

## **Guru gaga**

In this age of instant Buddhism and digital Dharma, almost every Buddhist, including us, at one time or another, is or has been a fan of a guru, female or male, whom, we swear, is the best teacher alive, and who has “solved our problem” or “changed our life”; we may even canonize him as an arhat. There is no doubt we have been moved by something the guru said, or by what we think we have heard from that guru.

On further investigation – if we are diligent and honest – we may discover that what the guru has said, or has been heard to say, is nothing new at all. In fact, it is found in various books, or spoken by other less famous teachers, or it is some rehashed re-telling of Buddhist teachings. In other words, it is the Dharma that has changed us, but it is the guru that we have found to be charismatic. We have fatuously fallen for the guru!

We may even set up a fan club for our adorable guru, and declare our gratefulness to him for his great wisdom and boundless compassion, and so on. These are very noble gestures indeed – in seeing oneself unburdened of our problems, and being grateful to someone whom we see as having helped us. The point is that this is not enough: we can do better.<sup>1</sup>

Let’s say a good doctor has done a successful operation upon us, and we are back to good health. We would rightly thank the doctor, but we would not idolize him. We would certainly not piously declare that he is the “best” doctor there is! So, too, with Buddhist monastics and lay gurus. It is their job to heal and soothe those in need of succour.

We do, in fact, notice that some monastics of the contemplative forest tradition are consistently well-restrained “with downcast eyes” and refusing to have “small talk” with us – in other words, not socializing with the laity. They merely answer us in a Dharma way, and to the point of our questions – they are simply being true to the early monastic tradition.<sup>2</sup>

Such monastics are not alienating themselves from the laity: they are simply not socializing with us lay people. We can, however, persist in meeting them – never in private, but in the presence of some others – and ask our urgent questions. We can expect some surprising words that answer more than the question we have asked. We then need to spend some time reflecting on how to put that advice into effect.

Celebrity gurus, on the other hand, are quick and easy with affable answers which often impress us. For this reason alone, such gurus make good fortune tellers<sup>3</sup> – they are often natural mentalists.<sup>4</sup> The best mentalists often know what we want or like to hear, and tell us just that, in an affable way. We thus *think* that they are enlightened masters, even arhats.

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<sup>1</sup> See Reflection, [Don’t just be a fan, be cool yourself!](#) R451, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> See, eg, the “rules for training,” the Sekhiya, dhammas: [SD 18.5](#) (2.3).

<sup>3</sup> There are numerous suttas containing rules that monastics should not be fortune-tellers of any kind: see any of the first 13 suttas of the Dīgha Nikāya. See, eg, [Sāmañña, phala Sutta](#) (D 2,56), [SD 8.10](#).

<sup>4</sup> A “mentalist” is a professional (such as a magician) or charlatan (a con-man) who often convinces others of their ability to show extraordinary mental powers, such as mind-reading.

Some accounts by observant and disillusioned kappiyas<sup>5</sup> are revealing and troubling. A dedicated ex-kappiya once related to me how devotees, making offerings to a celebrity guru were so euphoric and fawning over the “merits” that they would accumulate for their devotion, he said that he could actually see fervent “lust” burning their glassy eyes!

He was especially appalled to see such devotees euphoria in their desire to serve and please the guru with specially prepared food, expensive gifts and large donations, that they simply ignored a beggar who was waiting at the door!<sup>6</sup> They have misunderstood the teaching that it is more “meritorious” to give offerings to “the sangha” than to anyone else, especially someone with such bad karma as a beggar!<sup>7</sup> This is an example of a “class” Buddhism.

Such gurus often remind their affluent supporters that being rich is their “good karma.” This is, of course, a positive stroke, even mutual back-scratching. The not-so-affluent, however, would lack the good karma to be noticed, much less given the sweet attention of such gurus. This wrong notion of karma has sadly and insidiously created a class system for us. It is wise that we correct this at once, and prevent it from ever recurring.

My interest in the sociology and psychology of religion helps me understand better when and why religious people behave the way they do. It also helps me see more clearly why the historical Buddha keeps reminding us not only to listen to teachers, but to observe and question them, especially to see if they live up to the good that they speak of.<sup>8</sup>

Such monastics and gurus are clearly capable of great good. They dress and look different from us, and often behave differently from us. If they are monastic renunciants, they have taken the avowed path of working for self-awakening in this life. We should not be socializing with them, or have the wrong view that they should be sociable with us. We would then surely distract them from their own spiritual development.

There is another serious concern we should address. A few years ago, an acquaintance of mine, a retired Anglican vicar, now a lecturer at a local theological seminary and a Bible youth camp-trainer, told me that he intends to spend his remaining years studying Buddhism. In fact, he has completed a BA in Buddhism course at a Sinhala mission centre, and now plans to embark on a Master of Philosophy in Buddhism course. In an email to me, he writes:

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<sup>5</sup> The word “kappiya” is an anglicized and abbreviation of *kappiya, kāraka*, a licitor, that is, a lay male volunteer who attends to a monk or monks to accept offerings on their behalf, and to ensure their actions are “allowable” (*kappiya*), ie, in keeping with the monastic rules. In effect, he is a regular all-purpose personal attendant to the monks.

<sup>6</sup> There is a well known story about a Penang (Malaysia) Buddhist, a regular at a foreign-mission temple, who once dressed himself up as a beggar and went back to his own temple to “beg.” He said that the abbot there actually chased him away. The devotee then revealed himself to the abbot’s embarrassment.

<sup>7</sup> On wrong and right ways of giving, see **3 suttas on giving**, [SD 6.6](#).

<sup>8</sup> See eg **the Vīmaṃsaka Sutta** (M 47), [SD 35.6](#).

“My own philosophy now is to encourage an ‘open door’ approach. There should be a free flow of learning between religions. This should make for better decision-making if ever a switch genuinely needs to be made. The change should be made on the basis of well-informed knowledge, rather than from pressure or misdirected criticism.”

To his co-religionists, he said, in an interview with his theological seminary, that the Buddhists had received him well. He had even run training courses for the Buddhists. By befriending us Buddhists on our own ground, he hoped that some of us might be “evangelized” (converted) if we so chose.

I would like to think that he was himself seriously considering to be a Buddhist. As a man of the cloth, he admitted that he was well acquainted with “church politics.” He was now learning Buddhism on the inside. What would he think of all our weaknesses and wrongs that are addressed here?

The ex-vicar is a seeker, just as I am a seeker – and surely you, too, if you enjoy reading this. Our task, then, is to seek a good teacher, and that teacher must be the best we can have today, that is, **the suttas** – the early Buddhist texts (EBT) – themselves. Through them, we can still hear the Buddha Word.

At the same time, we, as lay practitioners, should show monastics (those who are truly celibate, money-free and well-restrained) and teachers (who study and practise the sutta teachings) our every respect, to accept them as they are, and to learn from them. The Buddha advises us that if we can find such a good teacher, wise and compassionate, then, we should go to him to learn the Dharma, and we should remain even when told to leave.<sup>9</sup>

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

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<sup>9</sup> See **Mahā Suññatā Sutta** (M 122 §20.3), [SD 11.4](#).