

Creative teachers, creative misreadings

An excerpt from SD 60d An evolutionary psychology of mindfulness, ©TAN Beng Sin (Piya Tan) 2023a

6.3.3.1 The “meditation teachers” of our time (the 1st quarter of the 21st century) are either Buddhist teachers (monastic and lay) or secularized teachers selling meditation as a product. The secularized teachers are, as a rule, certified by some institution or organization run by psychologists or meditation professionals. Since they only know what they are taught, they are likely to keep away from traditional teachers, who have spent many more years meditating and teaching than these “professional” teachers.

Many of the so called traditional “meditation teachers” in our own time too, are mostly good salesmen but bad teachers, hollow Gurus, desperately seeking funds and following, with an air of restraint and holiness. Much of such their religion (including Buddhism) is titles, looks and rituals: these Gurus are adept at ritual behaviour, masters of appearances, consummate Tartuffes.¹ They are likely to be the absolute power at the apex of an organization or movement, the final authority that answers to no one. We are only wise in keeping a safe distance, or better, avoid such a plague altogether—before it is too late.

One litmus test for detecting a Guru or a Guru-like teacher is to introduce yourself as a poor, jobless Buddhist, or even as a “full-time Buddhist worker.” If you find the Guru excusing himself in a saccharin sweet way (more often, it would be a silent treatment) [4.5.2.2], then you find him simply out of your reach, you have probably just met a Cult Guru. Be thankful you have been ignored but are safe: simply move on with your Dharma quest.

6.3.3.2 A popular Tibetan saying goes: **Every teacher his teaching.** Every meditation teacher creates his own meditation system and has his own views. So long as the teacher stays within the “Buddhist training,” it is unlikely that there will be any problems. This is more likely to be so with the traditional forest monks than with the “modern” monastics (monks and nuns), or the urbanized coenobites (those who live in large communities and have constant interaction with the world).

During an interview with a popular US Buddhist magazine, **Robert Sharf** was asked: “The religious historian Elaine Pagels has spoken of how religious practitioners adopt certain practices and beliefs selectively and reinterpret texts in what she calls a process of “creative misreading.”² Granted, this might be done unconsciously, even perniciously, but might it not also be a necessary strategy for adapting a tradition, in this case Buddhism, to the contingencies of time and place?” (*Tricycle* summer 2007:48 f) [6.3.3.3]

The term “creative misreading” is not always used in a disapproving way in literary circles. In fact, it is said to be creative for the very fact that we are able to see something different or new in some writing. This is, of course, a lively quality in creative writing.

¹ On Tartuffism, see SD 19.2a (2.3.2).

² E Pagels [I was unable to locate citations for any of Pagels works for this claim; it is thus taken on faith]; cf Jeffrey J Kripal, “Mysticism” (ch 18), in (ed) R A Segal, *Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion*, 2006 ch 18;331 f.

However, in the early Buddhist texts, we should be sufficiently delighted with “creative reading” of the sutta texts, that does not go against the “Dharma drift.” Our task is to work to understand the insight and instruction of the text so that we can reach the path, or at least better our lives for the moment, even in a literary way, but more so spiritually.

In an important way, the “coding” of the early Buddhist texts (EBTs) by an oral tradition was to prevent any kind of misreading, creative or otherwise. For our purposes, we may take “creative” here to mean “for personal purposes” or “out of personal bias.” Why then, did post-Buddha teachers and writers “creatively misread” the EBTs that they had. One reason was probably they may have or know the *text* but misconstrued the context, that is, they either made no effort to consult reliable teachers or other EBTs, or simply assumed that they were right on account of their status (that theirs was a fiat).

Secondly, they probably had very strong personal views of their own, or were deeply influenced by outside teachings, and were moved to see Buddhist teachings in the light or half-light of such beliefs and biases. Even today, or in recent times, we have, for example, Hindus, Theosophists, Christians, and today, psychologists, who creatively misread the Buddha and his teachings for the glory of their own beliefs. Among the later Buddhists, such creative misreadings must surely be efforts to legitimize their own views as Buddhist, or to reinterpret their beliefs in terms of Buddhist teachings, such as with Buddhism in China, especially in the Tang and the Song dynasties.³ [7.6.7.3]

6.3.3.3 Sharf agreed that **creative misreading** is possible with the Buddhist texts, and that Buddhist history supports it. He explained how when Buddhism arrived in China in the 1st and 2nd centuries CE, the early Chinese Buddhists translated the scriptures using terms that were familiar to them, often using Daoist language for Sanskrit terms that had no Chinese equivalent. One of Sharf’s favourite examples was the Sanskrit term *tathata*, or “suchness,” a word that refers to the natural “empty” state of things—the way things really are.

The Chinese translated *tathata* with the cosmological term 本無 *běnwú*, which means “original non-being,” and this gave the Buddhist concept a noticeably Daoist twist. The use of Daoist terminology made Indian Buddhist texts approachable and meaningful to members of the Chinese literati. It allowed them to make connections between Buddhism and their own indigenous ways of thinking. This was one reason Buddhism caught on so well. Sharf thought that there was a parallel in the way Buddhism is represented to a Western audience. Buddhist ideas are put into terms that are familiar and meaningful to our modern sensibility.

6.3.3.4 Today, Sharf adds [6.3.3.2], the language of choice for rendering Buddhist ideas is the language of **psychotherapy**. This ends up reinforcing, whether intentionally or not, the notion that Buddhism is basically a means of psychological transformation and that Buddhism is compatible with modern science. This is how we end up with the simplistic notion that Buddhism is a “science of happiness.” But as in China, this may be an unavoidable stage in the transmission of Buddhism.

³ See esp **How Buddhism Became Chinese**, SD 40b.2 Chinese challenges to Buddhism.

In China, the translation process evolved over the course of centuries. The Chinese continued to refine their translations of Buddhist texts, and with more reliable translations and commentaries came a deeper engagement with Indian Buddhist thought and practice. It took several centuries before the Chinese could fully appreciate the breadth and subtleties of Buddhism. This is not to say that they didn't continue to transform the Indian tradition and make it their own; they certainly did. But the work of transformation went hand in hand with gaining a sophisticated understanding of Buddhism's Indian heritage.

Maybe, the lesson from history, notes Sharf, is that it will take a long time—perhaps centuries—for the West (and westernized Buddhists) to engage with the Buddhist tradition at a deeper level. Such an engagement will require that we see past the confines of our own historical and cultural situation and *gain a greater appreciation of the depth and complexity of the Buddhist heritage*. Certainly, one impediment to this is the idea that the only thing that matters is meditation and that everything else is just excess baggage. (Sharf, *Tricycle* summer 2007:48)

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