

## For the love of learning

Source: SD 61.5b The Buddha's karma © Piya Tan 2024.

### 6.2 FOR THE LOVE OF LEARNING

This closing section is a short reflection on **the karma of learning**, inspired by Jonathan Walters' article, "The Buddha's bad karma" (1990) [1.0.1.5] and his dedicated work on the Apadāna [4.2.0]; and also to the growing trend among scholars of Buddhism today (especially since 2000)<sup>1</sup> to not only be scholars of Buddhism, but more so as *Buddhist* scholars and practitioners.

**6.2.1** A scholar of Buddhism (or Buddhism scholar), as a rule, is a trained specialist or learned expert on the Buddhist texts and traditions. They study the texts and traditions available to them in accordance with the purview and conventions of their special field, such as *philosophy, psychology, religion, social science, philology, science, technology, the arts, literature, history or general knowledge*.<sup>2</sup>

The better scholars are able to not only accurately and usefully quote other sources of information for a better understanding of Buddhism or to challenge it, but they also explain in some detail how this happens. On occasions, such a scholar may express their own views about such information and developments. A scholar may be sympathetic to Buddhism—which would, of course, interest and benefit Buddhists—or they could take Buddhism simply as a specimen of study as if to show they know better than the Buddha, the arhats or Buddhist masters and scholars.

Professional scholars—those who put their scholarship above Buddhism—are, as a rule, only as good as the sources they use and the views they express. As a rule, they have a shelf life, very much like their sources, and are quickly forgotten upon their passing or even earlier, when they are proven wrong or outshone by other scholars. Hence, scholars are likely to see Buddhism from new angles, or find new controversies in Buddhism.

On the bright side there are the "**inspired**" scholars, those who regard Buddhism the way a musician masters and loves music. They feel the beauty and peace of it; they are driven by that beauty and peace. They want to create that beauty and peace so that others may feel them, too. They are growing in that beauty and peace: they are **inspiring** scholars.

**6.2.2** The love of learning fires *the effort* of learning with joy, which keeps us learning, growing with a better sense of self and selflessness. Often such scholars are more right, more enriching and thus more interesting than the merely professional; they are scholars who love the Dharma, even practise it to understand it. In this way, they are better than the professionals and the "religious masters," especially in terms of the mastering of language, learning and vision.

Traditional and ethnic writings on Buddhism, for example, often show a lack of skill, accuracy and beauty when compared to modern disciplined academic writing or discourse (that is, the works of properly trained scholars), whether they are "Buddhist" or not.<sup>3</sup> Either way, a Buddhist who loves learning (*sikkhā, kāma*) will find such reading helpful in some way for their own study, understanding

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<sup>1</sup> See esp Roger Jackson & John J Makransky (eds), *Buddhist Theology: Critical reflections by contemporary Buddhist scholars*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> These are basically the 10 classes of knowledge according to the Dewey Decimal System of library science: 000 is general knowledge; 100 covers the first 2 fields (100 philosophy; 110 psychology); 200 religion; 300 social sciences; 400 languages; 500 science; 600 technology; 700 the arts; 800 literature; 900 history, geography, and biography.

<sup>3</sup> I'm thinking, for example, of the works of philologists like the British scholar K R Norman (1925-2020), who was not a Buddhist, but his works are very helpful in understanding the Pali of the early Buddhist texts.

and teaching of Buddhism. It's like looking at broken or unclear signboards on a journey, but wise travellers have a good sense of direction and are clear of their goal.

The better scholars, because of their ability to read and reason out what they have read are surprised and excited by the truth and beauty of Buddhism. Those scholars who feel a deep love for learning (rather than taking scholarship as merely or mostly a livelihood) are thus drawn to Buddhism, and often happily accept themselves as Buddhists, even as practitioners. Since 2000, we see a rise in the population of scholars who spontaneously dedicate themselves to Buddhism as a field of study and field of merit.

**6.2.3** Scholars who put scholarship first with the notion of being “unbiased” are often uncertain of themselves or, for various reasons, yearn the approval of the majority; or they claim to be “professional,” that is, they do it for the money and honour, turning to whomever pays them more with a better status or working conditions. This is not saying much since we rarely meet monastics who are not themselves worried about money, or seeking gain and titles, or having their own centres or retirement plans.

My point is that we all have our needs and biases, and Buddhism helps us see meaning, purpose and value *beyond* them. The learned who are guided by “**meaning**” (how Buddhism enriches their lives) tend to be Dharma-spirited scholars; those inspired by “**purpose**” (to be good humans or to strive for the path) tend to be Dharma-spirited Buddhists. Either way, they have “value-added” learned lives, and they tend to be better humans, more caring of others than mere scholars, secular or Buddhist. In this sense, all scholars and Buddhists are biased in some way; but it is good and proper to be “biased” towards the Buddha Dharma rather than to mere scholarship.

R887 Inspiration 536

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