

Living truth¹

Purists and puritans—those who see the letter as supreme above the spirit, and those who see Buddhism as a fixed, even dead, way of the past—may claim that we should view and vent Buddhism as a teaching given by the Buddha in India 2500 years ago, that is, as a religion limited in space and time. Some scholars even think that, in our study and teaching of early Buddhism, we should not introduce into it any new categories or concepts that are “alien” to what has been historically and culturally defined in the early Canon.

The **purist** approach is to see Buddhism as a kind of museum-piece, an artefact fixed in time and place. It is a purist notion that we must only study or use what we can find in the texts, to catalogue, analyze and discuss them—essentially, merely interpret Buddhism as a word-based or artefact-based tradition. This is often the way of the scholars or academic Buddhism. There is no interest in taking up Buddhism as a method of personal cultivation and path of awakening.

The **puritan** approach is to see Buddhism—or what is defined so—as the “ultimate” truth. These ultimate truths are clearly categorized, catalogued and defined. Often this “ultimate teaching” is taken to be the Abhidhamma (or, in later Buddhism, some late scripture or guru-based teaching). Any other vision of the teaching of the “Buddha” is likely to be scorned upon as being false or unacceptable —simply because they have not been authorized by the “Teacher” or some authority figure in the group.

Anyone of us who, with an open mind and eager heart, studies early Buddhism, will surely be surprised by its simple language, and marvel at its profound truths and related teachings. If we have some experience and love for **meditation**, we will also see how the truth and beauty of the sutta teachings help us better our meditation, and how our meditation, in turn, helps in our greater understanding of the historical Buddha’s teachings.

If we are trained in some academic or specialized discipline, or steeped in some artistic or human-centred pursuits—the cultivation and expression of human goodness—we are likely to be drawn to the natural coherence and profound implications of the suttas and their teachings, even from the perspectives of our academic training.

A philosophy student or specialist is likely to see the philosophical wealth and depth of early Buddhism. A psychologist will at once be drawn to the teachings, theories, case histories, therapy methods and meditation systems of early Buddhism. A religion specialist will be fascinated at how Buddhism—well accepted as a religion—also shows natural tendencies to challenge the very nature of religion itself.

A social scientist will see the social system of the early sangha and its later developments a worthwhile field for closer study. A language specialist, such as the philologist, is at once able to discourse on some interesting or special features of Pali and languages related to early Buddhism. Even a scientist will find little to object regarding the essential teachings of early Buddhism, and may find science helpful in ex-

¹ This reflection is an offprint from **the No Ce’daṃ Sutta** (S 14.33), [SD 50.16](#) (1.1.2): Early Buddhism as living truth.

plaining and understanding key early Buddhist concepts. A computer engineer will notice the way the suttas are structured (especially in their repetitive recursive cycles) reflect the way a computer programme works.

The Artist—one of creative and wholesome talents, dedicated to experiencing and expressing beauty by way of art, music, architecture, education, health and so on—will be inspired by the aesthetics and vitality of the **joy** in Buddhist life.² A true seeker will find himself overwhelmed by the beauty and truth of early Buddhist doctrine and meditation as taught by the Buddha. A truly good person will naturally be drawn to the true teachings of the Buddha Dharma. In short, this is what essentially is meant by the last of the 6 qualities of the Buddha Dharma: that it is “**to be personally known by the wise**” (*paccattarāṃ veditabbo viññūhi*).³

If we—renunciant or laity—are drawn to the historical Buddha’s teachings as our way of life, studying and practising them, even translating the suttas, we are somehow moved to express our understanding of such teaching in contemporary terms. To us, then, the Buddha Dharma is a living spiritual experience.

As a living truth and tradition, Buddhism—the Buddha Dharma presented to our contemporaries—easily articulates itself through any kind of useful or wholesome language and learning of our times. Indeed, we will discover that some of the theoretical ideas and practical structures of other systems, even other religions, clearly work better in Buddhism itself. This is especially true, for example, in the theories and vocabulary of psychology, so that both specialists and traditionalists will see “Buddhist psychology” as an authentic means of meditation and self-healing therapy, and as a basis for the Buddhist life.⁴

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

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² On the centrality of joy in early Buddhism, see Reflection, “[Joy as food](#),” R197 (2011).

³ See [SD 15.9](#) (2.6).

⁴ See eg [SD 1.3](#) (2).