

The Buddha's shadow

From the Upanīya Sutta (S 1.3), SD 54.2c (2.2.1.27)

[Previously published as fb181015]

The word **acquisition** (*upadhi*) characterizes a worldly or materialistic society or person, which very well characterizes the Singapore situation, but the “Singapore” situation is found in some degree in every wealthy society, community, family or group. In such a crowd, there are almost no humans, mostly drones (like the sexless macho bee and ant workers).

The drones have only one task (that’s all they do): to work, accumulate food, feed the queen and clear debris. Human drones may or may not work, but they accumulate things and treat people as things, too. People are merely numbers, statistics, productivity, and measurable in “key performance indicators” (KPI) and so on. Drone, in other words, is another word for “asura,” fierce exploitative heartless demons of Buddhist mythology.

Prosperous times

By the time of the Buddha (around the 5th century BCE), the middle Gangetic plain, was a very fertile region going through the Iron Age. Iron made better ploughs, swords, vehicles and tools. They helped crops yield better. The population grew. Kings became more powerful. Those with the best weapons and the best armies conquered more land. When such realms became peaceful, commerce and cultural activities grew and people became more prosperous.

With the specialization of work, they had more wealth and more time. To succeed in such a society, they had to do only one thing: acquire wealth and accumulate property. Everyone wanted to do this, but wealth is limited. It was a time when there was more than enough for everyone’s needs. For those with endless wants, there is never enough to acquire.

Alternative to accumulations

Understandably, more and more people began to feel the burden and stress of having to acquire things. They grew tired, even disgusted, with the drone-like lives. It was in this kind of ambience that the Buddha arose. Being himself caught in such a drone-driven society, he decided to opt out and, in his quest, he discovered the path to a drone-free acquisition-free life: that of renunciation.

More and more

The Buddha spent the rest of his life (a total of 45 years) teaching and liberating countless people in the central Gangetic plain. Basically, he teaches that all acquisitions (*upadhi*) are “empty” passing things. They are empty in the sense that none of these acquisitions—these “things”—have any essence or lasting reality; they don’t really bring true happiness.

They only make sense in their arising, changing and passing away. When we fail to see this—and think of them as being more than this—then, they become a burden, as we toil to acquire **more** and more, and to protect what we have acquired. Often, we have more than

we can enjoy, but our “drone” mentality does not know how to really enjoy life: we only know how to accumulate and be “better than others.” This also means that our existence also depends on others: it is a crowded existence.

Unreal acquisitions

Acquisitions (plural) are troubling for the simple reason they do not really exist—they are merely virtual realities we create through our 6 senses. They prevent us from spiritually maturing: like **Peter Pan** (the boy who wouldn't grow up) who loses his shadow and has to run after it, catch it and get it stitched it back to himself.

Interestingly, even when the shadow has been stitched back to Peter, it does not come back to life—unless there is light. After all, a shadow is simply a dark spot created by light. It is that part of us (that looks exactly like us, so to speak) that does not get the light. Hence, it represents the “shadow” of our life: our fears, sadness, ignorance, inability or unwillingness to learn and grow.¹

Devas and shadow

In Buddhist mythology, the fact that Peter Pan and the Lost Boys do not grow up make them like the devas, on account of which it is difficult for them to learn the Dharma since they do not experience impermanence. Furthermore, the shadow is symbolized by Māra, who shadows the Buddha for 7 years but is unable to find anything dark in him.²

Peter's shadow casts a dark undertone for the rest of his story. Peter's shadow and those of his Lost Boys symbolize their inability to physically and mentally mature, to reach adulthood—like the dehumanized drones. They seem to be caught in some kind of existence in amber, but time (in the form of Captain Hook and his crew) relentlessly seeks to capture and destroy them.

Birth as death

In the 2008 movie “**The Curious Case of Benjamin Button**” (loosely based on F Scott Fitzgerald's 1922 short story), Benjamin is a Peter-Pan-figure who ages in reverse: he gets ever younger until he reaches the point of his birth, which becomes his death! In the case of Peter Pan and the Lost Boys, their inability to grow appears as if to be a state frozen in time—it is as if they are already dead—as dead as drones, who have no life. This is a sombre reminder that the natural purpose of life is to grow up, especially in the mind. The body decays, the mind awakens.

Like the rich lessons of good literature and good movies, the Buddha's presence is even more vital in our lives today as we exist to acquire more and more of measurable things, dehumanizing us into work-driven quantity-controlled drones. As we acquire more and

¹ The episode of Peter losing his shadow is in the very 1st act of J M Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1902, 1904). See Elizabeth G, “Shades of a shadow,” 2007, <http://mural.uv.es/marsoga/art7>.

² See **Satta Vassa Sutta** (S 4.24), [SD 36.5](#).

more, we are less and less human. We have forgotten to live or love, since we only see figures, as numbers and measurable.

Living life

We need to rise above the drone crowd into the immeasurable space of life, love, light and liberation. Then, we will truly enjoy what we have, and more so, what we truly are: happy and wise.

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

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