to break these 3 mental fetters that blind and enslave us to false religion.

In general practice, the first and foremost fetter that we need to break is that of “**self-identity view**” (*sakkāya,diṭṭhi*). This is the wrong view that there is an abiding entity or eternal self -- a belief that is upheld by Brahmanism and related teachings. Even today, in the market-place of religion, self-propelled preachers and false gurus, we have to be diligent in identifying and rejecting any notion of “living Buddhas,” eternal Buddhas and cosmic Bodhisattvas, and not to worship our ancestors as pretas or patriarchs. The best way to honour our ancestors is to habitually remember them with lovingkindness and act with compassion in their memory.<sup>4</sup>

Even common sense will tell us that everything in this universe is impermanent: whatever exists must exist in time, to exist is to change. If we claim that there is something abiding or eternal, such as time itself, then we are only speaking metaphorically (in a conceptual or imaginative way). If we claim that there is some kind of external agency (such as a creator-God, eternal soul

<sup>1</sup> The reflection is based on **Cūḷa Sīha,nāda Sutta** (M 12), SD 49.2.

<sup>2</sup> On the 4 saints, see **Alagaddûpama Sutta** (M 22,42-47), [SD 3.13](#).

<sup>3</sup> See eg **Cult Buddhism**, [SD 34.5](#).

<sup>4</sup> See also Reflection “[From preta to hungry ghost](#),” R401 2015.

or eternal Buddha), this is a purely imaginative or wishful way of speaking, and can only be *believed* (not known so), not in true reality. Such dogmas are enforced by faith and fiat, or taught with theology and casuistry.<sup>5</sup>

The Buddha's teaching is that if there were anything permanent or eternal, it would be found in either something physical (such as our body) or something mental (such as our mind). Our **body** basically comprises the 5 sense-faculties (the bases for "material form" or *rūpa*), all of which are impermanent. So we cannot speak of any or all of them, in any way, as being an eternal soul or universal essence.<sup>6</sup>

The **mind**, on the other hand, basically comprises feeling, perception, formations and consciousness. All of these are also impermanent and conditioned. As such, none of them can be anything abiding or eternal, much less, any kind of immortal soul. It is meaningless to speak of an eternal soul that exists *outside* of the body or mind, because we, then, have no way of experiencing such an entity, and it would have no meaningful effect on us. All such ideas of an eternal agency or abiding entity are at best speculative, and, at worst, are the bases for unhealthy views used for legitimizing our false views and private agenda.

"Self-identity view" (*sakkāya,diṭṭhi*)<sup>7</sup> is the view -- a false and harmful one -- that we do not or cannot change as a person (that is, in terms of our body or our mind). This wrong view is, consciously or unconsciously, rooted in the belief that there is some kind of abiding entity or immortal self or soul in our body or mind (technically, in any or all of the 5 aggregates, or outside of it).<sup>8</sup> Once we understand or accept the fact that all things -- physical or mental -- are impermanent, we would also know them to be unsatisfactory.

Whatever is impermanent (*anicca*) and unsatisfactory (*dukkha*) have neither abiding nature nor any eternal essence. They *have* no self; they *are* non-self (they have nothing to do with the abiding self, as such a thing is impossible). We have no real control over our mind or our body, much as we think we have or wish that we have. For example, we all will die one day.

This is such a clear teaching that there is little, if any, room for doubt (*vicikiccha*). An important text, **the Anatta Lakkhaṇa Sutta** (S 22.59), gives us helpful instructions concerning these vital truths, and should be carefully studied and reflected on.<sup>9</sup>

If everything is impermanent, unsatisfactory and non-self, it means that there is no abiding agent -- something like a creator-God or powerful being out there -- who can help us in understanding the true nature of life, an understanding that liberates us from craving and ignorance, from suffering. Since we need to understand such vital truths for ourselves, it means that the true answers must lie only within ourselves. We cannot rely on anything outside of ourselves, even through rituals and vows (which are ways of seeking outside succour or salvation). Indeed, this is the only way to spiritual salvation -- through self-reliance and self-realization.

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<sup>5</sup> See **Is there a soul?** [SD 2.16](#).

<sup>6</sup> On the nature of the physical body or matter, see **Rūpa**, [SD 17.2a](#).

<sup>7</sup> On self-identity view as the 1<sup>st</sup> of the 10 fetters, see **Emotional independence**, [SD 40a.8 \(3\)](#).

<sup>8</sup> The **5 aggregates** (*pañca-k,khandha*), are form (our physical body), feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. See [SD 17](#).

<sup>9</sup> S 22.59/3:66-68 @ [SD 1.2](#).

None of these teachings on **the 3 universal characteristics** of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and non-self, given in such a clear and complete manner, is found outside of early Buddhism or those teaching following it. And those of us who even begin to understand these truths by completely rejecting the self-identity view are said to “enter the stream” to become streamwinners (*sotāpanna*), those who are assured of full awakening to true reality.

As we gradually break the many fetters of craving and ignorance, we evolve towards full awakening to know and see the true nature of reality, and so free ourselves from suffering. The awakening process begins with our attaining streamwinning, and evolves more fully through once-return and non-return to the full awakening of arhathood.<sup>10</sup>

Hence, the Buddha declares that the 4 kinds of recluses or saints are not found outside of “this” teaching, that is, early Buddhism, the Buddha Dharma. Conversely, there is no awakening outside, in those systems that do not have these 4 recluses or teachings to attain these states. It must also be emphasized that those who reject or degrade the 4 recluses – as in some of the later “Buddhist” sects and sutras -- such as claiming that “arhats still need to become Buddhas,” they, too, are empty of the 4 recluses. They are clearly not the path to awakening.

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

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<sup>10</sup> See SD 49.2 (1).