

To learn is to live

How the Dhamma can touch us here and now
[Previously published as fb210125 Piya Tan]

Early Buddhism teaches us that what we LIKE now depends on a similar experience we had had in the past. So, too, when we DISLIKE someone or something: it reminds us of a past bad experience. When our present experience cannot be related to some past good or bad experience—in other words, a new experience—we are likely to IGNORE it.

Every time we like something in this way, we only reinforce our DESIRE or lust in that way. Every time we dislike something in this way, we add on to our anger, ill will or HATE. When we ignore such an experience, we increase our IGNORANCE. Hence, greed, hate and delusion only deepens our unconscious tendencies of lust, aversion and ignorance.

No free will

Hence, every time we act in this way, we really have no free will. We are compelled by past habits, and re-acting them out again and again. Hence, we REACT to situations in predictable and repetitive ways: we cannot help it, and don't even know it. Those bad cunning people who know this (the Gurus, the Chief High Priests, etc), can easily exploit us where we are most vulnerable. And we are most vulnerable here.

A common case is when we are invited to study the suttas, the authentic texts of the Buddha's teachings, so that we can understand his teachings and practise them properly, with benefit in this life itself. Our quick and common reaction is that the suttas are "difficult," and so on.

Don't miss this break

The good thing we have missed is that this is really a BREAK we are offered for getting out of our samsaric humdrum life. But we are afraid to try it because we have not done so before. So we remain a samsaric frog in the proverbial well. We remain stuck with our past conditionings of reacting only to OLD stimuli: we keep running after the carrot on the stick, since that is all we have known. The Gurus and the High Priests want this, love this, encourage this.

For this reason, we tend to follow famous and successful teachers—we wrongly equate their status with their understanding of Buddhism, not their experience and realization of the Buddha's teaching. In fact, whenever we follow such a teacher, no matter how famous, successful or qualified, we can never be better than him or her. We are only FOLLOWERS: we can never really learn to be self-reliant.

Self-reliance

For this reason, the Buddha reminds us, even in his very last days, to be SELF-RELIANT. We must put the teaching above the teacher. It is not how we admire a certain human body or even look up to some quality in that person that helps us (this only gloriously enslaves us;

we are only Fans at best). On the contrary, we must be eager to LEARN; only then will we change for the better, to be a true and free individual on the path of awakening.

A Dhamma teacher who puts Dhamma first, will keep reminding us not to glorify him or put him on a pedestal. He will remind us to practise the teaching, the Buddha Dhamma. In a sense, he is learning the Buddha Dhamma with us. Maybe he is a quicker or better learner; then, we are fortunate to have such a learning partner. However, we each put in our own effort to walk the journey in the right direction and safely.

The suttas free us

An inspiring example of self-reliance, an act of amazing service and humility, is the PROOF-READING of the sutta translations. I speak of this because this is happening right now with a growing number of people, most of whom are neither experts in English nor even know Pali.

Indeed, I'm warmed to know that a few of the volunteers have not even finished secondary school but are eager to help and learn. My idea of proof-reading is simply going through the sutta translations and weeding out human errors, spotting typos, the numbering of paragraphs, and so on. We don't need to know Pali to do this, but knowing Pali is very useful since we can then also help to check the translated passages.

To proofread is to learn

Many of the typos are simply spellings, wrong numberings of lines, paragraphs and sections, missing words, and so on. We don't need to be an English expert to see this. If we can read the daily papers, we should easily be able to proof-read the suttas. This is just what is happening with the volunteers who are proof-reading the Sutta Discovery translations and essays.

Volunteers are given the kind of texts they are comfortable with. The SD works range from basic layman suttas to informative essays on key topics or issues. After nearly 20 years, we now have more than 70 SD volumes, totalling over 10,000 A4 pages of translations and essays.

Modern commentary

The SD series have, in fact, become a modern COMMENTARY on the Buddha's teachings, the real wealth of which will only be truly discovered and appreciated in the next generation. The value of these works come from being based on an academic discipline (proper English, clear writing, quoting authorities, referencing, critical thinking, etc).

Mostly, the SD series works to explain the teachings of early Buddhism and show how they can be properly applied to the good Buddhist life, personal growth, meditation and mindfulness, so that we understand the nature of true reality. In rare essays, difficult and real issues confronting Buddhists, are discussed openly and honestly in the spirit of documented research, critical thinking and the early Buddhist teachings.

What the Buddha teaches

The key purpose of the SD series is to help us understand what the Buddha actually teaches, and how we can understand and practise them. We can do this in at least 2 ways, by reading the SD works ourselves or by listening to the various global sutta and Dhamma classes now available: the world is the class now: a world class! But we must be willing to learn.

Another way of learning the suttas and helping the SD work, too, is PROOF-READING. We are introduced to suttas at our own level, and we will discover for ourselves what truly the Buddha teaches, and how we can learn and practise them. What better way to do this than carefully reading up on the authentic teachings of early Buddhism?

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