

Infatuation

As humans, how do we know that we are really loving or merely infatuated with someone, whether this is with a partner or a teacher or just someone else? When we love someone, we show it with every feeling and fun. Often, we surprise even ourselves with the positive feeling and wholesome fun that spontaneously arise from us on account of our loving. True love then is a great gift that cannot be measured. It is a boundless love that expects no rewards. The acceptance of that love by the other is a blissful reward in itself. When this works both ways, then both parties are truly happy.

On the other hand, when we love only a part of a person, it is clearly infatuation. Notice how when we first met a person we like, we tend to be drawn to a certain aspect of a person. The person's looks, voice, speech, gait, or smile just thrill us. Or, it could be the person's smile, playfulness, or kindness, appears as a glowing memory lighting our hearts. We seem to forget everything else, even ourselves, when we are with this person. And when this person communicates with us, or even seem to do so, we are drawn forever into some mystical oneness with that person.

When this happens in a religious situation, it is just as dramatic, if not more so. In fact, we tend to see a religious person as being much bigger than other people we admire. We need, especially to examine why we are really attracted to a certain religious teacher or guru. Do we love his looks, voice, speech, gait, or smile? Of course, we usually love his teachings, but that is not what we always think about, or even practise.

If we keep up the practice of his wholesome teachings, then we are well on the path of personal growth. This reflection is on when we fail to put the teaching before the teacher.¹ Even in early Buddhism, we have the case of the elder **Vakkali**, who is drawn to the Buddha's physical beauty, and becomes a monk just to be able to gaze at the Buddha's body! The Buddha, in his great wisdom and compassion, turns that infatuation on its head, and Vakkali frees himself from lust and becomes an arhat.² The Buddha tells Vakkali:

*Full of joy and faith in the Buddha's teaching, the monk
Will reach the place of peace, the happiness of the stilling of the formations.* (Dh 381)

Then, there is the case of the elder **Lakuṇṭaka Bhaddiya**, who is a dwarf, so that people are not attracted to him. However, the moment they hear his resonant voice, they are captivated. The elder Bhaddiya's famous words still ring true even today.³

*Those who have judged [measured] me by appearance and who follow me by voice,
overcome by desire and passion, they know me not.* (Theragāthā 469)

*Who knows the inside, and sees the outside:
seeing without obstructions, he is not misled by voice.* (Theragāthā 471)

¹ See **Gārava Sutta** (S 6.2), [SD 12.3](#) & **The teacher or the teaching?** [SD 3.14](#).

² See **Vakkali Sutta** (S 22.87), [SD 8.8](#).

³ See **The teacher or the teaching?** [SD 3.14\(6.2\)](#).

The most famous case of someone being infatuated with a monastic is found in the story of the beautiful nun **Subhā**, who resides in Jīvaka’s mango grove. A young rogue, infatuated with the nun Subhā, sings her numerous praises, and finally says:

*Your eyes are like a doe’s, | like those of a kinnari in the mountains.
Gazing at your eyes, | my sensual delight grows all the more.* (Therīgāthā 381)

Since the young rogue is unrelenting in his advances, Subhā resorts to a skillful means:

*Plucking it out, Subhā, the one beautiful to behold, | and with detached mind, unattached, said,
Come, take you this eye! | She gave it to the man at once.* (Therīgāthā 396)

That does the trick! The rogue realizes that we cannot really love or own a part of a person. It is both meaningless and painful. It’s in the eyes, we might say.⁴

So, from such stories, have we learnt any lesson about loving only eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, or body parts? Perhaps we have not even heard these stories until now. So we are infatuated with the Buddha’s eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, or body parts (including his relics). Perhaps, we are caught up with the Buddha’s Eyes of knowledge and power; or, his Ears, listening to praises, mantras and hymns; or, his Nose, beautifully shaped and sensitive to sweet fragrances; or, his Tongue, that is able to stretch to anywhere in the universe (which is very long, by any standard); or, his Body, beautifully shaped by art, possessing such great magical qualities; or, his relics, for which we might even steal or kill.⁵

Yet, in **the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16), the Buddha declares that even his body and life must come to an end,⁶ and that we should take refuge only in the Dharma,⁷ and offer the supreme worship, that is, practise the Dharma.⁸ Those of us who do not know the suttas, or are distracted by other teachers (instead of learning teachings), do not hear such urgent admonitions.

We keep running after a part of the Buddha, instead of seeing him as a whole and wholesome being. As we act, so we taste its fruit, which seems sweet, but addictive, not liberating at all.

If we accept only Tibetan Buddhism, we are likely to behave like a Tibetan, even reborn as a Tibetan. If we accept only Chinese, Korean, or Japanese Buddhism, we are likely to live as a Chinese, a Korean, or a Japanese. We are likely to be reborn into such an ethnic group.

If we accept only Sinhala, Myanmar, or Thai Buddhism, we are likely to be drawn to that culture, too. Perhaps, we were members or servants of these ethnic communities before, but now we are not.

If we are drawn to western Buddhism, we would very likely see only the way westerners see Buddhism. But, what is it that we are really drawn to – is it the “western” aspect, or the “Buddhism” aspect?

⁴ See **Subhā Therīgāthā** (Thī 366-399), [SD 20.7](#).

⁵ On an impending war over the Buddha’s relics, see **Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16, §§6.23.2-28), [SD 9](#).

⁶ **Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16, §§3.48, 5.6.2, 6.11), SD 9.

⁷ **Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16, §2.26) + SD 9 (6).

⁸ **Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16, §5.3) + SD 9 (7.2).

None of these Buddhisms or labels is complete in themselves, but they can be useful for those who are not ready for the “supreme worship.” Even then, it is the Dharma aspect we should be taking up and constantly practising, whatever the label.

In other words, they are numerous entrances to the historical Buddha’s teaching. We do not need to demolish these ethnic or modern aspects, but accept them for what they really are – provisional teachings – that should prepare us, or at least, remind us, of the choices we have for personal growth that can lead to awakening in this life itself.

As such, the Buddha advised us not to be caught up with groups, class, caste, or race. He reminds the monks to constantly reflect, “I’ve taken up the classless life.” The word for “classless” is *vevaṇṇiya*, “without class, without caste, without colour.”⁹ This also means above our race or class, and to accept ourselves and others as they are, and to start our Dharma practice that way.

We are meant to be Dharma heirs.¹⁰ When we are inheriting gold, we should not settle for silver, much less for bronze.¹¹

R405 Revisioning Buddhism 128

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

Copyright by Piya Tan ©2015

⁹ **Pabbajita Abhiṅga Sutta** (A 10.48, §2(1)), [SD 48.9](#).

¹⁰ See **Dhamma,dāyāda Sutta** (M 3), [SD 2.18](#).

¹¹ See the parable of the hemp load: **Pāyāsi Sutta** (D 23,29), [SD 39.4](#).