

Get the real thing

If we courageously and honestly observe what's going on around us in our community, we are likely to see that there is much that is troubling about Buddhism despite the pious veneer of niceties. There is so much that is false that is preached, professed, practised and proudly passed on as Buddhism. The bottom line is that most Buddhists (not to mention the non-Buddhists) know almost nothing about what Buddhism really is or what it is not.

What we often hear in Buddhist talks and teachings are mostly private or cultural views without much real basis in the early Buddhist texts. When most of our preachers and speakers are not even well grounded in proper Buddhist learning and experience. Most of them have neither really tasted the Dharma nor love it. They mostly take Buddhism as a laissez-faire hodge-podge of do-it-yourself claims and quips, what can we expect of the fans of such preachers?

Perhaps, we are simply attracted to the body or power of a person and to what we neither understand nor feel able to attain. This mystique seems to define our belief and faith. For, if we have really understood it, we would be inspired by the teaching, not the teacher. Or, we see the Dharma as a status marker or class commodity.

A dedicated and regular temple-goer once confided in me that he was befuddled how some of its prominent members would often argue over abstruse theoretical points of Buddhist theology, but lack any hint of wisdom or warmth. What's really troubling here is that we see Buddhism as a catchword for any kind of personal views that don't really matter in real life. Buddhism has mostly become little more than a past-time or fancy for the affluent, the eccentric and the emotionally troubled.

On the other hand, we may hear a speaker presenting his fascinating views on a Dharma teaching. No matter how good the presentation may be, it is still his opinion, and the reason that we "like" it does not really add any more to our understanding of the topic, not so say of changing us for the better. The point is that a Dharma or sutta talk – or even such a reflection as this – should be a statement or reminder of the truth and beauty of the Buddha's teaching. In terms of faith and practice, it makes us love the Dharma and only the Dharma as our life-guide.

It is only when we personally see the truth and beauty of the Buddha Dharma that such a talk or this reflection has served its purpose. Furthermore, we may be uplifted by a talk or by this reflection. Why is that? A key reason for our upliftment is that either we have some great goodness deep inside us that has been touched and awakened, or we have already been touched, at some level, by the truth and beauty of the Dharma through our own love and understanding of the suttas. We have been touched deep within us by the Dharma.

It's like when we love a beautiful piece of music. We hear it in our hearts in moments of peace and joy. Our worldly busyness eventually dims the music and kills it. Then, reading a sutta or this reflection, we again hear that familiar strain of joy and peace. Or, the music is new, but the joyful effect is the same. This is how joyful interest or zest arises and grows: we keep seeing something new in the old mind music. This is because we already have a love and taste for what is really true and beautiful that is the Dharma.

How do we get the real deal regarding the Buddha's teaching? How do we get a true taste of the Dharma? When do we know that a teacher is speaking authentically of the Dharma? The rule of thumb is to ask whether he is promoting himself or presenting the Dharma. A cult guru is one who himself moves us; an authentic Dharma teacher moves us with the Dharma.

Of course, there are occasions when we may both love the messenger as well as the message. Then, we must ask ourselves if any defence mechanism is deluding us. Are we transferring our love for a father-figure or a mother-figure onto the teacher? Are we identifying with what we see as a power-mode in the teacher (like when we love wearing that Superman or Spider-Man singlet)?¹

A good case is that of how we are inspired by the lives of the early saints, such as Mahā Kassapa, Sāriputta, Moggallāna and Ānanda. We should be inspired by the Dharma that makes them arhats and by the Dharma they teach. We should not admire them as "persons," that is, as fixed figures of power. We should, instead, see them as the living embodiment of Dharma, inspiring us to emulate their qualities, which are neither "them" or "that."² In this way, we are rightly putting the teaching above the teacher. We are heading for self-transformation.³

Or, we can use a sports metaphor. Say, we adore an athlete, a swimmer, a footballer, a basketballer or any sportsman, and we would like to do well in the sports like him. So, we train like him. No amount of hero-worshipping without diligence will ever make us into a good sportsman.

The Buddha teaches that if we wish for long life, or beauty, or happiness, or fame, or heavenly birth, praying and wishing for them will not help. We "should rather follow a way of life that is conducive" to that goal. These blessings that we desire are best cultivated and harvested with diligence.

Diligence (*appamāda*) refers to the 3 trainings, that is, those in moral virtue, in mental concentration and in wisdom.⁴ Training in moral virtue prepares and conditions our body and speech as a support for a calm and clear mind (mental concentration). This, in turn, works to help us cultivate insight wisdom to understand life and enjoy it wholesomely.

Furthermore, such a life-style leads us on to spiritual happiness. If we accept all these qualities that we desire as being impermanent, and reflect on this universal truth, then we will gain streamwinning in this life itself, too. We have taken the very first real step on the path of awakening.⁵

R508 Revisioning Buddhism 185

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

Copyright by Piya Tan ©2017

¹ On defence mechanisms, see **Khaluṅka Sutta** (A 8.14) + [SD 7.9](#); [SD 24.10b](#) (2).

² On this wonderfully subtle but profoundly vital teaching, see **Atammayatā**, [SD 19.13](#).

³ See **Gāraṇa Sutta** (S 6.2), [SD 12.3](#).

⁴ On the 3 trainings, see **Sīla samādhi paññā**, [SD 21.6](#).

⁵ Further see **Ādiya Sutta** (S 5.41) @ [SD 2.1](#) (3+4), **(Pañcaka) Iṭṭha Sutta** (A 5.43) + [SD 47.2](#), and **Brahma,deva Sutta** (S 6.3), [SD 12.4](#) (2).