

Streamwinning in this life¹

The way to awakening is like a stream. Whether as a lay Buddhist or a monastic, our first step to awakening in this life is to settle down in the boat on this stream and go with the flow. This is the stream that flows to the “ancient city” of nirvana,² hidden deep in the jungle of ignorance and craving. This is the journey of streamwinning, of awakening in this life itself.

To properly prepare for this spiritual journey (as in any journey), we must have the faith that we will reach our destination. We must have faith in both the journey (including the path) and the destination itself. This is our faith in the 3 jewels, that is, the historical Buddha, the true Dharma and the Sangha of holy disciples. We also need to cultivate moral virtue, so that we are physically ready for the journey.

True faith means fully accepting only the historical Buddha as our guide and teacher. The historical Buddha is a real human who struggled with pleasure and pain, and understood them. He is not an imaginary cosmic being or divine entity lording over some paradise. He is **Gotama Buddha**, who, in his wisdom and compassion, has bequeathed to us the liberating Dharma.

For this, we show our deep gratitude by practising it – this is our supreme worship.³ This is like inheriting our parents’ estate and honour. We would not here say that we are waiting for some future parent! The future “Buddha” is *not* a buddha yet. We don’t need to wait for future Buddha when we already have our inheritance right here and now to enjoy and guard. This way, we are truly Dharma heirs.

If we say that some later teaching is more “powerful” or “more advanced” than the Buddha’s own suttas, we are only rejecting the Buddha Dharma. If we say that some “new” teaching could not be understood by the Buddha’s audience, we are saying that the Buddha is not wise enough to speak on the level of his audience: this is a wrong view.⁴ If we say that such a later teaching was hidden in some naga world or imaginative place, we must take it only as a myth to spin new dogmas.

If we (quoting, say, the Lotus Sutra) say that the arhats have not completed their training, or still need to become Buddhas, we are clearly contradicting what is repeatedly declared in **the “essential arhat-hood stock passage,”** thus:

“He directly knew: ‘Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, done what is to be done, there is no more for this state of being.’ And the venerable (so-and-so) became one of the arhats.”⁵

The shorter arhat-hood stock passage similarly says, “The arhat has nothing further that has to be done or to repeat what has been done.”⁶ Any suggestion that an arhat needs to do “more” (such as becoming a Buddha) is a very serious wrong view. This kind of misrepresentation of the Buddha and his teaching is wrong because there arises “reasonable ground” (*saha, dhammika*) for disputation and censure.⁷ Our

¹ This Reflection is a shorter version of that found in [SD 47.1 \(3.2.2\)](#).

² On the parable of the ancient city, see **Nagara Sutta** (S 12.65,19-21), [SD 14.2](#).

³ See **Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16,5.3.2) + [SD 9 \(7.2\)](#).

⁴ See **Mahā, parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16), where the Buddha declares that he is able to speak convincingly to any audience (D 16,3.21-23), [SD 9](#).

⁵ D 16,5.31, [SD 9](#). See [SD 47.1 \(3.2.2.3\)](#) note, for a list of suttas that confirm arhats are fully awakened and do not need to become Buddha.

⁶ *N’atthi khv-āvuso arahato uttari karaṇīyaṃ, katassa vā paṭicayo.* (**Khandha**) **Sīlavanta Sutta** (S 22.122,19), [SD 47.4](#). On *paṭicaya* and more refs for this pericope, see [SD 47.4 \(2.2\)](#).

⁷ For details, see (**Majjhima**) **Jīvaka Sutta** (M 55,3.2) n, [SD 43.4](#).

karmic retributions are worse: rebirth as animals if we persist in such base ignorance; or hellish sufferings, if we induce others to believe such views.⁸

Faith in the Dharma means that we look up to the Buddha Dharma as the only means of personal and mental cultivation for the sake of awakening in this life itself, at least as streamwinners (*sotāpanna*). If we are diligent in overcoming a bit more of the 3 unwholesome roots (*akusala,mūla*) of greed, hate and delusion,⁹ we would become once-returners (*sākadāgāmi*), meaning that we would fully awaken in the following life. Both these spiritual paths entail our keeping to at least the 5 precepts and keeping ourselves mindful in wholesome ways.

In short, we only need to aspire to attain **streamwinning** in this life itself. Only streamwinning prevents us from falling into the lower realms of the exploitative asuras, the cyclic rut of the animals, the addictive preta underworld, or the violently painful hell-beings. Even if we are reborn in the heavens on account of some merits we have accumulated, when that karmic support is exhausted, we fall straight into the lower worlds, even the hells! This is a game of cosmic snakes and ladders.¹⁰

The suttas teach us an alternative path to awakening if we, for any reason, have difficulty in following the disciples' path (*sāvaka,bodhi*) as streamwinners, once-returners, non-returners or arhats. This alternative path is that of the pratyeka buddha or individual self-awakened ones (*pacceka,buddha*).

The pratyeka-buddhas are the subject of an ancient discourse, the famous **Khagga,visāṇa Sutta** (Sn 1.3),¹¹ and some of their names are mentioned in **the Isi,gili Suta** (M 116).¹² The term *pacceka,bodhi*, "individual awakening," is found in **the Nidhi,kaṇḍa Sutta** (Khp 8),¹³ and the second of the 4 chapters of **the Apadāna** is dedicated to pratyeka-buddhas.¹⁴ In other words, the doctrine of the pratyeka-buddha is well attested by the ancient texts, although the teaching itself is not as common as that of the path of the disciples.

The doctrine of the pratyeka-buddha is an inspiring teaching for those of us in this age when the Buddha Dharma is being systematically diluted and distorted in sophisticated ways by theology, racism and worldliness. The burning house of religion is haunted and infested with gurus proclaiming eternal Buddhas, imaginative paradises, and race-based pietism, and where monastics are seduced by wealth and worldliness. Those who forget the freedom of the forest are doomed to be walled in by the world.

When we know and see the Dharma, and truly enjoy its truth and beauty, we are true renunciants. Like the Buddha under the Bodhi tree, we are each courageously alone. For, we understand that we must stand alone in the Dharma, just as a lotus always stands alone, rooted in the mud, rising through the waters, blossoming alone in the sun. But there are always other lotuses all around us.

Faith in the sangha does not merely mean supporting worthy monastics in a material way or joining a fan club for monks or nuns. It means practising just as the true saints of the noble sangha would, habitually reflecting on the impermanence of everything around us. It means seeing the Dharma within ourselves.

⁸ (*Sāla,vatikā*) **Lohicca Sutta** (D 12,10 etc) + [SD 34.8 \(3\)](#).

⁹ On the 3 unwholesome roots, see **Mūla Sutta** (A 3.69/1:201-205), [SD 18.2](#); (**Kamma**) **Nidāna Sutta** (A 3.33), [SD 4.14 \(1.5\)](#).

¹⁰ See (**Nānā,kaṇḍa**) **Puggala Sutta 1** (A 4.123/2:126-128), [SD 23.8a](#).

¹¹ Sn 1.3/35-75/p6-12 @ SD 99.5.

¹² M 116/3:68-71 @ SD 99.6.

¹³ Khp 9,15/7 @ SD 99.7

¹⁴ Ch 2 of the 4 chapters of Apadāna is called **Pacceka,buddh'āpadāna** ("Heroic stories of pratyeka-buddhas," Ap 7-14), where the Buddha answers Ānanda's questions about pratyeka-buddhas.

If we want to truly follow the Buddha's teaching, then **we should aspire to be streamwinners in this life itself.**¹⁵ This is the true meaning of having deep faith in the sangha, that is, to aspire to be spiritually a part of it. For a streamwinner, whether a monastic or a lay practitioner, is a member of the noble sangha. He is *not* a Bodhisattva, and does not need to be one.

For, in the suttas, the only Bodhisattva is the Buddha himself before his great awakening. His life as Bodhisattva lasted for 100,000 aeons and 4 incalculables ago.¹⁶ During that time, he learns about the nature of suffering, like a traveller who has experienced the whole journey, and then teaches us how to travel safely and quickly on that path to true happiness. Hence, he is said to be the “shower of the way” (*akkhātāra*, Dh 276).

Nowhere in the suttas is it ever stated that we need to be a Bodhisattva or that there is a “Bodhisattva” path. Nor do we need to become Buddhas. For, awakening is a quality; it is liberation; it is neither a person nor deity. There is no other path, only the eightfold path. (Dh 274)

Cultivating moral virtue means living a life (action and speech) that emulates those of the noble saints. This means understanding the nature of right speech—communication that is truthful, unifying, pleasant, and beneficial—and practising right livelihood.¹⁷ On a deeper level, we make every effort to restrain our senses so that our minds are not scattered or distracted with thoughts and views.

The idea is to simplify our lives (body and mind) so that we can bring happiness to others, too, especially those near and dear to us. We can then focus and enjoy the present and what is before us, and cultivate our own inner peace, joy and clarity. This is a lifestyle that is ever ready with mindfulness and prepared for mental cultivation for a breakthrough into self-awakening.¹⁸

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

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¹⁵ See **(Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1), [SD 16.7](#).

¹⁶ An “aeon” (*kappa*; Skt *kalpa*) is a world-cycle; an “incalculable” (*asaṅkheyya*; Skt *asaṅkhyeyya*) is most commonly given as 10^{51} , 10^{59} or 10^{63} years.

¹⁷ See **Right livelihood**, [SD 37.8](#).

¹⁸ See Reflection, “I will wait for you,” [R362](#), 2014.