

## Buddhism without words

The academic study of Buddhism has reached such a level today so that we have an ever better idea of who the Buddha was, what he taught, and how the disciples of his times (and after him) lived. An important reason for this is that the scholars have applied various disciplined approaches to studying the Buddha and his teachings.

Such scholarly approaches are, of course, mostly western or westernized disciplines. These scholars are generally aware that we tend to create (at least project our own ideas onto) the religion we are studying. J Z Smith, in the Introduction to his “Imagining Religion” (1982), insightfully observes that

“Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study. It is created for the scholar’s analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no existence apart from the academy.” (1982:xi)

We can similarly say that Buddhism is solely the creation of the Buddhist teacher, the sutta instructor, the titled professional, the undergraduate, the adolescent, the child who tells you about it. But then, don’t we all create our own worlds by projecting our familiarities and fancies onto our experiences?

There lies the rub. We knew things, that is, our experiences, our Buddhisms, our religions, are but expressions and reflections of our undead past. We have projected our own imaginings and aspirations onto the present. After all, we are our thoughts; or more exactly, we are what we have thought. Past perfect tense. We are perfectly tensed up by our past.

However, is there a chance that we are not deluding ourselves? Is there a chance that what we have created and projected actually overlaps with what the Buddha himself has experienced and taught? But how would we know this? Perhaps we could rely on the primary sources, the suttas, or the Abhidhamma, or our perfect guru, or even our favourite speaker.

But, as we have noted, we have merely created and projected our own meanings onto them. They are, after all, what we have been looking for. They are what we want them to be. We have created them in our own image. Looks like we have a double-bind here.

We need to get down to basics: we must get down from our Zen cloud, as it were, the wordy fuzz and silly sounds we all are capable of fooling ourselves with. So what if we have tasted a koan? Are we better people, or are we merely better at talking about koans? We are all, we might say, Zennists at heart: that’s the ultimate koan. We are liable to be fooled by words.

Some may charge me as knocking down Zen, but I can think of many other examples. As D T Suzuki, the famous 20<sup>th</sup>-century Zen exponent, humorously observes: “Zen claims to be ‘a specific transmission outside the scripture and to be altogether independent of verbalism,’ but it is Zen masters who are the most talkative and most addicted to writing of all sorts.”<sup>1</sup>

Frankly, I am completely ignorant of koans. My great doubt, I’m sure, keeps me safe from being slapped, finger-chopped and cut in half with koans!

If we are already feeling a bit miffed at this point, that’s good :). (It’s even more healing to examine what *really* is making us miffed: surely not these dead dry letters.) We are noticing ourself in the present moment.

Or worse, we might actually like these foolish words from my pre-breakfast epiphany. Hunger has a way of invoking what being fed up deprives us of.

Some might say this is just being clever with words. But we forget that we ourselves could excel so, given a chance to speak before an audience, or post something about it online, or write a book. Words, words, words. We can be naked and lost without them.

Imagine we are suddenly deprived of words and language. How then can the Zennists blurb their zen? Or the preacher sell his God? Or the conmen con? Notice how children, not so sophisticated in language, befriend one another as easily as they quarrel. We smiled at their childish squabbles, and thought we knew better. Then we ourselves squabbled, only to know much later how childish we were. Aren’t we still living in the past?

Amidst the words and noises of our lives, we vitally need to feel a constant silence in between. Our wisdom arises from the spaces separating each letter and mark, the silence spacing every word; and do beauty, harmony and peace. They are like the still spaces in between our beautiful breaths. It is from such stillness that our vision of joy, beauty and truth arises. This is the vision of emotional independence, of being truly happy for itself.

We need to cut down the forest of words, but not the tree of wisdom. Religion is a forest, Buddhism is a forest; the Dharma is a tree. Cut down the forest, but not the tree (Dh 283).

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<sup>1</sup> Intro to Zenkei Shibayama’s *A Flower Does Not Talk*, Rutland, VT: Tuttle, 1971:9.