

## The Buddha's wager<sup>1</sup>

The Buddha always holds the Dharma first, as evident from **the Gārava Sutta** (S 6.2),<sup>2</sup> which records one of the first key events in the Buddha's life after the great awakening. In **the Mahā-parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16),<sup>3</sup> which records his last moments, too, the Buddha declares that the Dharma comes first, before the teacher.

However, against the Buddha's clear instructions, other Buddhist sectarians and later teachers put their Sutras and Teachings first. Such disregard from the Buddha arises from various reasons and conditions, but basically it was (and is) on account of desire for worldly gains and following, for putting down rivalry and dissent, and the influence of worldly conditions and other religions.

The Buddha does not make such vital statements frivolously or as an option that we may disregard. He has very good reasons for giving us such initial and final instructions. To remind ourselves of the vitality of these instructions we will call them the "Buddha's wager." This wager or challenge can be simply put like this:

The Buddha holds Dharma above himself. Buddha or no Buddha, Dharma is always there.

The later sectarian Buddhist teachers place their Sutras and Teachings first.

Without these gurus' Sutras and Teachings, there are no later Buddhist sects.

We don't need the later Buddhist sects, and can and must go directly to the Dharma.

Here, I think, is an almost infallible test for the authenticity of the historical Buddha's teaching or **the Buddha Dharma**, the teaching of awakening. Let's simply call it "historical Buddhism."

Here is the test. The Buddha is dead, but we still have the Dharma by way of the suttas. Then, we have the conventional Sangha – loosely defined as the monastics, priests and those who form Buddhist groups championing some kind of "Buddhist order." Now if we were to disregard or remove this "Sangha" – what is left? The answer is obvious: we still have the Buddha Dharma.

When we properly practise the Dharma, we will be able to attain the states of the "noble" sangha (the small "s" means this is a natural state, not a sectarian or ethnic construction). We can still walk the noble path of awakening, and gain nirvana. In fact, it is then easier for us to taste the true Dharma because of "internal" distractions of group identity, ritualism, superstitious doubts (which are called the "3 fetters" of worldliness).

Interestingly, in the case of **historical Buddhism** (the historical Buddha and his teachings), we are left with the realities that all things still change. Such changes bring no real satisfaction: we can find no abiding entity behind such reality. In short, we are left with the Dharma (true reality). The Dharma remains intact even when we remove or reject the worldly teachers, elites, teachings, labels and views. We are still capable of seeing what is really true, understand ourself, and see what is truly real. This is the essence of historical Buddhism: self-reliance.

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<sup>1</sup> A shorter version of this reflection first appeared on Piya's [Facebook](#) page on 22 November 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Also called **Uruvelā Sutta** (A 4.21), SD 12.3.

<sup>3</sup> D 16,2.26 etc (SD 9).

Now, taking a step back, let us take the case of, say, **Zen Buddhism**. Suppose we remove all the impressive Zen or Chan robes, the rakusu, the kesa, and not use the koan or huatou, and give up all the ritual ways of walking, questioning, and acting. If we forget about Zen/Chan ancestry, ancestral tablets and scrolls; forgo all the titles of sensei or shifu, and all those exotic terms like shikantaza, even zen itself. Is it still “Zen” or “Chan”? I don’t mean just not “talking” about it, really renouncing all these – just as the Buddha renounced the world and all views – is it still Zen or Chan? It’s best to smile at this.

Then, there is the case of **Mahāyāna** (we can include Vajrayāna, too). Is it still Mahāyāna or Vajrayāna, or even Buddhism, if we willingly give up all the complicated and noisy rituals neither done nor allowed by the Buddha. We give up all the Cosmic Buddhas, Transcendental Bodhisattvas and their Vows, Paradises and Samadhis with very long exotic names. Then, there are those terrible deities, fearful looking demons and imagined beings with more limbs and features than any human. What if they really appeared before us, how would we actually react?

What about the Nichirenists? If we set aside Nichiren, the Daimoku, the Gohonzon – is it still Nichirenism (or whatever it is called)? Or, if we remove all the impressive buildings and all the money behind the religion, is it still Nichiren Buddhism? Can we just let go of all of them – just forget about them? Just imagine.

After all, the Heart Sutra says all is Emptiness: there are no 4 noble truths, no 5 aggregates, and so on. What if we take all these as really Emptiness. Is it still Mahayana, or Vajrayana, or even Buddhism? If it is, then it is not really empty. If it is empty, then it is not really Mahāyāna, Vajrayāna or even Buddhism. Are we caught in a double-bind, then?

When we take what we have never experienced – an idea or a mental image or even a dream – to be something real, “as we are real” (as one Mahayana preacher put it): what kind of reality is that? If you experience this view but I do not, it is only “real” to you, not real to me. It is a private reality – a delusion at best, or madness at worst.

But a headache is real to all who feel it. If any of us fall sick, we know how it really feels. Or, if we lose something we value, we know how it hurts. Or, we do not get the job we want, or have a horrible boss, or a bad relationship, we all know what it’s like. Or, we can have all that we ever wanted, become a billionaire at 20, and then, suddenly, we find life simply meaningless – we have nothing else to pursue or appropriate! These are real emotions. Can a religion, one delusion, even a grand one, solve another delusion? Can we truly say: there is *no* pain, *no* suffering to ourselves in such situations? Or, are we simply switching to a private reality or a very private, limited reality to think that we have found the answer: some paradise or heaven or God?

Our task as true seekers is not to invoke Buddhas or deities, or pray in the hope of some paradises of Buddhas, or tally the rounds of mantras to purify ourselves. Or, even to master canons of Sutras, Commentaries and Transmissions. None of these will help us if we do not examine why we have turned to religion in the first place. We are simply intoxicating ourselves with a very private virtual reality if we simply adore and worship a religious figure, when we do not really know him, or, worse, when we know him well intimately. How does worshipping another person, being, or deity free us from our own craving, delusion and ignorance?

We must ask ourself the most basic questions. These questions have no direct answers, but they are like mirrors that we look into or lenses we look through to see our true self. The questions themselves then become the answers. Here are a few to begin with:

- (1) What are the negative qualities that I have and how can I correct them?
- (2) How have I projected what I wish or hate onto others?
- (3) What aspects of religion am I drawn to and why?
- (4) How have I mentally or emotionally changed over the years?
- (5) What does my conduct in a religious group or activity really tell about me?

Coming back to historical Buddhism. If we properly remove all its externalities or religious aspects, we find that we can simply be our true self. We feel (directly know) that we have nothing to believe in, nothing really to do, nothing truly to say, nothing at all to think about. We are simply open and spacious, able to embrace anyone who needs solace or healing or, simply, friendship and kindness.

On the right occasion, we can, then, tap from a great collection of teachings left behind by the Buddha to address the issues or problems that we face and that others present before us. Yet, it is not the teachings or words that help or heal. It is how we present ourself to others. We communicate without our whole self: we are actually communicating the truth and beauty of the Dharma. Thinking about this only makes it hard, even impossible – it is beyond thought. It is feeling, a direct experience: we learn by really doing it. It is not a pretence or ritual or religion. We live the experience, and the world watches us living it, and is changed by it. Posterity benefits from this, too.

In **the Dhamma Niyāma Sutta** (A 3.134), the Buddha declares,

“Whether there is the arising of tathagatas [buddhas thus come] or not, this element [reality] remains, the fixedness of thing, the order of things, that all formations are impermanent, ... all formations are suffering, ... all dharmas [principles] are non-self.” A Buddha fully awakens to these truths and then declares them (for our benefit). (SD 26.8)

While the other Buddhisms point to themselves, declaring that only their teachings are true, the Buddha simply points to the Dharma, true reality, and declares the truth and reality of the Dharma. Dharma does not point to itself: there is no more point there.

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

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