

Why do you want to know?

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Monastics and lay teachers sometimes privately quip amongst their inner circle and close colleagues that their audiences are often simple-minded, frivolous, or obsequious. According to them, most audience enjoy being entertained rather than listen to some deep point of Dhamma. It seems that many of us actually **fear** rather than respect the monastics. (“They are ‘venerables’ you know, so we must respect them!”) In this point, they are often more right than wrong, but to their advantage and to our disadvantage.

Inforrhoea

On the other hand, on closer scrutiny, we are likely to notice that most of us (the audience) also tend to be **narcissistic** (think in term of ourself and think only we are right). Yet, we are filled with doubts (that’s why we attend the talks). Many of us are superstitious (we think that some monks are “arhats” without being one ourself).

Today’s information age drowns us with floods of facts, “inforrhoea,” about Buddhism than we can properly process or helpfully use. Understandably, a curious person is likely to collect and store whatever facts he can find about Buddhism. It’s like collecting books (or PDFs) on cooking or playing a musical instrument, but never actually learning or trying to cook or play the instrument. Yet, we behave as if we are experts in Buddhism (we are right, everyone else wrong).

Doubtful

Further, because there is so much inforrhoea about Buddhism in a very competitive religious market, each peddler will try to feed others with facts that seem to promote the peddler to be the best in the market. He is projected as the Sole Proprietor of the Buddhist goods so that we can only get these from them alone. While the intelligent may **doubt** such a situation, others are likely to fall for it, and even become their promoters. “I’ve used your Soap years ago, since when I’ve used no other!”

Superstitious

Despite the decades of religious teachings from foreign monastics, preachers and high priests, we have only learned:

to receive “blessings” from them (as if they are more blessed than we are);
to “transfer” merit to departed (as if karma is a measurable and negotiable thing);
to remit millions (“you cannot take it with you, so why not send it ahead through us!”)

We are taught to rely on merit by performing **rituals**: this means that we are seeking solution in an external means for problems that have arisen in our own minds!

The most powerful tool

Some monastics and priests try to attract and hold us as their supporters and clients through **rituals**. Notice that all rituals cost money, often a lot of money (in fact, this is the real purpose behind such rituals). These monastics and priests teach us rituals not found in the suttas, and prayers not encouraged by the Buddha. The Buddha teaches that, with **lovingkindness**, we can pray for anyone by sending our thoughts of goodness to them. Thoughts are the most powerful tool that we have to help ourself and benefit others.

However, when we learn to be self-reliant, these monastics and priests fear that they will lose us as their supporters and clients. For example, when one serious lay Buddhist asked a famous teacher about “**streamwinning**” (see below), he severely reacted: “Why do you want to know about streamwinning!” This shocking reply only shows his lack of Dhamma training and his misrepresenting the Buddha’s teaching, which is about reaching the path of awakening in this life. It is the **purpose** of being a Buddhist.

Help the unfriendly teacher

We can, with lovingkindness, ask this teacher (for his benefit):

“Didn’t the Buddha teach about streamwinning?
Can you please tell me what teachings the Buddha gives on streamwinning?”

It is good to ask such questions (again and again if necessary) openly before the whole audience, so that everyone can hear the answer, and decide for themselves.

Self-effort

The life of the Buddha is about the success of his **self-awakening**: through his own efforts, the Buddha discovered the truth of reality and liberated himself. The Buddha then teaches us how we, too, can by self-effort free ourself from ignorance and suffering. We only need to know, tame and free our mind—he teaches us mindfulness and meditation.

Unlike in other religions, we need not, must not, believe in imaginative things (like God, sin and holiness) that are not really helpful. We only need to accept the truth of **impermanence**, whether by faith or by wisdom. Everything is impermanent: even our problems are impermanent. When we understand that everyone, too, is impermanent, we begin to value and love people, especially those near and dear to us.

We can deny God, but we cannot deny impermanence!

Our first step on the path

When we understand and accept impermanence, we learn to value what are really true and good. We learn to keep our body and speech wholesome. We train our mind and heart to be calm and clear, letting our thoughts come and go, since they cannot really stay with us forever. When we live in this manner, the Buddha guarantees that we will take the first step

on the path of awakening: **see the (Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1), SD 16.7. This is known as “streamwinning.”¹

We do not need deep meditation or attaining dhyana (*jhāna*) for this. Some teachers claim that we must attain dhyana, even to do this. Nowhere in the suttas does the Buddha ever say we need dhyana to take this first step on the path.

This is the **first** vital step we should take as lay Buddhists, or as monastics who are unable to meditate to attain dhyana. This is the Buddha’s great wisdom and compassion in teaching us the way out of suffering. This is the **purpose** of being a Buddhist. It is up to us either to take this path of self-reliance or, disastrously, to hand over our remote to others.

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¹ See R414, “Streamwinning in this life” (150915): <http://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/R414-150915-Streamwinning-in-this-life-RB135.pdf>.