

## **Don't just be a fan, be cool yourself!**<sup>1</sup>

**The wisest after the Buddha.** The Dhammapada has a riddle by the Buddha regarding **Sāriputta's** awakening, thus: “Not through faith, but knowing the unmade ... he is indeed a supreme person” (Dh 97). The phrase “not through faith” (*asaddho*) means “by virtue of his own realization, not through faith in the word of another” (DhA 2:187). **The Pubba Koṭṭhaka Sutta** (S 48.44) relates how the Buddha asks Sāriputta whether he has faith that the 5 spiritual faculties – faith, effort, mindfulness, concentration and wisdom – when practised, lead to nirvana.<sup>2</sup>

Sāriputta replies that he does *not* go by faith in the Buddha in this matter. He has no doubt about this because he has himself realized it. But because of this, he now has faith in the Buddha. The Buddha lauds Sāriputta and declares that he has awakened by self-effort through deep meditation.<sup>3</sup>

It is also important to note that Sāriputta's awakening – like the awakening of other arhats – is the same as that of the Buddha's. The only difference, says **the Sambuddha Sutta** (S 22.58) is that the Buddha discovers the path, and the disciples awaken in the same way after him.<sup>4</sup>

**The wisest of the laymen.** **The Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta Sutta** (S 41.8) tells us about another famous disciple, a layman, **Citta the houselord**, who declares that it is not through faith in the Buddha that he is able to attain deep meditation called dhyanas. The essence of the interesting dialogue between the Jain teacher, Nātaputta, and the houselord Citta goes like this:

Nātaputta: “Houselord, do you have faith in the recluse Gotama when he says, ‘There is a concentration without initial application and sustained application,<sup>5</sup> there is a cessation of initial application and sustained application?’”

“Here, bhante, **I do not go by faith** in the Blessed One ...”

Nātaputta misunderstands Citta's answer, and thinks that Citta has converted to his religion. He proudly announces his misperception to his congregation of Jains. Citta then explains to the embarrassed and exasperated Nātaputta that he (Citta) has by himself understood the Buddha's teachings, so that he is able to easily attain all the 4 dhyanas. This is what he means by “not through faith.”<sup>6</sup>

**Not by faith alone.** Sāriputta is the wisest of the monks after the Buddha, and Citta is the wisest of the laymen. Both of them do not go by faith in the Buddha. They learn the Dharma and practise meditation by their own effort. Upon understanding the Dharma for themselves, only then they have faith in the Buddha. In other words, they do not blindly follow the Buddha, even though he is the greatest teacher they know.

<sup>1</sup> Based on **Emotional independence**, [SD 40a.8](#) (5.6.2-5.6.3).

<sup>2</sup> S 48.44/5:220 ([SD 10.7](#)).

<sup>3</sup> DhA 7.8/2:186 f on Dh 97 ([SD 10.6](#)).

<sup>4</sup> S 22.58 ([SD 49.10](#)).

<sup>5</sup> “Initial application” (*vitakka*) and “sustained application” (*vicāra*) here, in simple terms, refer respectively to “thinking and pondering” – alluding to a “thoughtfree meditation” (see next sentence). See **Vitakka, vicāra**, [SD 33.4](#). On meditation being free of thoughts, see **The Buddha discovered dhyana**, [SD 33.1b](#) (6.2).

<sup>6</sup> S 41.8,5-8 ([SD 40a.7](#)). See **The layman and dhyana**, [SD 8.5](#)(8).

Neither Sāriputta nor Citta the householder is a “fan” of the Buddha. They neither idolize nor idol-worship the Buddha. All the other arhats and saints, too, are like them – they are not Buddha fans, but seriously practise the “supreme worship,” that is, making self-effort in Dharma practice – keeping the precepts, practising mindfulness, and cultivating wisdom.<sup>7</sup>

Here are some brief pointers on how not to merely be “fans” of famous teachers, but rather to practise the Buddha’s teachings and become worthy followers.

**A decision or a commitment?** For some reason, good or bad, we *decide* to become a Buddhist. But after the decision, we only praise our teacher but do nothing to find out more about the Buddha’s teachings. The best way to know the Buddha’s teaching is to study **the suttas**, the most ancient records of the Buddha’s teachings. Even modern mind-scientists are carefully studying the suttas and meditating to better understand the human mind and behaviour.

To become a Buddhist is like finding and loving the wisest and kindest human who has ever lived – that is, the Buddha. When we love someone, we need to be committed to that person. This means that we must get to know more about that person and what he teaches, so that we become happy, wise and kind like him.

**Many, or one and only?** As a Buddhist, one of the teachings we often hear is that there are many Buddhas. This is an interesting new idea. Some even say that there are Buddhas who come from other or parallel universes – like aliens in some space-fiction story! But there is no such teachings in any of the early Buddhist suttas. The Buddha does not teach these ideas.<sup>8</sup>

The historical Buddha has come into this world, just like us, but like Sāriputta and Citta, he has made his own effort to discover what life really means and why we are not really happy. He has also discovered the purpose of life, that is, to keep our body and mind healthy in every way, so that we will find true happiness called nirvana. We only need one Buddha to tell us this, and this is enough for us to know the meaning and purpose of our lives.

**Worshipping Buddhas or loving the Buddha?** The Buddha is a human, just like us. He discovered the way to true happiness: so can we. The Buddha’s key teaching is that everything in this world – including the Buddha himself and ourselves – are impermanent. This makes our life precious. We should not waste our time doing prayers and worshipping all kinds of Buddhas, Gods, Deities and Demons that do not exist. They originally came from stories to remind us about good in life and how to be happy. But all this is forgotten, and people began to worship them – like the Monkey God from the Ming-dynasty story of *The Journey West* by Wu Cheng-en.

The Buddha is fully awakened and has attained nirvana over 2,500 years ago. Even when he was alive, he never asked anyone to worship him or make him offerings. He was truly happy just being himself. In fact, he is someone we really need – an ideal person – to whom we can show our unconditional love. This is the kind of love which does not hurt anyone, whether we are giving it or receiving it.

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<sup>7</sup> On the “supreme worship,” see **Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** ([D 16, §§5.1-5.3](#)) + [SD 9 \(7.2\)](#).

<sup>8</sup> See Reflection, [Parallel universes](#), R450, 2016.

The Buddha helps us to live by feeling and showing love for him: a spacious and radiant warmth that pervades our body and mind. With this kind of love, it is easier for us to accept ourself and others, even when they are different from us, or hate us. If we try hard enough we will understand how hate and anger are best overcome by love (Dh 5).

**Keeping vows or keeping to the Dharma?** Some of us are so inspired by the Buddha that we want to make a vow to become a Buddha, too. A vow is very sacred and very difficult to make. It is more serious than a marriage vow. Before we marry someone, we have to know that person very well; then, we should be able to love and support our partner for life. Before we can make any religious vow, we should fully well know the suttas and practise meditation.

In fact, we can only make such a vow before the Buddha himself. Our Buddha made his vow before Dīpaṅkara Buddha, and practised the Dharma for many world-cycles and became the 24<sup>th</sup> Buddha after Dīpaṅkara. So it's not like a "fan club," but more like working to be elected as the country's President, or to become elected as a our representative (such as a Member of Parliament) and to become, say, the Health Minister. We only need one such person around – like the father of our family. The point is that even just as we are, we can awaken as the Buddha did, by practising what he teaches us.

**Self-driven or Dharma-inspired?** If we are really honest with ourself (and this is to our great advantage), we may notice that we tend to seek in religion something that agrees with us. We seek teachers who teach what we already know or who endorse what we want to believe. Religion becomes our quest for something to believe in. We want to believe so that we can understand. But we are standing on our heads, and we wonder why we are not moving!

The Buddha stands such ideas on their heads, and simply rejects them. Surely, we must understand before we can safely and helpfully *believe* something. Just because I can imagine a beautiful milk-white golden-horned talking unicorn does not mean that it exists. We cannot define God or Buddhas into existence. That is why we have so many different images of God and Buddhas, and there are so many contradictory notions about them. We have tried to create God in our own image; we have imagined Buddhas to be at our beck and call. But we do not heed his call.

No matter how deep our faith, we are all the more limited by it. Faith holds, wisdom frees. Wisdom is knowing through personal experience. No matter how much we are told about the beauty of the sunset on Singapore's southern islands, no matter how many books we read about it – we will never know or feel it.

A sunset is not a belief; it is an experience. Its beauty and truth are in the fact that it is very fleeting. If we even said a word while watching it, we have missed that moment. The fleeting Dharma (the teaching of impermanence) is experienced with joy – that is why those who truly know Dharma also love it, and everything else. The joy is in the moment.

**Don't just be a fan, be cool yourself!** Naturally, we would be enthralled to find a teacher who agrees with what we have suspected or held fondly all long, and he also talks to us in such entertaining ways. We are still children at heart – we feel that the Dharma should entertain us; otherwise, it is boring. We are not amused because we have really found nothing amusing, so we are still looking, and collecting tickles and tingles we see as a measure of worthwhileness.

The Dharma is neither something entertaining nor something to joke about. Yet, our understanding of the Dharma evokes great joy in us – the joy of seeing the true nature of life and things, so that we are no more running around like headless chickens. We smile, even laugh, at how well and long we have been deceiving ourselves. But now, we are much more mature: we are truly human with a taste for the divine. We now understand that Buddha, God, hell, earth and heaven are within our own hearts. Now, that's cool!

Even though all life long a fool associates with the learned,  
he knows not the truth [the Dharma] than a spoon the soup's taste." (Dh 64)

Even for but a moment the wise closely associates with the learned,  
he quickly knows the truth [the Dharma] just as the tongue the soup's taste. (Dh 65)

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

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