

Why Buddhist?

Once the monk Koṭṭhita questions the elder Sāriputta (whose wisdom and compassion are second only to those of the Buddha) on the purpose of being a monk, or more broadly, of being a Buddhist. Is it for the sake of enjoying now good karma that was or will be? Is it to always enjoy only good karma, fully and happily, and avoiding all bad karma? Sāriputta answers that this is not so at all.¹

At some point in our lives, as we mature in different ways, especially when we are faced with some challenges or losses in life, we begin to question why this has to happen, especially “Why me?” Or, we might even think that we have found what we are looking for, but realize that we are still not happy. This is often the time when we turn to Buddhism for answers, that is, if we are not distracted by others or other things.

Then, we go to a reputable Buddhist centre, or any Buddhist group (if we are living in some place distant from Buddhism). We might even attend Buddhist classes and courses; or join in some well known Buddhist traditions; or even look for teachers in some Asian country. The joyful interest that drives us to seek the Dharma here must always be remembered, no matter how our quest turned out to be.

Our first impression of the Buddhist group we go to is often like that of meeting a soul-mate we have been looking for. However, for most of us, after a while, we find that the teachers have limited knowledge of Buddhism, and even less practice. If our teachers know so little, how much can we learn, if we depend on him alone?

Then, we attend Buddhist courses and conferences. In these gatherings, we have a chance to hear the views of other Buddhists, and new sources and resources for Buddhism, which do help if we are diligent in looking them up. Buddhist conferences, even “world conferences,” are often less beneficial. We are fortunate if we hear an occasional wise and compassionate teacher who gives us some practical tips for personal practice. But most Buddhist speakers at such conferences are there more to please the crowd, get financial support, or simply show how funny they can be.

Then, we have local Buddhist leaders themselves. As the only willing and able person to lead and teach a local group, they keenly feel their limitations and lack in Buddhist knowledge and practice. Some might spend a few weeks or months with some Buddhist teacher in India or SE Asia, or even work for some kind of title from one of Japan’s many ancient but secular temples,² and become *ordained* senseis and teachers; or get initiated into some ethnic Buddhist sect. This is one of the ways that modern scholars have courageously wedded their faith and their profession: to be both scholars and openly Buddhist.

Such “qualified” Buddhist teachers and practitioners are certainly serious about Buddhism, but if we knew them well enough, or during their classes, we learn valuable lessons about the human aspects and historical realities on which those Buddhist sects and ethnic traditions are grounded. In one way or other, such “prefixed” Buddhisms (Sinhala Buddhism, Tibetan

¹ See **(Brahma,cariya) Mahā Koṭṭhita Sutta** (A 9.13), [SD 39.11](#).

² According to the 1872 *nikujiki saitai* law of Meiji Japan, all Japanese “monks” must marry and eat meat: see **Monastics, sex and marriage**, [SD 66.13 \(2.4\)](#).

Buddhism, Chinese Buddhism, Japanese Buddhism, etc) invariably means that they are somehow constrained by their race and culture. We can be bodily limited by race; we can be mentally limited by culture – we need to overcome these unhelpful barriers as Buddhism grows more global.

Western Buddhism, the youngest and fastest growing of the “prefixed” Buddhisms, is fortunately less likely to fall victim to being fettered by ethnic baggage or exotic traditions. However, over recent decades, we have seen how Western Buddhism was a sort of “free for all” or “do it yourself” Buddhist kit. Even Buddhism (a broad community) must go through adolescence, being exploited for its youth and gullibility, and pay the costs for bowing to faith.³

Now, we see the rise of more dedicated Buddhist groups, especially those rooted in early Buddhism and the historical Buddha. Most of us are growing out of Suzuki “Zen” (we almost don’t hear of D T Suzuki today); for others, such trends have come to mean “fluffy intrigue.” It has been relegated to the undergrowth of religious slang along with “jesuit”⁴ and the like. We have even forgotten, or not even know, that Lobsang Rampa who wrote “The Third Eye” (1956) was a really an imaginative English plumber from Plympton, Devon, UK.

Lobsang Rampa’s incarnations still haunt us in the form of teachers who want us to believe in imaginative Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who exist “just as we exist,” and by mere chant and faith, we could be saved or even go to some exotic paradise. Have we thrown Buddhism to the Gods?

After more than 2600 years, many of us, it seems, still cannot accept the Buddha’s death. So we imagine he’s not dead, or existing in some distant Paradise. If we reject history, what we are left with? Religious fiction may be useful for some, but if we preach that arhats still need to become Buddhas, have we not turned the Buddha on his head?

The final choice belongs to each of us – this is the great thing about being Buddhist. And we need to choose wisely as the Buddhism market grows more global, better franchised, better stocked, better managed, and the sales reps better at their hype. Have a wish, and there’s a guru to grant it. We must be careful what we wish for – we may receive it!⁵

Even western psychology – a young Cinderella amongst academic disciplines – has finally found her charming prince in Buddhist meditation. We are now in psychology’s Third Wave: meditation is dead, long live mindfulness. It has even convinced the major world religions to incorporate “mindfulness” in the service of God. The good thing is that if we spend enough time in stillness, we master a language of true peace on earth and goodwill amongst religions. The Buddha’s purpose has been served.

But waves come and go. Schumpeter of *the Economist* writes: “The biggest problem with mindfulness is that it is becoming part of the self-help movement – and hence part of the dis-

³ See eg **Bad friendship**, [SD 64.17](#).

⁴ Originally meaning a member of the Society of Jesus, founded by an ex-soldier, Ignatius de Loyola, and used by the Catholic Church to stem the influence of the Protestants, by way of evangelizing, education, even politics. Their works and ways were seen as dissembling and prevaricating so that “jesuit” has come to mean “one given to intrigue or equivocation” (Merriam-Webster 11th Collegiate Dictionary).

⁵ W W Jacobs, “The Monkey’s Paw” (1902) is an instructive story here: <http://americanliterature.com/author/w-w-jacobs/short-story/the-monkeys-paw>.

ease that it is supposed to cure. Gurus talk about ‘the competitive advantage of meditation.’ Pupils come to see it as a way to get ahead in life. And the point of the whole exercise is lost. What has parading around in pricey lululemon⁶ outfits got to do with the Buddhist ethic of non-attachment to material goods? And what has staring at a computer-generated dot got to do with the ancient art of meditation? Western capitalism seems to be doing rather more to change eastern religion than eastern religion is doing to change Western capitalism.”⁷

We hear about “Google Meditation”; some of us even do it. However, note that “Google” comes before Meditation. Clearly, it’s more about Google than it is about meditation or even Buddhism. It’s interesting that one of its Singaporean promoters proudly shows off a picture of himself under the shoulder of US President Obama. What’s the message here? We don’t need to heal ourselves, just wear a big badge, and make a business of healing others. This is selling meditation, not practising it.⁸

Let us return to the opening sutta’s unanswered question: Why really are we Buddhist? (asks Koṭṭhita). Sāriputta answers that it is for the realizing of the 4 noble truths. “Realizing” here means penetrating these truths:

- (1) Have we really experienced **suffering** to know what it truly is (or do we merely compare notes, or find someone or something to blame)? Has suffering taught us anything real and true about ourselves or about life?
- (2) If we have tasted **suffering**, do we really know what brings it about in the first place? Have we removed, or at least, avoided its cause? No, it is not someone: people don’t cause suffering, but conditions do.
- (3) Have we really seen the **ending** of suffering? Do we understand the true nature of happiness? Since the problem actually started within us (especially in how we think and feel), we cannot find the answer *outside*, such as in rituals, or any kind of belief whether in gurus, gods, God, or even Buddhas. Belief means we have not experienced them. But understanding ourselves is the best start. Here, it is meaningful to say: “Only when I really know myself, can I truly believe in myself.”
- (4) “Having” someone or something, even a lot of things, is not true happiness, or even wealth: it is just “having.” We cannot “have” happiness, we can only “be” happy. We need to reflect on this for a better understanding of how truly happy we can be. I have no answer to give here; you have to learn this for yourself. The answer is in studying the maps and guides for the **journey** – then, we must make that journey ourselves.

R425 Revisioning Buddhism 140

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

Copyright by Piya Tan ©2015

⁶ From Lululemon Athletica Inc, styled as lululemon athletica, a self-described yoga-inspired athletic apparel company, which produces a clothing line and runs international clothing stores from its company base in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

⁷ Joseph Schumpeter, “[The mindfulness business](#),” *The Economist*, 16 Nov 2013.

⁸ See David Desteno, “[The morality of meditation](#),” *The New York Times*, 5 July 2013.