

The Blind Men's Elephant, Season 2

How ignorance feeds delusion

[Previously published as fb200517 Piya Tan]

Buddhism, it seems, is the only major religion where one only needs to know some words about it to be a Buddhist teacher or leader! We have heard of the familiar metaphor of the blind men trying to describe an elephant, an animal which they have never seen before.

Even after they are brought to a living elephant and each touched a different part of it, they can only imagine from their limited knowledge what it is like. Then, comparing notes, they began to quarrel, each claiming the elephant is the part that they have touched: it was like a snake, a mat, a spear, a tree-trunk, a wall, a rope!¹

The Elephant God

Imagine what happens next when these very same elephant-feelers proudly go back to their respective dens of blind followers and describe to their epiphany of an elephant. From their spirited sermons of Elephant Parts, grew 6 powerful new Religions: the Snake Religion, the Mat Religion, the Spear Religion, the Trunk Religion, the Wall Religion and the Rope Religion, each claiming that its image of faith is the All of the Almighty All-knowing All-powerful Elephant.

And their followers, in turn, sanctimoniously and systematically spread their respective grand views through the mass media, publishing thick glossy-covered tomes, erecting impressive buildings and structures to worship their Elephant-parts!

Free-lance monastics

Many of our monks and nuns speak volumes of Dhamma which they have not experienced at all, and often enough not even spent the basic 5-year tutelage (*nissaya*) with a proper teacher. Having donned the robes that should remind them of the Vinaya, the monastic rules, they claim that all these rules are “constructed” and “debatable,” in other words, they do not keep to them.

Then, these monastics, without mastering the suttas, go on to study the Abhidhamma, and then declare that this is the “higher Dhamma,” belittling the Buddha Word with these Latter-day Words. Unconfident of their status or lack of it, they try to legitimize themselves through academic qualification, becoming students of non-Buddhist professionals of academic learning. Some seek heraldic titles: they even denude themselves of their robes and wear civvies to receive their worldly entitlement.²

¹ The blind men and the elephant: Nānā Titthiyā Sutta (U 6.4,10-19) + SD 40a.14 (1.1). In the Sutta, the 9 blind men each thought the elephant was like a water-pot (its head), a winnowing-tray (the ear), a wooden peg (the tusk), a plough-beam (the trunk), a store-house (its body), a mortar (its foot), a pillar (its thigh), a pestle (its tail), a broom (tail-tuft). For Piya's FB reflection on “BLIND TO THE ELEPHANT” (14 Nov 2017): <https://www.facebook.com/piyatan/posts/10155190949916325>.

² <https://www.thestar.com.my/.../12/02/chief-monk-faces-ouster>.

When a regular woman devotee of the Maha Vihara in KL went to its Chief High Priest to grieve before him that she was worried sick about her missing son, he retorted: "Aiyah! You think only you have problems! You think I don't?" That poor woman, like Paṭācārā, went away weeping even more.

No faith

Such monks or nuns may be very Venerable Doctors with PhD and high titles. But remember, the Buddha had no such external titles. Whatever virtue we reflect of the Buddha reflects his actual quality. When such monastics have these titles, it seems to mean that they lack faith or confidence in their robes, their training, in the Dhamma itself.

Hence, whatever they may speak of the Dhamma, even quote the suttas or the Abhidhamma, but they have experienced none of these. Following them would be like the blind leading the blind—as the Buddha tells us in **the Tevijja Sutta** (D 13,15), SD 1.8.

We may well just listen to them from a recording of such words. Or better, we should search the suttas ourselves and learn directly from these early texts. In fact, more and more lay Buddhists who love the Dhamma are turning away from such false monastics and following the Buddha's teaching directly by themselves. This is called SELF-RELIANCE, which the Buddha encourages us during his last days.

Professional Buddhism

As Buddhist information becomes more easily available, we also are getting more professionals, highly intelligent people, who read some Buddhist books or followed some of these learned teachers or titled monastics, and then start to preach the Dhamma themselves—without any personal experience of it, sometime not even as Buddhists.

However, when they do practise the Dhamma themselves, they would be inspired to reach the path of awakening, or at least aspire to attain streamwinning in this life itself. In some ways, it is better to listen to such lay Dhamma teachers than to the titled monastics when we know that these lay teachers keep the precepts and work honestly for a living. Sadly, very often, the titled monastics wrongly think that they are clever enough to change or reject the Vinaya that has protected the Dhamma since the Buddha's time.

The Vinaya and precepts are the rules that define the monk or the nun as renunciants. This means they have vowed to renounce the world: they have no home, no economic security, no wealth. By the truth and goodness of their Dhamma practice, they become exemplars of the Dhamma to inspire us to practise. However, when they use money, become salaried workers, own property, socialize like the laity, what does that make them? They are no better than any laity who have not made those vows!

Blind followers

When we follow such titled and entitled teachers, no matter how holy or impressive they may look, they have not tasted the Dhamma. When we follow them, we can be no better

than them. We are following the Teacher, not the teaching; and going against the Buddha's advice. Even the Buddha holds the teaching, the Dhamma, above himself, as stated in **the Gārava Sutta** (S 6.2), SD 12.3.³

When we listen to worldly and professional teachers, or worse, we follow cultish Gurus, they will actually limit and stunt our personal development and spiritual growth, or worse could happen. We become literally their slaves, and our bodies and minds belong to them.

When we look at the University and academic tradition, we will notice that the new generation of scholars, philosophers, engineers, doctors, scientists, even their students, are better than the teachers of the past. This is reflected in the Chinese saying: "Green comes from indigo." We should better our teachers (that is, the unawakened ones).⁴

Becoming true Buddhists

How can we, even as lay Buddhists, master the Dhamma as instructed by the Buddha. The key teaching is that of SELF-RELIANCE. This is how we do it.

(1) We seek to understand OURSELF. This means we should KNOW how our mind works. No one can do this better than we ourself. When we do not understand ourself, we fall under its power: it is called selfishness or NARCISSISM. When we understand our body and mind, we are able to see how they bring us natural GOODNESS.

(2) We should not depend on anything outside of us or on anyone else. Our problems arise WITHIN us (in our minds). When we seek their solutions outside, it is called SUPERSTITION. The SELF-EMPOWERMENT comes from our inner peace and clarity through mindfulness and meditation.

(3) We should not DOUBT our capacity for self-effort and freedom. When we believe in an outside power, such as God (which is a human creation anyway), then, we doubt that we can ever save ourself because we are told that we are sinners (a very harmful, false idea). TRUE FREEDOM arises from our self-realized wisdom of true reality.

To help this practice, we should have some understanding of the suttas, especially **the (Anicca) Cakkhu Suta** (S 25.1), SD 16.7. When we feel ready, we then aspire to attain streamwinning in this life itself. This means that we are sure of reaching the path of awakening before we die (as stated in the Sutta).⁵

R758 Inspirations 438

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³ The Gārava Sutta (S 6.2), SD 12.3: <https://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/12.3-Garava-S-s6.2-piya.pdf>

⁴ Fully, the saying is: "Green comes from indigo; but it's bluer than the plant itself," 青出於藍，而勝於藍 = simplified, 青出于蓝，而胜于蓝 qīng chū yú lán, ér shèng yú lán (荀子, Xúnzi, 300-230 BCE).

⁵ The (Anicca) Cakkhu Suta (S 25.1), SD 16.7: <https://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/16.7-Anicca-Cakkhu-S-s25.1-piya.pdf>