

Family history

The Pali suttas are the most complete, oldest and most reliable sources – at least for the most parts – that we have on the Buddha’s teachings. Even though they are not all the exact words (*ipsissima verba*) of the Buddha, they were certainly recorded by his living disciples and followers within a few centuries of his death.

Early Buddhism was so ancient that its teachings were memorized and handed down orally from teacher to pupil. Later Buddhism arose when writing was in vogue, and the new sutras (note the Sanskrit word) were written documents which took on a “life” of their own, as it were.¹ We can clearly see how different the repetitive style and simple teachings of early Buddhism are from the written records and teachings of later Buddhism.²

Later Buddhist teachings were written or edited long after the Buddha’s death by those who have *never* met him. One interesting point about the nature of later (post-Buddha) Buddhism is that they tend to exaggerate both the life and the teachings of the Buddha; they tend to present a philosophical style, and have fabulous narratives and imaginative beings.

We have a well known example where the suttas speak of 500 monks or 1,250 monks, but in the later sutras (as they are called in Sanskrit, which the Buddha clearly forbids us from using)³ would speak of such audiences as being countless *koṭi* (a *koṭi* = 10,000,000) or “as many as the sand on the Ganges river banks,” and so on.

In later Buddhism, the historical Buddha was often presented as if he were an eternal being, and his historicity was often diminished, even rejected,⁶ compared to glorious and cosmic Buddhas and eternal Bodhisattvas.

The Buddha only speaks about past buddhas who are like him, and none of them are as fabulous as those depicted later. In these later narratives, their person seems to outshine their teaching.⁴ The Buddha, however, always puts the Dharma above even himself.⁵

Psychologically, we can say that such depictions of the Buddha is a result of our inability to accept the Buddha’s death as a natural part of existence⁶ and as the Buddha’s own teachings that he, too, is subject to impermanence.⁷ Later Buddhism also tends to focus on special individuals, special groups, even special countries or races. They often incorporate materials and methods which are non-Buddhist.⁸

¹ On writing and Buddhism, see [SD 26.11 \(3.1.3\)](#).

² On the value of the Pali suttas (esp the 4 Nikāyas) in terms of Buddhist origins, see Analayo, “The historical value of the Pali discourses,” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 55 2012b:223-253.

³ On the Buddha forbidding the use of Sanskrit, see [SD 26.11 \(3.1.1\)](#).

⁴ On the past buddhas, see [SD 1.10 \(2.1\)](#) Dharma-ending age; [SD 36.2 \(3\)](#) names & qualities; SD 49.8 (2) names.

⁵ See esp **Gārava Sutta** (S 6.2), [SD 12.3](#).

⁶ On dealing with the Buddha’s death, see [SD 27.6b \(4.1.1\)](#).

⁷ See eg **Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16) Section 2.25.3 ([SD 9](#)).

⁸ See eg **How Buddhism Became Chinese**, SD 40b, and the latest scholarly detailed researches on how such sutras we compiled in Central Asia or China, and how the Buddhist sects grew or competed with one another by promoting or editing, even writing their own sutras, and inventing their own meditations. Such developments are not necessarily bad in themselves, but should be understood in

It's important to note here that I'm not saying that we should totally reject later Buddhism, but that we need to be very clear about our "family history." We should properly honour and credit our "ancestors," especially the Buddha and his immediate saints, the early arhats. If we have not carefully studied early Buddhism, we are unlikely to know or accept who our real spiritual ancestors are. Or, we might misrepresent them, or even be misled into rejecting them altogether!

In some traditional circles today, especially amongst Asian Buddhists, we often hear some Buddhist speakers zealously claiming that arhats, although awakened, still need to become Buddhas! This is a very serious wrong view which must at once be addressed and corrected whenever we can.

If we are silent, then we may be misunderstood as agreeing to such a serious wrong view, and so be promoting it, too. Out of deep respect for the Buddha and the true teaching, we need to stand up, speak up, for the Buddha here.

The suttas often and clearly state that "He knows thus: 'Birth is ended, the holy life has been lived, done is that which needs to be done. There is nothing further beyond this."⁹ Attaining arhathood is the complete end of the spiritual journey: the goal of nirvana has been attained. Arhats are fully awakened: they are like graduates who have completed their studies and training, *summa cum laude*, and need not go back to school.

In the **Sammā,sambuddha Sutta** (S 22.58), the Buddha makes a very important statement regarding the arhats. He declares that the arhats are "liberated by wisdom" just like the Buddha himself, that is, freed through the fading away of defilements and ending of craving through being "revulsed" at the 5 aggregates¹⁰ (that is, not being attracted to them in anyway).

The only difference between the Buddha and the arhats, says the Buddha, in the **Sammā,sambuddha Sutta**, is the simple fact that the Buddha is the "one who brings the path into existence, one that did not exist before" and that the arhats are his disciples who follow that path, and are accomplished in it after him.¹¹ In other words, their awakening is the same, differing only in terms of *timing* – that the Buddha is the first amongst equals (*primus inter pares*).

The Buddha is the "one who brings the path into existence" (*magga uppādetā*) means that he discovers the path or blazes the trail. This is an ancient path, but it was lost, overgrown with the jungle of ignorance and haunted by fierce beasts of craving. It is totally lost to us who have never seen this path in our lives. But, it is effectively brought into existence for us by the Buddha, as if for the first time. This

their proper contexts, and not be simply attributed to the Buddha or diminishing early Buddhism, the roots of later Buddhism.

⁹ On the teaching that arhats need not become Buddha, see **Mahā Assa,pura Sutta** (M 39,21.5), [SD 10.13](#). See also **Mahā,nidāna Sutta** (D 15,36.3/2:71,26), [SD 5.17](#).

¹⁰ The 5 aggregates are form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness: see [SD 17a & SD 17b](#).

¹¹ *Maggassa uppādetā asañjatassa...magg'ānugā...pacchā,samannāgatā*, (S 22.58/3:65 f), SD 63.11.

path is the way through the dangerous jungle to the secure ancient city. The path is, of course, the noble eightfold path, and the city, nirvana.¹²

The Buddha is like a doctor who has discovered the cure for a disease that is ravaging us all. We might even say that we all have the same “terminal disease” called *life*: all life must end in death. It is the Buddha who teaches us how to get out of this cycle of life and death, called *samsara* (*samsāra*). Once the Buddha, the spiritual doctor, has healed us, we need not be healed again. It would be strange to say that we are not fully healed until we have become the Doctor ourself!

This important teaching is vital for us today if we value true happiness and awakening through the Buddha’s teaching. The Buddha discovers the path and points it out to us (Dh 276), and we are his followers on the path: we don’t have to discover the path (it has already been discovered). We only need to walk the path, and head for the ancient city of nirvana.

The Buddha is our very first great ancient ancestor. We recall this fact and honour him – not by wanting to become the “first great ancestor” (we can’t and don’t need to), but by practising the “supreme worship,” not by worshipping ancestors (an external action), but by truly honouring them by practising what they have taught us (as a personal experience), that is by walking the ancient path to the ancient city of freedom.¹³

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

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¹² For the beautiful parable of the ancient city, see **Nāgara Sutta** (S 19-21/1:105 f), [SD 14.2](#).

¹³ On the supreme worship, see **Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16,5.3.2/2:138) + 7.2, [SD 9](#).