

## What does the Buddha mean?

In reading religious scripture, it is vital not only to understand what the words, sentences, images and stories mean, we need to know the original INTENTION of the writer or speaker. This is not always easy in religious writings, as it is rare that people read the scriptures and religious works with a truly open mind to understand the author's original intentions.

Even avowed open-minded scholars do not always know the original or true intentions of the scripture authors. A good scholar might be able to have a good idea of the probable, even the intended, meaning of a religious text. He might then go on to argue his case with logic and learning, and, as such, earn the respect of his colleagues, and to publish books. They would then go on to write more about the intended or probable meanings of these religious texts, and to publish more books. So all appears right in that neck of academia.

Let us limit our discussion to early Buddhist texts. Many, especially the scholars and specialists, know enough Pali to write very good explanations and critiques of the early Buddhist texts. Word-wise, such scholars seem to know better than even the Buddhist practitioners themselves.

The most important contributions that western and modern academics have contributed to Buddhist studies is, I think, "historical criticism," also known as higher criticism or the historical-critical method. This disciplined approach investigates the origins of a text, and compares them to other texts and traditions of the times or antecedent ones.

Such a disciplined approach has been applied to Bible studies, often enough with disastrous results. The more research scholars know about such ancient texts, the more they realize the Bible is not what many believers claim it to be. While the theologian might choose to bowdlerize or rationalize the disagreeable parts, a more honest scholar might renounce the whole enterprise for a more purposeful life.<sup>1</sup>

The historical critical approach to Buddhist studies is, however, clearly beneficial for both the academic scholar and the Buddhist faithful. The early Buddhist canon was compiled some 2500 years ago in India. The repetitive style of the texts (eg the use of literary devices such as the ring composition) reflects its oral tradition. The exactness of this oral tradition is reflected today in the structure of a computer programme.<sup>2</sup>

A close study of the Buddhist texts will reveal a lively internal coherence, so that one sutta (discourse) helps to explain another, evoking a delightful vision of jigsaw pieces fitting together to form beautiful pictures.

Another valuable insight from historical criticism is to inform us on how the lifestyle and ideas of the Buddha's milieu and earlier times influence his teachings, and how he and the early saints respond to such realities. All this gives us a better idea of what "really" happened behind the

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<sup>1</sup> Well known Bible scholar Bart D Ehrman, for example, turned away from his born-again evangelism to taking the Bible as literature: see his [Youtube interview](#), Berkeley, April 2008.

<sup>2</sup> See Revisoning Buddhism 10: "Why Suttas repeat themselves," 2010: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/RB10-Why-Sutta-Repeat-Themselves.pdf>.

words and sounds of these ancient texts. The early Buddhist texts are a literary and traditional legacy for the faithful. In an important way, they preserve the WORD of the Buddha.

However, this is as far as historical criticism can usefully serve to investigate the Buddhist texts. If historical criticism and the scholars can tell us what the Buddha really SAID, we still need to know what he really MEANS.

These ancient texts try to point to the TRUTH realized and taught by the Buddha. However, just as love cannot be felt from words alone, nor sweetness tasted even from the clearest pictures, the Buddha's TRUTH, the true Dharma, can only be personally experienced through contemplative practice, that is, mindfulness and meditation.

For this reason, the monastics of the forest tradition are highly valued virtuosi of Buddhism today, in so far as they continue to live monastic, moneyless, celibate and spiritual lives in the manner of the Buddha and his saints. Such monastics, although set apart from society as holy individuals, however, are neither priests nor royalty, but teachers and exemplars to the laity.

That is, insofar as they have trained, or are training, themselves in the contemplative tradition handed down from the Buddha himself down the millennia. We can still have a direct experience of the Buddha's awakening, or we can at least feel the gentle, yet zestful, stillness of approaching this great awakening.

We can only truly see the forest Dharma beyond the textual trees in the inner space of our still minds, and it is still possible to do this. Indeed, it is badly needed today as religions generally become more worldly, more violent, more exploitative and more confusing. A viable spiritual exercise is to look closely at the Buddha Word, and then close our eyes to look deeply within at true reality. Then we will discover what the Buddha really means.

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