

Tits for titles

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When the wanderer Sāriputta first saw the arhat Assaji, he was simply moved by the arhat's calm and radiant composure. He followed Assaji in total silence, watching how he walked on his alms round, collected alms, headed for a suitable place. Then, Sāriputta seized the opportunity to prepare a seat for him, and serve him water for washing and drinking.

Only when Assaji had finally finished his meal (Sāriputta waited happily and patiently), did Sāriputta ask Assaji about the teaching. Assaji humbly said he was very new to the teaching and knew little. Sāriputta politely persisted (as Bāhiya strongly persisted with the Buddha) for the teaching. Finally, Assaji uttered his famous quatrain on impermanence. Listening to only the first 2 lines, Sāriputta becomes a streamwinner: he had reached the path himself!

A true teacher frees us

Amazingly, Assaji made no fanfare about his appearance; he was dressed very simply in a monk's rag-robles, looking like any other good renunciant. He had no impressive head-dress, kesha, sanghati, or some fancy robe to show how holy he was. By his own practice, he was beautifully calm and radiant.

He neither published nor gave away any name-card or vade mecum or curriculum vitae; or used big titles to impress the rich, the powerful, the gullible. He merely walked silently, mindfully on his almsround. Sāriputta followed his newfound teacher in total silence, watching closely, happily. At the right time, he asked just the right question, and with that question, he won the path.

Buddha's virtues

The Buddha, too, never tells us to adore him for his titles. We only reflect on his virtues, which are qualities that we too can and should attain: worthy, awakened, accomplished in wisdom and conduct, and so on. The other arhats are awakened just like the Buddha; only that the Buddha arose first in this world.

Furthermore, the Buddha invites us to examine his moral virtues in his actions, speech and thought. Do we notice any faults? None at all. Then, we should follow him. After all, we are not really following him as a person. He himself holds the liberating Dhamma above himself. Following the Buddha, we are following the Dhamma which we practise and through which we awaken just like the Buddha.

No bush needed

What does it mean when we see a Teacher who is impressively dressed to show how holy or successful or classy he is? An intelligent person will know that if he were really that good, he would not need all this publicity and pretence. Fine wine needs no bush: even when we don't drink we know this!

When a Teacher shows a list of long titles and positions of this and that, here and there, it only shows he had been very busy. We would wonder if he ever had time to train in the Dhamma Vinaya or what he is looking for? Indeed, when a teacher is really good in the Dhamma and Vinaya, he would be like Assaji. We would see his goodness naturally in his daily personality, and after knowing him long enough.

Letting go of views and self

No teacher can free us; we must feel the joy ourself. When we do not approach the Buddha's own teachings, but run after things the Buddha did not teach, we will not feel free or happy, but become burdened and troubled.

The secret of good Dhamma study is that it is liberating. It teaches us about RENUNCIATION, letting go. We begin to better understand why we hold certain views, why we are running after Teachers and Teachings (for the power of it?). Yet, when we understand a sutta, we let go of such burden; we feel great relief, a liberating joy.

Soup and spoon

Often when we like a Teacher (for any reason: looks, voice, knowledge, holiness) we think so highly of him. We follow him around, praising him, promoting him, fanning him. We forget the most important thing: we have not really practised the Buddha Dhamma that he teaches.

When we find a teacher who is really good, we do not place him on a pedestal. We will only make him fall because we are holding that pedestal. Worse, when we put a teacher so high up, he has to look down on us. We begin to see him for what he is not, and he does not really see us for what we really are.

Without practice, we are just proverbial SPOONS that carry the soup but not tasting it. No matter how big the Spoon, we are still numb Spoons! With practice, when we tell others about the goodness of the Dhamma, we speak as those who have sipped the soup from the Dhamma spoon. And we share that soup and Dhamma food with others, too, so that they are healthy and wise. (Dh 64-65)

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

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