

Unbiting the snake

An excerpt from SD 60.1d: An Evolutionary Psychology of Mindfulness, Piya Tan.

4.5.3 Buddhism and Buddha Dharma

4.5.3.1 Do we deserve the Buddhism that we get, or do we deserve better? When we look for Buddhism in impressive buildings or charismatic personalities, we deserve what we get: we tend to find what we are looking for, like chickens scratching the ground. But if that's all we are; that's all we will get—knowledge, fame, status, respect, wealth perhaps—but keen-eyed scholars will watch and study us, like King Yama, recording our karmic deeds for posterity.¹

Our beliefs and fears are often deeply rooted in our past; in the case of local Chinese Buddhists, in our peasant and migrant past. Even when our ancestors here had grown rich through dint of labour and frugality, our views and fears continue to domesticate us as underdogs: we may have all the creature comforts but never enjoy humanity and fellowship. We will be like the Minions.²

4.5.3.2 One of the vital psychosocial teachings of early Buddhism is that we are conditioned by the past and present conditions tend to perpetuate our past, so that we are caught in a vicious loop of predictable instinctive and routine behaviour. Our task as Buddhists is to see and confront this uroboric lifestyle: that of a serpent devouring its own tail.³ There is so much in great literature written about how we are caught in this rut of ignorance and craving, so that we are not ourselves.

Religion—for us, Buddhism—is a double-edged sword. It cuts both ways: it can enslave us; it can free us. Buddhism is the most effective tool with which others can mentally and culturally enslave us, to be their dancing bears, and like the huge but docile bears, we are leashed to this strange heartless Master, dancing to his tune.

Or, Buddhism can free us from the gilded cage of spoon-fed subhuman euphoria.

We need to learn and understand why this is so, and how we can be better. Our task then is to pull ourselves out of the mire of mental slavery to foreign cultures, and inspire others to rise to lives dignified by the Buddha Dharma of **true nobility**, leading to the path of awakening.⁴ Heading for this path, even faltering yet persevering on with diligence and wisdom, we would in time realize that we would have written all this ourself, seeing our own inner good for the better of our own Buddhist community.⁵

¹ On King Yama, see **(Yama) Deva, dūta S** (A 3.35), SD 48.10.

² *Minions* was a 2015 US computer-aided (and highly successful) comedy film produced by Illumination Entertainment and distributed by Universal Pictures. The Minions are small pill-shaped creatures who have existed since the beginning of time, and exist only to serve the most evil masters, but often end up destroying their own masters.

³ On the uroboros, see SD 23.3 (1); SD 49.2 (4.3.2.3).

⁴ Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989) is a modern classic about an English butler who has been conditioned to serve, and does so consummately, so that he could never learn to be happy, or even reciprocate the love of others for him. See SD 7.9 (4.5.3.3); for other similar works, see (4.5.3).

⁵ I thank TAN Cheng Siong of Malaysia for his inspiring sentiment which I have expressed here.

4.5.3.3 The Commentaries—summarizing the teaching styles of the suttas—lists the “2 kinds of teachings” (*desanā*), that is:

- (1) the person-based (*puggalādhiṭṭhāna desanā*) and
- (2) the Dharma-based (*dhammādhiṭṭhāna desanā*).

In terms of (1) a person (that is, addressed to a person, or based on a person), and (2) based on a concept or idea, one that is “truth-based” (*dhammādhiṭṭhāna desanā*).⁶

On a deeper level, we should understand *dhammādhiṭṭhāna* as meaning “Dharma-based,” in the sense of the Buddha Dharma as the true teaching. This simply means that we should always hold the teaching above the teacher. Instead of idolizing the teacher, attributing him charisma, we should instead attend to the wholesome teachings he has taught, reflect on them and go on to search the suttas for a better self-understanding, personal growth and spiritual transformation. This is the Buddha’s teaching in **the Gārava Sutta** (S 6.2).⁷

This is how we free the serpent from devouring itself: we are that serpent. We free ourselves from the subhuman state to attain humanity, and upon reaching the path become truly noble (*ariya*), that is, one bound for awakening.

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⁶ See esp SD 36.1 (1.11.2); also SD 47.20 (1.2.3).

⁷ S 6.2/1:138-140 (SD 12.3).