

The spoon and the soup¹

If we measure religion in terms of the duration of attention-span in reading, listening and learning that the average follower can sustain, ethnic Buddhism presents an interesting case of extremes. “**Ethnic Buddhism**” refers to a general group of Buddhists, those of us, mostly Asian-born, who follow a race-based Buddhism. On the one hand, we have many followers who practically fear, even hate, reading their own scriptures! On the other hand, we see famous or charismatic teachers as the embodiments of the scriptures: if they say so, so it is!²

Some ethnic Buddhists may even mention the Lotus Sutra or the Diamond Sutra, unaware that these are *not* teachings of the historical Buddha. Often, these are polemical teachings that actually try to debunk the historical Buddha.³ In other words, most of them have not been taught any of the key suttas of the Buddha, which an average western or westernized Buddhist would be familiar with.

On the other hand, there are Buddhists – both ethnic and convert – who diligently practise meditation, who can sit for at least half an hour to an hour on a regular basis. By “**convert Buddhists**” I mean those who are not born Buddhist (often following another religion), but who overtly or covertly regard themselves as Buddhist.

Amongst this growing number are non-Buddhists (including those who still nominally keep to their old faiths) who practise Buddhist meditation and have some familiarity with Buddhist teachings. In fact, we can also call this second group the “**self-help**” or DIY (do-it-yourself) Buddhists because of their spiritual initiative and diligence.

In stark contrast, ethnic Buddhists are often “spoon-fed” Buddhists. “**Spoon-fed**” is a helpful description here because their “practice” comprises a staple of “talk” Buddhism – that is, an indoctrination – as a rule, by exotic teachers. They habitually show a ritualistic dependence on the blessings and guidance of a priesthood or pious elite, whom they worship and enrich with worldly gifts, especially money and personal devotion.

“**Talk Buddhism**” here refers to a public gathering of the faithful to listen to an illustrious teacher, usually an exotic guru. There are two important reasons for this. The first is that of a public appearance: we are *seen* to be Buddhists and as a part of the group, and the second is that of attendance, not necessarily even the listening or remembering of what is talked about. In short, this is a ritual listening. So, we keep on attending such public gatherings, as a rule, without undergoing any kind of meaningful self transformation.

The object of faith in such a “talk Buddhism” is an illustrious exotic priest – called a “virtuoso” in sociology – one seen as an expert, even an adept of sorts, to the believer. This is a striking resemblance to the pious religious practice of merely “seeing” (*darśana*) the teacher. It’s all right if we do not at all understand his talk. After all, he is of such profound wisdom beyond our ken. If we cannot understand him, it is because he has attained such an advanced religious level!

Spoon-fed Buddhism is a ready-mix of “how to be happy” tips and entertaining stories, even jokes, touching on mundane topics like money, work, love, family life and happiness – nothing controversial,

¹ This is a reflection on Dhammapada verses 64 and 65 (Dh 64+65).

² Further, see Reflection, **Faith in fiction and fact**, R461, 2016.

³ Of course, we may interpret such post-Buddha texts in symbolic or mythical terms as reactions to problems that characterize the ambience that produced them.

life-changing or earth-shaking. There is an important reason for this. The speaker, from high above, sees the audience as a source of support and standing for his priesthood and person.

Wealth is a measure of our good karma, it seems, which we cannot take with us, but is best remitted to our future-life accounts by depositing it in these priests and pastors, who after all, show neither need nor use for money. “You cannot take it with you, so why not send it ahead,” we’re reminded. This Buddhism, then, is an antechamber to heaven, a passport to paradise.

“Spoon-fed” Buddhism is a vicarious faith: good seems to have already been done for us by the priest or pastor, the shepherd of our tribe. (We’re already enlightened and don’t even know it – like being overweight.)⁴ It is a “premix” of pious practices and public devotion to a holy hero. After all, our teacher is like the Buddha’s door-keeper or agent who introduces us to him or addresses him on our behalf, and so we only do their behest. But still, a spoon never tastes the soup (Dh 64).

On the other hand, there is “**self-help Buddhism**” – the living tongue that savours the steaming soup (Dh 65). Self-help Buddhism begins with at least some basic but clear understanding of the Dharma, not from the whims and wiles of talkers and teachers, but from what the Buddha actually teaches, as preserved in the early Buddhist texts. The teachers, however, can still be helpful when they diligently work to realize this ancient liberating wisdom themselves.

Buddhist teachers are not vicars of Buddhist truths and blessings. They should be conductors of an orchestra to which we belong. We love our musical instruments and learn to play them well. We carefully read and recall the musical scores and libretti. When the orchestra and choir gather, we are led by the maestro – who himself has mastered music, and loves it – and together we create, and, above all, enjoy, the music, truly and beautifully, bringing joy and peace to those who listen. For, we all love music.

This is “**living Buddhism**.” We live Buddha-like lives preparing our body and speech wholesomely as the vehicle for inner peace. We practise Dharma-centred aloneness and stillness, joyfully reflecting and meditating on impermanence, guaranteed by the Buddha himself to bring us to the noble path in this life itself.⁵ We live in a sangha-spirited global community beyond race and religion, unified by the love of the *beauty* and the vision of *truth* of the Dharma within us.

If the Dharma is nourishing food for us – the spiritually thirsty and hungry – we should be the tongues that taste it. No matter how much food or soup the spoon scoops from the pot or into the bowl, the spoon still does not taste it. Only the tongue can taste the soup. (Dh 64-65)

The heart of this Dharma-inspired life is **the perception of impermanence** (S 25). When we habitually reflect on the days of our life and the world around us – be they the best, be they the worst – as being impermanent, we board the boat on the stream to awakening in this life itself – if not, certainly at the very last moment of our life, declares the Buddha in **the (Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1).⁶

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

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⁴ An image of Milefo (the Chinese Maitreya), Budai or Phra Sangkacchai comes to mind: see **Cakka,vatti Sīha,nāda Sutta** [SD 36.10 \(4.1.2\)](#).

⁵ See any of the 10 suttas of **the Okkanta Saṃyutta** (S 25), such as **(Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1), [SD 16.7](#).

⁶ **(Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1), [SD 16.7](#).