

Buddhist questions

Buddhism today is not a monolithic religion, as it was in the Buddha's time and in the after-centuries. Latest researches have shown that the Buddha passed away around 410 BCE (give or take a margin of 10-20 years).¹ Following such a dating, Bhante Sujato has worked out the following provisional periods of Buddhist sectarian evolution:

0-100 AN ²	integrated pre-sectarian Buddhism	410-310 BCE
100-200 AN	disintegrating pre-sectarian Buddhism	310-210 BCE
200-300 AN	emerging sectarian	210-110 BCE
300-400 AN	sectarian Buddhism	110 BCE-90 CE

Mahayana arose during the "emerging sectarian Buddhism" period. However, it should be understood that the sectarian differences lay more in their doctrinal views than in matters of monastic discipline. One such view is of the Buddha, whether he is a human or a divine being. The early "elders" (Sthavira), for example, keep to the teaching that he is human, while the Sarvastivāda and later schools mostly see the Buddha as a divine being.

It is important to note here that these monastics, despite their different views, would often live together harmoniously in the same monastery. After all, even today, we know, for example, that not everyone holds the same view of the Buddha; and different Buddhists have different views of a "bodhisattva" (some take it to refer to the historical Buddha, while others take it to mean an "enlightenment being," like Avalokitesvara or Guanyin). But no matter what their views, Buddhists, as a rule, are openly accepted and can live or practise in any monastery, temple or centre they choose.

In other words, there is a social cohesiveness amongst Buddhists since early times. We might even say that Buddhists, throughout their history, have generally been "ecumenical" in spirit, that is to say, they easily accept the differences in views of one another. This is what easily makes Buddhism a global religion in the past and today. However, this ecumenism is based on the fact that such "Buddhists" do study and know Buddhism well enough, or more technically, to have some practical understanding of the Dharma and Vinaya. And, ideally, they practise some Dharma-based meditation, too.

What is dividing Buddhism today is not the differences in ideas about the Buddha, the Dharma or the Vinaya. What divides Buddhists today is how we view our involvement in our world. In this very short reflection, let me state the basic problem as that of what our visions or ideals should be. This question can be ramified into two parts: (1) Who really is influencing our Buddhist vision? (2) What, as a Buddhist, is our true ideal, or what is our highest aim in life?

This short reflection is actually a fundamental question, or essential set of questions, for us to each answer for ourselves. My understanding is that if we keep asking the right questions, and we are honest with ourselves and open to others, significant parts of our answers would overlap. And if more and more

¹ This is in accordance with the "Rhys Davids-Gombrich theory," see L S Cousins, "The dating of the historical Buddha: A review article," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Soc* 3.6.1, 1996:109 & Bhikkhu Sujato, *Sects & Sectarianism*, 2006:193 <http://sectsandsectarianism.googlepages.com>. The periods terms used here are from Sujato.

² AB = anno Buddhae, ie, year(s) after the Mahaparinirvana (the Buddha's passing-away).

of us think in this way and put them into action, we would strengthen Buddhist ecumenism, and promote Buddhism locally and globally in significant ways. Here are then questions in greater detail:

Are we taking Buddhism merely as a cultural heritage? Asian communities have a rich history of cultural Buddhism: there are Chinese Buddhism, Japanese Buddhism, Korean Buddhism, Sinhalese Buddhism, Burmese Buddhism, Thai Buddhism and so on. If we give a greater importance to the cultural prefix, our differences and our distance from the Buddha-Dharma would only grow. How can we give greater priority to the “Buddhism” that we all share to promote local Dharma growth?

How is our profession or socioeconomic status limiting or preventing our understanding of Buddhism, and how can we rise above this? Who really is influencing us in our Buddhist understanding and Buddhist work: is it a person or a teaching, and what does this tell about us?

Are we merely promoting an ethnic Buddhism, or are we working towards a global Buddhism? What is global Buddhism? Can there be a global Buddhism without a local Buddhism; or, what is the relationship or synergy between local Buddhism and global Buddhism?

As I have stated earlier, I give no answers here, but I hope these questions would help us look more deeply into ourselves and our activities in the Buddhist spirit. These questions are even more vital if we are Buddhist workers and leaders: for, what we think and do are likely to contribute to a better Buddhism, or otherwise slow down, even prevent, Buddhist growth in our own community.

The real roots that prevent Buddhist growth is not out there, but right here inside us. The roots for Buddhist growth, too, are here within our hearts.

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

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