

Lineage or learning

How to directly experience the Dhamma

[Previously published as fb200521 Piya Tan]

We had a kind of comic-tragic encounter with a Tibetan Geshe (a sort of monastic PhD) who has spent around a decade or more mastering Buddhist doctrines, Tibetan style. Yet, this Geshe was belittling us all the way, simply because we uphold early Buddhism, saying that we were not cordial to him. I'm amazed at the layman and the monk (both following Theravada) who patiently tried to salvage the chat with the proud and unfriendly Geshe.

Then, another Tibetan practitioner (with a Tibetan name) chipped in with the key message that we all need a TEACHER if we are to know any Dharma. I have been studying religion and practising Buddhism for over 50 years now, and from my experience, this Teacher Devotion (as it is often called) is not something healthy¹, besides the fact that the Buddha himself places the Dhamma above even himself: see the Gārava Sutta (S 6.2), SD 12.3.²

A geshe and a monk

After a couple of days of “we’re better than you” airs from the Geshe and “please explain what you mean ... didn’t the Buddha teach that ... ” of the Theravada Buddhists, I told myself: “Wow, a lama quibbling with a monk!” Too bad for the pontificating Geshe, the monk was learned and patient, who did not mind a tough talk.

From this Intra-Buddhist debate is the sad reminder we are divided by the very religion that we follow—just as God-faith divides those who believe in such an existence. My conclusion: If having a Teacher churns out the likes of the Geshe and his Minion, I don’t think it is a good or successful system.

Friend?

Another interesting point is that the Geshe had actually clicked the Friend button to join our FB. My current policy is not to accept even Theravada monks or nuns, unless they have a deep interest in the Dhamma-Vinaya and practise them. Indeed, we value learned monks and nuns of faith and wisdom. But they are reminded this is a lay group dedicated to early Buddhism. Hence, my reluctance to accept the pontificating Geshe as a Friend. “Don’t you have your own Friends to chat with?” I asked him.

“A special transmission outside the scriptures”

Further on teachers, we also have lineage in the Tibetan and other Mahayana sects. The Chinese CHAN school and their Japanese counterpart, the ZEN, proudly claim in a famous quatrain that there is “a special transmission outside the scriptures.” Ironically, having rejected the Sutras (not to mention the suttas), they are left with nothing canonical to

¹ On scandals involving Tibetan tulkus and Zen senseis, see: “Bad Friendship” : <https://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/64.17-Bad-friendship.-piya.pdf>

² On 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>

authenticate their existence in the eyes of the literati (educated nobility), the powerful elite and the imperial court, who support and wealth they desired.

The Chan patriarchs and theologians came up an ingenious legitimizing scheme, one that would appeal to the upper-class Chinese elite (who custom and patronage they needed anyway). The idea of patriarchy in Chán Buddhism did not come from the Indian Buddhist tradition, but was an adaptation and transformation of *the ancient Chinese way in recording FAMILY LINEAGE*. It was a worldly lineage to preserve and promote the family and its legacy (wealth, assets, etc) through primogeniture (property passing down through the 1st son, or the Chief Abbot's nephew in the case of the Siyam Nikaya of Sinhala Buddhism).

The word *zong* (宗) originally did not have the meaning of “school” or “sect,” but referred to “ancestor(s),” (*zǔ* 祖). The Chán monks borrowed this secular Chinese usage of family lineage and transformed it into a sacred lineage of religious transmission, thus a teacher-disciple relationship replaced the father-son lineage. The blood connection was thus transformed into a holy-truth connection. This transformation returned to the Chinese tradition again when the Neo-Confucian orthodoxy and the Daoist school adopted the usage in recording their religious lineage.³

Buddhism as property and product

After World War 2, during the American Occupation of Japan (1945-1952), Americans learned about Zen Buddhism (just as the colonial British in Sri Lanka and Burma encountered Theravada Buddhism there). By this time, Japanese law had secularized Japanese Buddhism by the “NIKUJIKI SAITAI” (eat meet, get married) law of 1872. In other words, there are to this day, legally, no celibate Zen monks or nuns, only priests and priestesses; hence, the term SANGHA (monastic community), strictly speaking, does not apply here.⁴

However, in capitalist America, not just every thing, but basically, everything, can be quantified or thingified, and priced. Buddhism, too, became a kind of valued object, one that can be handed down from Teacher to Pupil. This reminds us how the Vinayaless Sinhala monks quantified or thingified MERIT so that it can be “transferred” to the dead! Properly speaking, neither Buddhism nor merit can or should be measured.

American lineages

This idea of lineage then caught on even with non-Zen Buddhists, such as in the lineage of lay Dhamma or meditation teachers. Again here, the idea is legitimizing the teacher that he has mastered the teaching NOT of the Buddha-Dhamma, but of the preceding teacher! Such a set-up clearly shows that the lineage-holders have missed out on the fullness and depth of

³ See “How Buddhism Became Chinese”: Transmission outside the scriptures (SD 40b.5): <https://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/40b.5-Transmission-outside-the-scriptures.pdf>

⁴ See “Monastics, sex and marriage” (SD 66.13): <http://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/66.13-Monastics-sex-marriage.-piya.pdf>.

the Buddha's teaching, or choose to ignore those teachings, such as in **the Kālāma Sutta** (A 3.65), where lineage is not a basis for the truth of a teaching or teacher.⁵

Instead of using the lineage ideology to legitimize teachers, it is wiser and fairer to have a kind of BOARD of senior or elder teachers (like a school board) to authorize such teachers. This is a more democratic system of appointing Dhamma teachers, instead of the feudalistic and outmoded lineage system. More importantly, we would be promoting the teaching, not the teacher.

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

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⁵ The Kālāma or Kesa,puttiya Sutta (A 3.65), SD 35.4a: Introduction: <https://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/35.4a-1-Kesaputtiya-S-a3.65-Intro-nn.-piya.pdf> ; Sutta: <https://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/35.4a-2-Kesaputtiya-S-a3.65-Sutta-tr.-piya.pdf> ; Sutta commentary: <https://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/35.4a-3-Kesaputtiya-S-a3.65-Comy.-piya.pdf>