

# Who is Buddha?

We can examine the nature of Buddha through two lenses: the Buddha of history and the Buddha of *saddhā*, of faith. The obvious difference between them is that the Buddha of history is dead, while the Buddha of *saddhā* is alive. Let's begin with the Buddha of history. How was he perceived when he was alive? And in particular, was he, even then, the Buddha of *saddhā*?

## Upaka & Buddha

After his awakening at Uruvelā, in the neighbourhood of Gayā, the Buddha is on his way to teach the dharma to his five former companions when he meets a wandering *samaṇa*, or ascetic, named Upaka. Upaka is an *Ājivaka*, a member of an early school of yoga. Upaka is impressed by the Buddha's radiant appearance and says: "Friend, your faculties are clear, your complexion is pure and bright. Under whom have you left home? Who is your teacher? Whose dharma do you accept?"

The Buddha responds by bursting into spontaneous verse:

I am the one who has overcome everything,  
Who understands everything.  
Unstained among all phenomena,  
Abandoning everything,  
Freed by ending craving.  
Having understood directly, by myself,  
To whom should I point?

For me there is no teacher,  
And one like me is unknown.  
In the world with all its devas,  
There is no-one equal to me.

I am the worthy one of the world,  
I am the supreme teacher.  
I, alone, am *sammāsambuddha*.  
I am cooled, extinguished. (MN 26 Ariyapariyesanā Sutta *The noble search*)

Here Buddha presents himself as the one source of teaching that leads out of the *dukkha* of *saṃsāra*. Notice that while he is claiming to be *unique*, he is not making a *cosmological* claim. He is not claiming to be God or a god. He is human, but has transcended the human condition and points the way to this same transcendence for those who are willing to take him as teacher.

Upaka is not impressed, saying, in effect, "Yea, whatever," and leaving. Many of us share this response. After all, it's a nice idea, *but ...*

## Mahā Kaccāna & Buddha

Years later we see the Buddha's role as teacher when he is firmly established as an international teacher of great fame. One evening he gives a brief but profound teaching to the assembled bhikkhus and then retires to his hut. The bhikkhus had listened respectfully but now they have no idea what he was talking about, so they approach a senior student, Mahā Kaccāna, for an explanation. Mahā Kaccāna begins by scolding his fellow bhikkhus for asking *him* about the teaching rather than asking the Buddha when they had the opportunity.

Though you were face to face with the Buddha you overlooked him, imagining that you should ask *me* about this matter.

For *he* is the Blessed One [*bhagavā*] who knows and sees. He is vision, he is understanding [*ñāṇa*], he is truth [*dhamma*], he is the highest [*brahma*]. He is the teacher, the proclaimer, the clarifier of meaning, giver of the deathless, lord of truth, the Tathāgata. (MN 18 Madhupiṇḍika Sutta *The sweet essence*)

Here we see the Buddha from the perspective of those who have already committed themselves to him as his students. Buddha is their ultimate authority for all matters of dharma. Do we have a question? Buddha provides the answer. Hence the Theravāda tradition of the discourses as buddha-vacana, "the Buddha's words," and Buddha as "The teacher." Not *a* teacher; *the* teacher, still today, whose words and actions live in the literature that records them. Which suggests a relationship. After all, don't we develop a relationship with our teachers? And isn't our relationship with *the* teacher the most important of these?

## Piṅgiya & Buddha

Next we have an example of a student's relationship to Buddha that is more than absorbing the teachings from him. The brahmin Piṅgiya, who had met the Buddha and been converted to his teaching, was asked why he left the Buddha's presence given that he was so devoted to him. Piṅgiya replied:

I am *never* apart from him, even for an hour,  
from Gotama, vast in knowledge and wisdom,  
he who taught the dharma to me,  
the dharma that is visible, not subject to time,  
craving ended, beyond troubles,  
with nothing that compares.

Continually in my practice  
I see him in my mind's eye,  
both day and night.  
Venerating him throughout the night,  
I conceive myself as living with him.

My faith, joy, mind and mindfulness,  
never stray from Gotama's teaching.  
Whatever direction this One of Vast Wisdom goes,

there I bend my head. (Sutta Nipāta 5.19, *Verses on the Way to the Beyond* 1140 – 1143)

Here the relationship to Buddha is taken one step further. The Buddha is alive but physically distant. Yet Piṅgiya is in a close relationship with him and this relationship is clearly central to his practice. In fact, Piṅgiya sees his practice as maintaining an intimate connection with Buddha, to the point that he can conceive of himself as living with him. Notice that Piṅgiya does not say he lives with Buddha; rather, he *conceives* himself *as* living with Buddha. We will examine this distinction later.

### **Buddha of saddhā**

After the Buddha died he continued to hold the tradition together. He remained the central point of reference for those who called themselves his students. Piṅgiya's relationship to him became the standard.

But here we are, in 21<sup>st</sup> century Australia, educated and rational materialists whose faith is in science. Hence in a time of international health emergency we are told to not question the science, and we tend to look down on those who reject its teachings. Given our commitment to a scientific world view, how can we deal with the idea of a Buddha who is alive even though he is dead? Should we even try? Or should we be content with a dead Buddha who left behind some very useful teachings?

We begin with the concept of *saddhā*, for if we are to approach Buddha as a living presence rather than an academic project we must approach him, like Piṅgiya, through *saddhā*.

Let's begin by clarifying our terms. *Saddhā* is the Pāli word normally translated as "faith" or "confidence" – or even "trust." The word "*saddhā*" comes from the verbal root *√dha*, "to put or to place," and *śrad*, an old Vedic word for "heart." *Saddhā* means "to place the heart," as in "putting our heart into something;" or "to place in the heart," as in "taking something to heart." So *saddhā* is about our heart connection with what we take to be real. *Saddhā* is not *belief*, but a *felt connection* with reality. *Saddhā* is not cognitive, but affective.

This is central to understanding *saddhā*. In our modern world we assume "faith" is cognitive in nature. To have faith means we accept impossible beliefs because someone tells us to. But this is not *saddhā*. If *saddhā* is "faith," then it is closer to faith in the sense of being faithful to someone. When we commit ourselves to a relationship with another person we agree, implicitly or explicitly, to be "faithful" to that person. This does not mean we believe impossible things about him or her. It means we are committed to this relationship in such a way that it shapes our way of life. It provides us with a sense of direction, of what is important and what is not so important in our lives, and therefore with a felt basis for the decisions we take.

The Buddha pairs *saddhā* with *paññā*, usually translated as “wisdom.” “*Paññā*” is based on the verbal root *√ñā* “know” and the prefix *pa-*, which acts as an intensifier. *Paññā* has a wide range of application. It is closely linked to *sati*, “mindfulness,” and often when the Buddha refers to mindfulness practice he does so using the compound word *sati-sampajañña*, “mindfulness-&-clear-understanding,” where *sampajañña*, also based on the verbal root *√ñā* “know,” is a kind of entry-level *paññā*. In contrast to *saddhā*, *paññā* is not affective, but cognitive.

Together, *saddhā* and *paññā* represent a union between the affective and the cognitive within the person, to the point where mature *saddhā* merges into *paññā*. Once when he was living at *Āpaṇa* the Buddha asked *Sāriputta*, foremost in wisdom among his students, to teach on the five *indriyas*, or faculties, of *saddhā* (faith), *virīya* (energy), *sati* (mindfulness), *samādhi* (concentration) and *paññā* (wisdom) These are the familiar three factors of meditation in the eightfold path (energy, mindfulness and concentration) flanked by faith on one side and wisdom on the other. These flanking positions are very important, for often what holds a list together are the first and the last members.

Faith (*saddhā*), for *Sāriputta*, is directed toward the Buddha and the Buddha’s awakening. It is concerned with the felt sense of the reality, and therefore the real possibility *for me*, of awakening. Notice the sense of reality, at least in potential. What I have *saddhā* in must be sufficiently real for me to act upon it.

Wisdom (*paññā*) is directed toward understanding dependent arising and realising *nibbāna*. Faith and wisdom, holding the list together, finally merge when all these faculties mature:

Striving again and again, being mindful again and again, unifying her mind again and again, and understanding again and again, a cultivated student’s heart is firmly placed (*abhisaddahati*) in this way: “Those things that once I had only heard about, now I live *touching* them with the body, *seeing* them clear through” ... This is her faculty of faith. (*Āpaṇa Sutta At Āpaṇa Indriya Saṃyutta* 48.50)

“Things” or “phenomena” (*dhammas*) are “touched with the body,” and “seen clear through.” Are we speaking of two different modalities of experience? “Touching” suggests feeling (*vedanā*), the affective mode of experience. “Seeing” suggests wisdom or understanding (*paññā*), a clear cognitive mode of experience. “Touching” suggests intimacy; “seeing clear through” suggests detachment.

This presentation suggests that mature *saddhā* is almost indistinguishable from *paññā*. The verb here is *abhi-saddahati*, which adds the intensifying prefix “*abhi*” to the verb “to entrust one’s heart” (*saddahati*). Here it’s not a case of *saddhā* now and *paññā* later; *saddhā* here and *paññā* there. Both are present, equal, but different. *Saddhā* is intimate and physical, an affective relationship with reality; *paññā* sees right through, a cognitive relationship with reality.

## Where does Buddha fit in?

Sāriputta says that the object of faith (*saddhā*) is the Buddha and his awakening. Where does faith begin? Faith begins as a *question* that immediately provokes a challenge. A question that has the power to move us out of our usual sense of the possible, out of our normal, taken-for-granted world.

For me, faith began with a figure of the sitting Buddha, purchased on my first trip to Thailand in 1971 and then set up upon my bookcase at home, where he looked down on me for years, silently issuing his challenge.

The Buddha sits in perfect calm and bliss, while my life is a chaotic mess full of suffering. The Buddha's serenity represents a claim that some other way of life is possible, because others apparently have led such a life. The figure of the Buddha attracts, he awakens desire in the midst of pain. Looking at him, I know that "I *want* that," I want it passionately. But do I want it enough? Do I want it enough to throw everything else aside, everything that stands in the way of getting what he has, in order to chase it? Because to get this I must throw away *everything* I know and understand up to now.

And so the Buddha's serenity throws out a challenge: "Is that really possible?" "Can it be true?" The posture of the Buddha represents a truth claim, but it is important to point out that I do not *believe* this claim, as I have no basis for such a belief, but it is such that it *demand*s my attention and my action. This is something I must find out about.

Reading what books are available I discover that "buddha" means "awakened one," and what he has awakened to is a condition called "bodhi," "awakening," or enlightenment. I gradually develop a content to this image, an idea of what bodhi might be and how it might relieve my pain, but still I have no way of knowing if any of this is *true*. But I do know that if it is true I must have it! I must find out if this is true, and the only way I can find out is by embarking on the practice. Bodhi may be an illusion; I don't know, and have no way of knowing. But I *must* find out whether it is or not, and I can only do so by embarking upon the path. And embarking upon it seriously, as if my life depends upon it – which it does.

For bodhi to be a real possibility means that I am prepared to live *as if* buddha is real, even if there is no immediate confirmation of that reality. So the commitment and direction are real in that they move me to commit to a certain way of life, even though I have no rational basis for believing that any of this is real. This commitment demonstrates the power of the image of Buddha – not just the statue, but the embodied *concept* of "Buddha."

And so in 1977 I toss everything aside and fly to Sri Lanka and India, with no idea of what may happen, terrified that I may be chasing an illusion, but knowing, very clearly, that even if it is, I still have no choice but to chase it. I am leaping into the darkness and this leap is an act of faith (*saddhā*). Not of belief, but of faith.

In this way I enter into a relationship with Buddha. What is the nature of that relationship? This puzzled me for a long time and continues to intrigue me today. Let me provide in response two events.

Many years ago I practised at Chanmyay Yeiktha, a meditation centre in the northern suburbs of Rangoon. The mens' meditation hall was dominated by a tableau of a huge image of the Buddha teaching the first discourse to his five initial students, the sun and moon in the sky and deer listening from the forest. An old man who was practising at this centre used to place himself on the floor directly in front of this Buddha image, where he would sit, immovably, for hours. I would look at him in envy, for I knew that when he went through difficult and dark times in his practice, all he had to do was to look up and he would be assured that he was taken care of. I did not have that assurance. Hence my envy.

Years later I was part of the teaching team at a Dharma Gathering where the teachers were asked the question, "Is Buddhism a religion?" Without thinking about it I said, "I don't know. All I know is that I talk to Buddha and sometimes, he replies."

### **But is this real?**

This is all very well, but isn't it just pursuing a fantasy? We live in a material world. How is creating a Buddha of my mind, real? Here we need to look at how the Buddha himself conceives reality.

The practice of satipaṭṭhāna, mindfulness meditation, centres around bringing our centre of gravity away from our conceptual world into the world of our directly encountered senses. The basic principle here is that the world of our habitual concepts, what we take to be "real," "normal," is constructed from the three roots of the unwholesome (akusala), those of attraction (lobha), aversion (dosa) and delusion (avijjā). We create a world of concepts centred on a self who exists, is *real*, only as a network of concepts. This is the teaching of not-self (anattā). We are not who we think ourselves to be. The world is not what we think it is. Our concepts are not the reality they point towards. Does that mean we reject concepts?

Which brings us back to, "Is Buddha real?" Let's approach this question through another question: "Is justice real?"

How many of us would be happy to conclude that "justice" is not real because it's just a made-up concept? Because if it is, then in our scientific and material world we have no business believing in it or living according to its demands. Or are we happy to conceive of "justice" *as* real so that it can guide our actions in our material world in a way that allows us to flourish?

"Justice" is not real in the same sense that "Buddha" is not real. We cannot see it, hear it, smell it, taste it, or touch it. But our agreed sense of "justice" does affect the material conditions in which we live, including how we respond to these material

conditions. Would we be willing to surrender our ideals of justice because they are not (materially) “real”?

Buddha is real in the same sense that justice is real. If Buddha is real *as a concept*; and this concept has a positive effect on the quality of our practice and therefore the quality of our life; isn't that real enough?

How does Buddha affect our life? He gives us an ordered and meaningful world within which we live and live well. To flourish, we need a world that has a sense of meaning built within it. Yet the world does not come to us already prepackaged with meaning. We have to create meaning. This world needs “buddha;” it needs a principle that points beyond itself, beyond our everyday concerns and desires, to give us a sense of an ultimate destiny that gives meaning to the everyday. It was the promise of meaning embodied in the Buddha image sitting on my bookshelf that moved me to encounter the dharma, to find out whether, in a sense, Buddha exists or not.

How do I know Buddha is real? My heart and mind have been shaped by years of practice, study and life. I have learned that the way that I conceived the world back then, when I placed that image on my shelf, was entirely inadequate. I now live in a world where Buddha is real and where he and I are in relationship. This world is much richer and more sustaining than the world I lived in back then, and I flourish within it.

The felt sense of Buddha normally lies just beneath the surface of my everyday experience, arising in unexpected moments. When I practise intensively my mind quietens to the point where, if I listen, I can catch the sound of his voice. Is this an illusion? Possibly. I would not argue with that conclusion. But does this relationship enrich my life? Does it provide me with a support and a direction I otherwise would not have? Definitely.

Can I prove the existence of Buddha? No. Can anyone prove the non-existence of Buddha? No. And I am content to have this relationship based on *saddhā*, on the movements of my heart, rather than on the scepticism of my rationality. Because my rationality is a thin guide at best to my life.

And so I live *as if* Buddha is real. Which means, of course, that Buddha *is* real.