

Lost in Quotation

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Many people who don't know much about old Buddhist texts often know one passage from the Pali Canon: the part of the Kalama Sutta (Anguttara Nikaya (AN) 3:65) stating that old texts can't be trusted.

Quotes from this passage come in many shapes and sizes. Some of them are short sound bites, like the message that was rubber-stamped on the envelope of a letter I once received:

Follow your own sense of right and wrong. – The Buddha

There's also the desktop wallpaper:

Believe nothing, no matter who said it, not even if I said it, if it doesn't fit in with your own reason and common sense. – The Buddha

Even scholarly citations of the sutta give the same message. Here's the entire quote from the sutta in a recent book:

"When you know for yourselves that these things are wholesome... these things, when entered upon and undertaken, incline toward welfare and happiness – then, Kalamas, having come to them you should stay with them."

Taken together, these quotes justify our tendency to pick what we like from the old texts and throw the rest away. No need to understand the larger context of the dhamma they teach, the Buddha seems to be saying. You're better off rolling your own.

But if you look at the entire passage in the Kalama Sutta, you discover that these quotes give only part of the picture. The Buddha's skepticism toward reliable authorities extends inside as well as out:

"So in this case, Kalamas, don't go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical deduction, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by probability, or by the thought, 'This contemplative is our teacher.'"

Notice the words in plain face, the ones that usually get dropped from the quote or sloughed over when they're included. When the Buddha says that you can't go by logical deduction, inference, or analogies, he's saying that you can't

always trust your sense of reason. When he says that you can't go by agreement through pondering views (i.e., what seems to fit in with what you already believe) or by probability, he's saying that you can't always trust your common sense. And of course, you can't always trust teachers, scriptures, or traditions. So where *can* you place your trust? You have to put things to the test in your own thoughts, words, and deeds, to see what actually leads to suffering and what leads to its end.

"When you know for yourselves that, 'These dhammas are unskillful; these dhammas are blameworthy; these dhammas are criticized by the wise; these dhammas, when adopted & carried out, lead to harm & to suffering' – then you should abandon them."

"When you know for yourselves that, 'These dhammas are skillful; these dhammas are blameless; these dhammas are praised by the wise; these dhammas, when adopted & carried out, lead to welfare & to happiness' – then you should enter & remain in them."

The word "dhamma" in these passages means three things in one: teaching, mental quality, and action. Teachings are naturally related to the mind states and actions they inspire, so they should be judged by the results they give when put into action. True dhamma is what works in leading to genuine well-being. False dhamma is what doesn't.

But even when judging the results of your own actions, you can't simply take your own ideas of "what works" as a trustworthy standard. After all, you can easily side with your greed, aversion, or delusion, setting your standards too low. So to check against this tendency, the Buddha recommends that you also take into consideration the views of the wise, for you'll never grow until you allow your standards to be challenged by theirs.

Now, if you're expecting quick access to a totally reliable authority, this may sound like a catch: If you're not wise enough to trust your own judgment, how can you recognize who's really wise? But it's not a catch. It's simply the way we have to operate when developing any kind of skill – your appreciation of good carpentry, for example, grows as you master carpentry yourself – and the Buddha is making the point that this is how to approach the dhamma: as a skill to be mastered. As with any skill, your inner sensitivity and assurance as to who's truly wise in the skill grows only through your willingness to learn.

In giving advice on how to learn this skill, the Buddha is speaking, not with the authority of your creator who can tell you what you have to believe, but with the authority of an expert in his field, one who knows from experience what does and doesn't work. If you want to learn from him, you're wise to accept his observations on how it's best done. The first thing to recognize is that there are others who have mastered the skill before you and that they have some important things to teach.

Among the things they'll teach you, of course, is what they've learned from the wise before them, going back to the Buddha. Some of this knowledge can be passed on in words, but in a list of the qualities to look for in the wise – and to learn from them – the Buddha shows that there's more to wisdom than just words. A person worthy of respect, he says at AN 7:64, should have a sense of seven things: the dhamma, its meaning, oneself, enough, the right time and place, social gatherings, and how to judge individual people.

What's striking about this list is that only the first two qualities deal with verbal knowledge. *Having a sense of the dhamma* means knowing what the Buddha did and didn't say; *having a sense of meaning* means knowing how to explain the dhamma's difficult concepts and ideas: the general principles that express its values, and the basic techniques for implementing them. These are things we can pick up from dhamma talks and books.

But the Buddha didn't teach a one-size-fits-all-in-every-situation technique. Even his seemingly abstract principles are meant for particular stages in the training. "Not-self," for example, is useful in some instances, and harmful in others. This is why the Buddha added the last five members of the list: the sensitivities that turn the techniques and principles into genuine skills.

Having a sense of oneself means knowing your strengths and weaknesses in terms of conviction, virtue, learning, generosity, discernment, and quick-wittedness. In other words, you know which qualities are important to focus on, and can assess objectively where you still have more work to do.

Having a sense of enough applies primarily to your use of the requisites of life – food, clothing, shelter, and medicine – but it can also apply to intangibles, such as when you need less desire, effort, concentration, or thinking in your practice, and when you need more.

Having a sense of time means knowing when to listen, when to memorize what you've heard, when to ask questions, and when to go off into seclusion and practice on your own.

Having a sense of social gatherings means knowing how to speak and behave with people from different backgrounds and classes of society.

Having a sense of individuals means knowing how to judge which people are worthy of emulation in their pursuit of the dhamma and which ones are not.

Even though we can talk about these last five qualities, we can't embody them through words. They're habits, and the only way to pick up good habits is by being around good examples: people who've already been trained to embody these qualities in the way they live.

This is why the Buddha – in trying to establish the dhamma for future generations – didn't just leave a body of teachings. He also set up the monastic sangha and organized it to carry on the tradition of all seven of these qualities: his habits as well as his words. To ensure that the standard of the dhamma

would last over time, he first made it clear that he didn't want anyone tampering with his teachings.

“Monks, these two slander the Tathagata. Which two? One who explains what was not said or spoken by the Tathagata as said or spoken by the Tathagata. And one who explains what was said or spoken by the Tathagata as not said or spoken by the Tathagata. These are the two who slander the Tathagata.” – AN 2:23

It's easy to understand why the Buddha phrased this so strongly. He had chosen his words with great care, and wanted the same level of care in those who quoted him. Fidelity, in his eyes, was an act of compassion. He intended his words to be taken as a standard for what was and wasn't dhamma – anything consistent with his words was to be accepted as dhamma; anything inconsistent, to be rejected as not – so it's only natural that he'd warn his followers not to muddy the standard. Otherwise, later generations would have no trustworthy guide in their search to end suffering.

So in addition to establishing principles for determining what he did and didn't teach, he also set up protocols for how the sangha should settle disagreements on this issue when they arose.

To ensure that the meaning of the dhamma would be passed on, he established the principle that teachers should be open to questioning. He didn't want them to engage in what he called bombast: empty words “the work of poets, the work of outsiders, artful in sound, artful in expression.” He encouraged his students to focus on teaching the end of suffering, and to encourage their students to dissect those teachings to make their meaning clear. Understanding occurs best when there's an opportunity for an open dialogue in good faith.

To transmit the habits of the dhamma, the Buddha designed the ideal teacher-student relationship on the model of an apprenticeship. You live with the teacher for a minimum of five years, attending to the teacher's needs, as a way of observing – and being observed by – the teacher in all sorts of situations.

To allow for the fact that your sense of judgment develops over time, the Buddha didn't force you to commit to a teacher for life. You look for someone who, as far as you can see, has integrity, but if you sense with time that integrity is lacking, you're free to look for a new teacher.

At the same time, the Buddha realized that not everyone would have the time or inclination to undergo this apprenticeship, so he arranged a division of labor. The monks and nuns who had passed through apprenticeship were to live, not in cloisters, but in places where lay people would be free to come and learn from the fruits of their training.

So it's obvious that the Buddha didn't have a casual or cavalier attitude toward the preservation of his words and habits. Knowing the difficulties he'd encountered in discovering the dhamma, he didn't trust us – with our greed,

aversion, and delusion – to discover it on our own. He knew we'd need help. Although he foresaw that his teachings would someday disappear, he didn't simply resign himself to change or trust that it would always work out for the best. He established a wide range of safeguards to ensure that reliable words and models of behavior would survive as long as possible.

But in the cut-and-paste Buddhism developing around us in the West, many of these safeguards have been dropped. In particular, the idea of apprenticeship – so central in mastering the habits of the dhamma as a skill – is almost totally lacking. Dhamma principles are reduced to vague generalities, and the techniques for testing them are stripped to a bare, assembly-line minimum.

We reassure ourselves that the changes we've made in Buddhism are all for the best – that Buddhism has always adapted itself to every culture it enters, and we can trust it to adapt wisely to the West. But this treats Buddhism as if it were a conscious agent – a wise amoebic force that knows how to adapt to its environment in order to survive. Actually, Buddhism isn't an agent, and it doesn't adapt. It gets adapted – sometimes by people who know what they're doing, sometimes by people who don't. Just because a particular adaptation survives and prevails doesn't mean that it's genuine dhamma. It may simply appeal to the desires and fears of its target audience.

Certainly we in the West are easy targets for the idea that the Buddha wants us to cut and paste his dhamma as we like. Many of us have been burned by religious authorities and we don't want to risk getting burned again. There's also our cultural pride: We like to think that we can see more clearly than Asian Buddhist what's of genuine value in their traditions and what's simply cultural baggage – as if we didn't have cultural baggage of our own. And how do we know what's "just baggage"? A beat-up old suitcase might contain your jewelry and keys.

So is a designer dhamma what we really want? As the Buddha noted, one of the natural reactions to suffering is to search for someone who can give good advice on how to put an end to it. When offered the choice, wouldn't you prefer reliable guidance on how to end your suffering rather than a do-it-yourself kit with vague instructions and no guarantees?

Or are there those who would benefit if you bought the kit? People sometimes argue that in our diverse, postmodern world we need a postmodern Buddhism in which no one's interpretation can be criticized as wrong. But that's trading the possibility of total freedom from suffering for something much less: freedom from criticism. **And** it ignores the other side of the postmodernist equation: that our perceived wants can be overwhelmingly shaped by the interests of institutions who want something out of us. One of the common ruses of privatization is to offer us less, dress it up as more, so that we'll pay more for it. Is that what's happening here?

The Buddha wasn't so naïve as to think that we can always know what's in our own best interest. He saw long before the postmoderns that there's plenty to

mistrust both in old texts and in our own preconceptions about what seems reasonable. Yet he did the postmoderns one better by offering a solution to this dilemma. It would be a shame if, sold on the idea of designing our own dhamma, we let his solution die.

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