

What is the Buddha-Sasana?

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Imagine that someone has made up an elaborate and original joke, one that evoked both chortle and guffaw, and that this joke has since been retold many times. Sometimes the retellings have made use of different words, sometimes even of different languages, sometimes they have added an embellishment or stripped away minor details. Characters might have changed names or gender, settings might have varied, elephants might have been replaced by hippos, a rabbi by a shaman. As we catalog the retellings we will find that some have missed the point of the joke completely, evoking neither chortle nor guffaw, but that others have recounted the joke with a skill matching or surpassing the original, keeping the story line functionally intact, introducing the relevant information at just the right time, creating the same anticipation and culminating in a punch line to evoke at least the same response in the hearer as the original telling.

What shines through in an authentic retelling is the functional core of the original story. But how has the core been lost in some cases, yet preserved in some cases, in spite of a long history of alterations, so much so that they are unmistakably recognizable in the former cases as a manifestation of the same story? I suppose that the authentic retellings have been transmitted by adept humorists who have understood the point of the joke and the art of telling it. Even if it is transmitted to them with some small error, they will know how to correct it to restore its functional integrity, because they get the joke. The alternative is that the joke degrades over time into nonsense and into an audience response of dead silence.

Sāsana is a Pali expression that means literally *teaching*, and *Buddha-Sāsana*, the name of my podcast, means “teachings of the Buddha.” In practice they are both used to refer to the *living Dharma*, that is, to Buddhism in its personal, cultural, social and historical dimensions. The Sasana is something organic that can be located in time and space, that can grow, thrive, propagate or wither and disappear, that can uphold the authenticity of the Dharma, in the midst of change, or degrade. “Sasana” has been variously translated into English as “the Buddha’s dispensation,” as “the Buddhist religion,” simply as “Buddhism” or

even as “the Buddhist church.” Buddha-Dharma or Dharma is by nature something much more static and ideal. Dharma is like the joke that has been preserved in its functional authenticity, and the Sasana like that which carries the joke along in real time, in real places and by real people, ideally maintaining its integrity. The word “Buddhism” itself is entirely of western origin, and vaguely sometimes refers to Buddha-Dharma and sometimes to Buddha-Sasana.

As we will see, the Sasana itself is not simply an arbitrary phenomenon of interest to the sociologist, historian or cultural anthropologist, subject to the vicissitudes of folk culture but of little relevance to the Dharma practitioner. Rather the structure of the Sasana itself was propounded in the early teachings of the Buddha, particularly in the ancient *Vinaya*, with specific form and functionality in mind, a structure which it has maintained surprisingly well over a span of a hundred generations. For the Path follower it is an object of gratitude and of responsibility. It is exceptional in the malleability and resilience that produced the first world religion. It is a living organism that knows how to self-regulate, to adapt, to propagate and to brighten any landscape with its civilizing influence.

Any given Buddhist tradition considers itself almost invariably to be the almost unique heir of Buddhist authenticity. Yet in exploring other lands and other sects its adherents are faced with peculiarity and anomaly in the practices and beliefs of the other laity, the garb of the other monastics, the style of other liturgy, the presence of unfamiliar figures in temple statuary, unfamiliar rites at temple altars, unknown scriptures on temple bookshelves, and hocus pocus all around. For many in the West who first come to Buddhism and survey the vast array of traditions with no prior bias toward any particular tradition, the variance is even more striking, and it is easy to see how one might throw one's hands up in despair and perhaps entertain the hope that Baha'i or Sufism is easier to sort out.

Buddhist traditions have developed for centuries, or even millenia, in quite divergent regions and under quite divergent cultural influences. They have evolved, then cross-bred with each other and with other religious traditions, such as Tantric Hinduism, Taoism, an array of regional shamanistic and animistic practices, and even with modern psychotherapy and brain science, to produce doctrinal variants, sects, innovations, new cultural expressions and religious hybrids. A result is that Buddhists of different traditions rarely agree

on the contents of their respective scriptural corpora. Buddhism has proved particularly *malleable* under these influences and this is probably at least partially responsible for the Sasana's ability to project itself beyond cultural boundaries and for its status as the first world religion, predating Christianity and Islam, the remaining two world religions.

What is truly remarkable, but not always obvious, about Buddhism is its *resilience*, its capacity to retain the authenticity of early Buddhism, the functional integrity of what is most basic, even while it bends to vicissitude. Somehow, transmitted through many centuries, through many traditions and cultures, and in spite of its accrued variety, Buddhism has preserved an essential core in most of the traditions, a core that includes, for instance, a more-or-less common understanding of liberation and of the Path of training toward liberation, a Path which focuses on virtue, wisdom and contemplative/meditative development of mind, and a recognition of greed, hatred and delusion as the primary qualities of mind to be attenuated. It also includes as fundamental trust in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, a prominent role for the monastic order and a particular emphasis on the practices of generosity and virtue. In general, Buddhism seems to have much more consistency of purpose and understanding than, say, Christianity, in spite of Christianity's more-or-less agreement on its scriptural foundation.

Buddhism is adept at carrying a good joke into new forms while protecting the integrity of its core meaning. It knows how to make the joke meaningful for the Indian, the Burmese, the Tocharian and the Mongol. There is, in other words, Dharma that shines constantly through the various Buddhist traditions, a Buddhism visible first in the earliest scriptures and a common edifice behind the many often wild and perplexing guises appearing under the name "Buddhism." The Sasana has evolved differently in different lands in the subsequent centuries, giving us sometimes totally new scriptures and the many traditions alive today.

The natural place to begin studying the Buddha-Sasana is at the beginning, with the Buddha, for all of these diverse traditions are rooted there. Scholars have a fairly good idea of what *early Buddhism* looked like before it began to undergo most of its retelling, that is, before identifiable sects emerged. It consisted of two parts, the *Dharma* and the *Vinaya*, the doctrine and the discipline. Roughly, what is preserved in the Pali language as the Suttas, organized into collections, called Nikayas. Four Nikayas – the *Digha*,

Majjhima, *Samyutta* and *Anguttara Nikayas* – are considered reliably as very early, as well as parts of the fifth *Khuddhaka Nikaya*, including the *Suttanipata* and the *Dhammapada*. Equivalent texts are preserved in Chinese, where Nikayas are called *Agamas*. Together these are acknowledged by scholars to constitute the most reliable evidence of the early Dharma. The *Vinaya*, the monastic code, is available in several redactions. I should note that these ancient Suttas and the *Vinaya* are still not entirely reliable texts, having passed through both oral and orthographic transmissions and suffering from faults of memory, embellishments, insertions, deletions and other edits along the way. As a result, we can never be sure a particular teaching actually was spoken by the Buddha.

My own main interest, as I study, practice and try to understand Buddhism, is this earliest stratum of Buddhism. I am also interested in the modern stratum, largely keeping the question in mind of how successfully are we establishing an authentic understanding and practice in the West. (I tend to be critical, but constructively and optimistically critical.) My earliest training in Buddhism was in Japanese Zen, which gave me a familiarity with texts from the middle period of the Buddha-Sasana.

The Buddha and his early disciples seem to have anticipated that what he had taught would change in different and unpredictable ways and to have expressed his interest in preserving the functionality rather than the word of content of doctrine and discipline. First, he defined Dharma broadly to include whatever served the same narrowly defined functions.

“But, Gotamī, those things of which you might know: ‘These things lead to dispassion, not to passion; to detachment, not to bondage; to dismantling, not to building up; to fewness of desires, not to strong desires; to contentment, not to non-contentment; to solitude, not to company; to the arousing of energy, not to laziness; to being easy to support, not to being difficult to support,’ you should definitely recognize: ‘This is the Dhamma; this is the Discipline; this is the teaching of the Teacher.’”

So, Dharma was not strictly confined to the words of the Buddha, but includes whatever shares their function.

Second, the *Great Standards* (Pali, *Mahāpadesa*) generalized recognizable teachings to novel or uncertain circumstances. A particular view that suggests

itself under such a circumstance can be tested by standing it against the Dharma and the *Vinaya* and if it accords then it can be accepted.

Third, the *Vinaya* provides specific support for applying the Great Standards to monastic rules by providing for every rule an origin story to reveal the function of the rule. This is an invitation to generalize on the basis of first principles. For instance, there is an early rule that monks should not drive ox carts. The origin story clearly reveals the intent of the rule in avoiding the exhibition of extravagance. Applying this to modern circumstances entails that monks probably should not fly first-class, nor drive a Mercedes, ... but that ox carts are probably now OK.

Finally, the Buddha anticipated that a community of adepts in the Dharma would be required for its preservation, like a committee of skilled humorists who understand the point of a good joke and can tell others how to retell it properly. This was a key function of the Monastic Sangha.

We can think of the core of *authentic* Buddhism as the *functional system* that shines through in early Buddhism, but stripped of this particular manifestation and stripped of extraneous elements of the ancient texts irrelevant to the functionality of that system. Authentic Buddhism thereby turns away from the allure of literalism that adheres to texts, and toward the flexibility admitted by the Great Standards, by the expansive meaning of Dharma, by the early functions revealed in the *Vinaya* origin stories and by the adepts in their role of retelling the authentic Dharma in a way that best preserves its integrity in a particular cultural context.

This functional aspect can also be helpful in interpreting faulty, misspoken or difficult early texts themselves, to recognize what is really authentic. It suggests that it might sometimes be more interesting and helpful to ask, when confronted with a particular teaching, not “Is this really true?” but rather “Why was this said?,” to lay bare the function of the teaching. For instance, there is constant reference to *devas*, godly beings, in the early texts. (These are very old texts; of course they are going to have things that raise modern eyebrows!) The question of whether *devas* really exist or whether as Buddhists we should believe in *devas*, is of little consequence. Much more fruitful is the question, What role do these supernatural beings play in the texts? If they have no recognizable function, maybe they are not core teachings. In fact, *devas* in the texts generally pop in on the Buddha much like laypeople, bowing to the Buddha and listening to discourses. They certainly are not there to demand

worship or sacrifice. Instead *they* venerate the *Buddha* and even the *monks*, and generally act as *cheerleaders* of the Dharma. Their role therefore seems to have been largely rhetorical; it would have impressed the ancient Indians that even the gods look up to the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. The search for the functionality, if any, quickly reveals the connection of any particular element of the teachings to *authentic* Buddhism.

As mentioned, the ancient scriptures are often an unreliable victim of ancient editing. However, seeking functionality can help the adept reader of the early scriptures interpret them properly. His task is like piecing together a jigsaw puzzle in which some pieces are missing, and in which other pieces have been mixed in from other jigsaw puzzles, but at some point he nevertheless recognizes, “Oh, I get it: This is the Golden Gate Bridge!” At some point a particular interpretation of the whole shines forth that one cannot easily back out of. Although it cannot be proven decisively, and still admits of debate, the convergence of evidence from many sources becomes so overwhelming to those who see what shines through, that doubt disappears. And what shines forth in each case is a functional system. The Buddha was a very systematic thinker.

The Buddhist adept accomplished in Buddhist practice is in a far better position to witness this shining through than the mere scholar, because the former has his own practice experience as potentially confirming evidence. He is like the jigsaw enthusiast who has actually been *on* the Golden Gate Bridge, who is already familiar with its features and the contours of the land- and sea-scape around it. Once the Golden Gate Bridge has shone through it becomes the basis of interpreting the remaining unplaced pieces, and rejecting some of these altogether as intruders from other people's jigsaw puzzles.

Nonetheless it can be exceedingly difficult to actually trace a functional feature of authentic Buddhism from early Buddhism into a later manifestation, as found, for instance, in Chinese Mahayana or Tibetan Vajrayana, in order to make the case that the later counterpart actually preserves the function of the original. The difficulty is compounded by the substitution of later texts for the earliest scriptures, which is endemic in the history of Buddhism. For instance, although many find Zen close to the Theravada forest tradition through experience in both traditions, there is little strictly textual basis for the connection. Part of the genius of Zen language as compared to Indian is the former's minimalism, its ability to focus on the one thing upon which

everything else hinges, to describe that and let the rest find its place implicitly. Because of such subtleties we must hope that the adepts, and ideally the Noble Ones (*ariya-sangha*, those who have attained at least an initial level of Awakening), have been ceaselessly at work ensuring authenticity as these traditions have developed historically.

By way of example, mindfulness practice is clearly a key functional element of early Buddhism, one formulated in the lengthy *Satipatthana Sutta* and in other early discourses. In Japanese Zen there is a method of meditation that was named *shikantaza* by Dogen Zenji, which clearly has something to do with mindfulness or awareness but is described by Dogen with very concise instructions that are textually quite distinct from the *Satipatthana*. It would therefore be very difficult to make an argument for functional equivalence that would satisfy the *scholar*, but it *would* be feasible for an experienced *practitioner*. I am fortunate personally to have trained in *shikantaza* and then many years later of studying the *Satipatthana Sutta* and modern *vipassana* techniques, which, at least in this particular context, give me something of an adept's insight into what shines through. I can definitively testify that there is an astonishing functional equivalence among these techniques. If my subjective testimony can be taken as reliable, this is one example of a feature of authentic Buddhism that has been carried historically through place and culture, evolving into a radically different manifestation, yet fully maintained its authenticity right down to the punch line. This is the genius of the Buddha-Sasana.