

DID THE DHAMMA DIE WITH THE BUDDHA?

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Introduction

In 1986 Peter Masefield published a book called *Divine Revelation in Pali Buddhism*. It was based on his doctoral thesis and is a highly academic book, with a very large number of quotations from the Paali texts in both Paali and English – mostly translated by the author – that makes it a formidable read. Masefield comes to several unusual conclusions, which seem at odds with received notions of what the Buddha taught. He claims in a recent magazine article to have had little or no feedback on the book and seems not to have changed his views since it was first published.¹ This essay is a response to *Divine Revelation* 16 years after the publication of the book.

Firstly I need to outline the central thesis of the book. Masefield proceeds in stages to build up his argument.

1. He says that the real distinction in the Buddhist world at the time of the Buddha was not between the bhikkhu and the householder, but was actually between the saavaka and the puthujjana. Saavaka means literally *one who hears* and “the main point of difference between the puthujjana and the saavaka is therefore that the former, unlike the latter has not heard [and been transformed by] the Dhamma”.²
2. Right-view is equivalent to the arising of insight, and to the opening of the Dhammachakku, as well as stream entry. Masefield maintains that a saavaka is one who has right-view on the basis of having heard a *pecially tailored* Dhamma discourse. Further if right-view is both equivalent to stream entry and the first stage on the eightfold path, then the eightfold path is aimed at, and can be traversed only by a stream-entrant. Masefield says: “...I have attempted to show that the ariyan eightfold path was, in the Buddha’s day, known only to those who were themselves ariyan, that is the sotaapanna, sakadaagaamin, anaagaamin and arahant, that it began, as the Buddha always said it did in the form of a vision – and a hearing – of the Deathless”.³
3. Right view is *only* attainable by personal contact with a living Buddha. Citing many examples Masefield attempts to show that in every case recorded in the Paali Canon that the Buddha brings about the arising of insight. He actually records two instances where this is *not* so, but having noted and dismissed them as exceptions to the rule, he proceeds as though the rule is absolute.
4. Having attained right view, reaching the goal of Nibbana requires a second intervention by the Buddha. Masefield characterises arahants as “passive recipients of a goal they could not pass onto others”.⁴

5. In relation to both points 3 and 4 Masefield maintains that no amount of spiritual practice seems to be effective – that in the majority of cases “that such right-view was not the outcome of any specific practice but that it is occasioned rather by the Buddha...”.⁵ Further that all new stream-entrants attain Arahantship within a very short space of time – typically two weeks or less.
6. Given 3 and 4, it is impossible that any more saavakas could have come into being after the Buddha’s death and parinibbana, and that therefore the ‘true Dhamma’ would have died out within a short time – Masefield speculates that this would have taken about 70 years at most!
7. Having delivered this pessimistic conclusion, he attempts a redefinition of the term sotaapanna away from stream entry towards one who has heard the Dhamma, i.e. a saavaka. Saavaka and sotaapanna would then be truly synonymous as he says in the first chapter.
8. Lastly Masefield looks at the Buddha’s critique of the Brahmins which occurs in the Paali Canon. We won’t be concerning ourselves with this aspect of Masefield’s book, because it is secondary to the main points outlined above.

General remarks

Before proceeding on a more detailed analysis of *Divine Revelation* I’d like to make some more general remarks about the book. Firstly it assumes that the Paali Canon is an accurate representation of the Buddha’s teachings, that it accurately portrays life in the time of the Buddha, and that it is a relatively complete description of the both. The texts upon which Masefield bases his argument were not written down for some hundreds of years after the events which they record, and survived only in the memories of Buddhist practitioners. He includes no critical discussion of any of these questions, which for modern Buddhist scholars are extremely important ones. In *A Concise History of Buddhism*, Skilton for instance, notes that “much was thought to have been lost after only the first thousand years of transmission”, many suttas post-date the time of the Buddha, and that some appear to be composite in character.”⁶ A specific example is the Mahaaparinibbana Sutta. In the notes to his translation of it, Maurice Walsh says: “No doubt it contains the basic facts about the Buddha’s last days, but various late and more than dubious elements have been incorporated into it”.⁷

Masefield makes no mention of possible editorial influence on the canon or of Theravada bias which is noted by other scholars when they compare the Paali Canon with surviving fragments of the other early Buddhist canons. Again Skilton notes that: “In the Paali recension some of these additions appear to be editorial in function, seeking to modify teachings in the light of a preferred doctrinal stance”.⁸

We may say then that Masefield's approach to the Paali texts is a naïve one that doesn't take into account modern higher criticism. But even if we take a similarly naïve approach there are difficulties with the conclusions reached in *Divine Revelation*. Taking this sort of approach to sacred texts tends to push aside other sources of information. Masefield, for instance makes no attempt to address the fact that in all schools of Buddhism there have been, right up to the present, people who were considered to be Arahants or even Buddha's. Lance Cousins, current President and Treasurer of the Pali Text Society recently remarked in an internet discussion group about the Theravada school that "their later literature is full of stories of monks who became arahats in Ceylon".⁹

Right-view

Turning to the specifics of Masefield's thesis, and firstly to the question of *sammaadit.t.hi*, or right-view, being equivalent to stream-entry, the Paali Text Society dictionary gives the following definitions for *sammaa* : thoroughly, properly, rightly; in the right way, as it ought to be, best, perfectly.¹⁰ Sangharakshita has suggested that in the case of *sammaadit.t.hi*, *sammaa* would be better translated by 'perfect'.¹¹ While "right" as a *denotation* is not incorrect, it doesn't really have the right *connotations*, because right-view is transcendental insight into the nature of phenomena. To the contemporary Buddhist, "right" seems entirely too weak to describe such insight. Masefield further makes the association that it is the first step in the Ariyan Eightfold Path and Ariyan is almost always associated with Awakening. The Buddha did emphasise the distinction between the Ariyan or Saavaka sangha, those who had attained either the path or the fruit of stream-entry, once-returner, non-returner, or Arahant: and the puthujjana.

Masefield demonstrates that a householder, or a bhikkhu, (or even a deva) could be either a saavaka, or a puthujjana, and that therefore these essentially social distinctions are much less significant than traditionally recorded.

Sangharakshita notes in his *Survey of Buddhism*, that there was indeed a difference between the "Transcendental (lokottara) Eightfold Way" as practised by the Aryan, and the mundane (laukika) Eightfold Way" practised by the pr.thagjana.

"The main point of distinction is the difference between a virtue consciously and deliberately practised, with more or less success, as a discipline, and a virtue that is the natural expression, the spontaneous overflow of an inner realisation"¹²

Two Eightfold paths are also discussed in the Mahacattariska Sutta.¹³ Here the Buddha speaks of right-view which have obscurations, and which results in the accumulation of merit; and Noble Right-View, which is free from obscurations, in transcendent, and is a 'factor of the path'.

Attaining Right-View

In very many cases, and Masefield records a large number in table 4. at the back of DRBP, people attained right-view, only after hearing the Dhamma from the Buddha – hence they are known as saavaka – the hearers. This is where Masefield’s discourse starts to come unstuck, because there are two extremely well known cases where it was not the Buddha who gave the discourse, but rather one of his disciples. In the first case Saariputta attains stream-entry after hearing a summary of the Dhamma from Assaji.¹⁴ The second, and even more significant case happens when Saariputta goes on to bring about the same state in his friend Moggallana – *before* he (Saariputta) becomes an Arahant. A further case is that of Ananda, who gains insight under the tutelage of Punna Mantaaniputta.¹⁵ These are not minor instances to be written off as exceptions to a rule – here are three of the foremost disciples of the Buddha, who attain stream entry without his direct intervention which Masefield says is essential.

Two lesser known puthujjana disciples gain insight not (on the face of it) through the intervention of the Buddha, but in the cathartic crisis of a suicide attempt. The bhikkhu Sappadasa¹⁶ and the bhikkuni Sila¹⁷ both despair after long years of striving without result, but have a break through on the point of despair. These cases are significant because they directly undermine this foundation of the thesis of DRPB.

However once one starts digging one finds many similar cases. In the Therigata for instance there are a number of cases where bhikkunis gain insight, and even arahantship, under the tutelage of another bhikkuni e.g. Uttamaa in canto 30, and the anonymous sister in canto 38. The bhikkhuni Pat.aacaaraa helps *many hundreds* more puthujjana bhikkunis to become arahants in canto’s 48 – 50. In canto 57 Vijayaa is taught by Khema and becomes an arahant. None of these accounts make it onto Masefield’s table of Awakening experiences – although to be fair he does say he doesn’t consider it a complete list.

Masefield’s response to the cases that *he* found was :

“Thus whilst we find *odd passages* where it seems that some saavaka gave others the Dhammachakkhu it must be concluded that *if in fact they did* do this they were very much the exception and that in general this was not the case.” [emphasis added]¹⁸

We are not told why there is doubt about other saavakas “giving others the Dhammachakkhu”, and indeed there seems no reason to doubt that it happened since it is recorded quite frequently. The conclusion, if there is one, is that there are more cases of the Buddha converting people recorded in texts, than of saavakas doing so – there is *no* indication that saavakas could not do so, and there *is* evidence of people becoming stream-entrants without the direct intervention of the Buddha. Clearly it is not the case that in the Nikaayas people only attain right-view after contact with the Buddha.

Further it is implicit in these cases that right-view is something which can be communicated.

There is a sutta in the Samyutta Nikaaya in which the Buddha clearly contradicts Masefield's assertion. In this sutta the Buddha sets out four factors for stream-entry: there are association with superior persons, hearing the true Dhamma, careful attention, and practice in accordance with the Dhamma.¹⁹ The same four factors also lead to the fruits of once-returning, of non-returning, even of arahantship.²⁰

Attaining the goal

Next Masefield tries to show that having attained right view, that achieving the goal of the path is only possible through a further intervention of the Buddha. Again Masefield records the instances of this in table (table 5.) at the end of DRPB. However in just a few minutes looking through Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation of the Samyutta Nikaaya I found a counter example. The naked ascetic Kassapa attains right-view after talking to the Buddha and then goes off to be looked after by the other bhikkhus (similar to Aananda). Then after receiving the higher ordination he goes off into the forest to meditate - and becomes an Arahant while "dwelling alone, withdrawn, diligent, ardent, and resolute, the Venerable Kassapa, by *realising it for himself* with direct knowledge, in this very life entered and dwelt in that unsurpassed goal of the holy life [emphasis added].²¹ There is no second intervention by the Buddha – it seems that the practices already taught to Kassapa were sufficient for him to reach the goal on his own!

Another example occurs near the beginning of this section in *Divine Revelation*. The example of Bhaaradvaaja is used to show that the typical length of time between acquiring right-view and arahantship is about two weeks. Masefield translates: "soon after (acria-) he had been ordained the venerable Bhaaradvaaja, abiding alone, aloof diligent, self resolute, not long afterwards (nacirass' eva), *by his own superknowledge*, having precisely seen in these conditions realised the unsurpassed culmination of the Brahmachariya..." [emphasis added]²² The Paali words are the same as used to describe Kassapa, with Masefield's translation differing only slightly from Bhikkhu Bodhi's. In fact the description of his attainment is a stock phrase that occurs in several places e.g. the same words appear in the case of Seniya the dog-duty ascetic²³ and in another case quoted by Masefield, that of Vacchagotta.²⁴ Vacchagotta attains right view while in conversation with the Buddha (which accords with Masefield's scheme), but then reaches the stage of non-returner in some unexplained way – it is neither explained in the sutta, nor by Masefield. It is probably safe to assume that he was engaged in meditation during this period. Vacchagotta then asks the Buddha for a *practice* which will enable him to attain final liberation. The Buddha instructs him in *a method of spiritual practice* which Vacchagotta goes away and applies with excellent results. There is no indication of a change in Vacchagotta's state until after he has gone away and applied this method – and his break through is described in the stock phrases as before.

Somehow Masfield seems to have again overlooked the case of Aananda who due to his attachment to the Buddha, attains arahantship only after the Buddha's parinibbana.²⁵ He does this by going off alone and meditating. So despite having listened to literally thousands of Dhamma discourses, and spending 25 years in the constant company of the Buddha, Ananda neither attains right-view, nor Awakening through any sort of divine revelation from the Buddha! So while we can agree that it was the Buddha that set out the spiritual practices that his disciples should undertake, it appears that it was the disciple's own efforts towards the goal that were decisive in attaining it.

The efficacy Spiritual Practice

Another of Masfield's arguments is that no amount of spiritual practice can be seen to be effective in the pursuit of right view. Most frequently the people attaining right-view do so not in relation to spiritual practice, but as a direct result of interaction with the Buddha only (and his enlightened disciples we must add even if Masfield is unwilling to).²⁶

However as we've already seen the Buddha specifically lists "practice in accordance with the Dhamma" as a factor for stream-entry. Perhaps we must concede that the Buddha's instructions were often aimed at the saavakas - i.e. those who already had attained stream-entry or right view. But it is not so much a case of divine intervention as it is instruction in a method that is to be applied by the individual.

There is another counter to Masfield's assertion which, while not a direct refutation, must surely carry a lot of weight. And that is that the Buddha taught his disciples – lay, ordained and non-human a large number of practices which he says are intended to bring them to realisation. Chapter nine of the Samyutta Nikaaya has more than 40 descriptions of the path leading to the unconditioned. The Buddha certainly seemed to think that the spiritual practices which he taught to puthujjana and saavaka alike were effective. Masfield's theory doesn't account for this body of method – if spiritual practice is ineffective why should he teach it. Why did he not just say, as did Jesus, "I am the way".

A further question we might ask is if Masfield is right about the efficacy of spiritual practice then how did the Buddha attain the goal? If we accept that spiritual practice leads to the goal then it is clear that the Buddha awakened by the same process as everyone else – his feat was in discovering the possibility. But if awakening requires the intervention of a living Buddha, then the Buddha must have Awakened by some other process which is never to my knowledge mentioned in any text. In fact the descriptions of the Buddha's practice suggest that he based the practices he taught on the insights he had gained – and that these enabled people to follow

Lastly I should mention that although Masfield lists five methods by which the Buddha brought people to the goal, one of them is reflection *by the*

saavaka on some aspect of Dhamma remembered or even overheard. It is difficult to see how this can be construed as a direct intervention by the Buddha.

The Stream

Masefield claims that in the Nikaayas “the stream” is most often used as a negative image “...it becomes abundantly clear that in the metaphorical language of the Nikaayas the stream or current would be the last thing the *saavaka* would desire to enter, attain or win”.²⁷ This is based on the usage of the imagery of the stream in the canon which is largely concerned with the flood of the senses, and with the current of *klesas* – i.e. with negative images. The ‘stream’ as it seems to be represented in Paali is not something any spiritual practitioner would want to be in. The usual derivation of *sotaapanna* is said to be from the root \sqrt{s} ’rotas, but Masefield argues that it would be better to take \sqrt{s} rotas as the root, and therefore the meaning of *sotaapanna* would be something like one who has heard [the Dhamma]. In Paali the word is *sota* which can mean *ear* or *stream*. *aapanaa* means “to enter into, to attain”.²⁸ The usual translation of *sotaapanna* is *one who has entered the stream* – so if Masefield is correct *sotaapanna* would mean *someone who has entered the ear!* *Saavaka* is a well known term for one who has heard. The usual word for heard is *sutam* which occurs at the beginning of every sutta in the words *evam. me sutam*, ‘thus have I heard’. The etymological argument then is dubious at best.

What of the ‘the stream’ metaphor? Admittedly Masefield provides a number of quotes to support his assertion, but he appears to overlook the obviously named *Sotaapattisamyutta* – the collection on stream entry – in the *Sam.yutta Nikaaya*. Here are collected a number of short suttas which relate to stream entry. Within this collection are two sections called *Stream of Merit*, and *Stream of Merit with Verses*.

In the *Stream of Merit* we find that ‘the stream’ is associated with the four factors for stream entry, which are unwavering faith in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, and impeccable ethical observance.²⁹ Three almost identical suttas use this image. Two more liken the four factors to divine tracks. In this section we also find the Dhamma likened to rain falling on a mountain side, and running down to fill up the streams and rivers and those running together to eventually fill the great ocean.³⁰ The image is expanded in the *Upanisa Sutta*,³¹ which occurs earlier in the *Samyutta Nikaaya*. Here a series of states or stages is shown to arise in dependence on the previous, not in a cyclic fashion, but in a progressive series leading ultimately to knowledge of the destruction of the *asavas*. This is known as “Transcendental Dependent Arising”. The *Nandiyasutta* also contains a description of “Transcendental Dependent Arising”, though it differs from the *Upanisa Sutta* description.³²

In the *Stream of Merit with Verses* we find three suttas similar to those above, but with the following verses appended:

Just as many rivers used by hosts of people
 Flowing downstream, finally reach the ocean
 The great mass of water, the boundless sea
 The fearsome receptacle of gems

So the streams of merit reach the wise man
 Giver of food and drink, and clothes,
 Provider of beds, seats, and coverlets
 As rivers carry their waters to the sea.³³

The wise man is clearly a householder, since he gains merit by generosity, but the context of this sutta is stream-entry and it specifically deals with the *stream of merit* associated with the four factors for stream entry.

In another section of the Sam.yutta Nikaaya we find a passage where the Buddha is talking with Saariputta about stream-entry: "Saariputta, this is said: 'The stream, the stream.' What now, Saariputta, is the stream? This Noble Eightfold Path is the Stream... Saadhu, saadhu Saariputta!"³⁴ The word used in the Paali is "soto". This is the nominative singular form of *sota*. I can't reconcile this usage with Masefield's idea. If he was correct then the question asked would be "what is the ear?", rather than "what is the stream?". The answer being that the "ear" is the Eightfold Path. It just doesn't seem to work. In the Samaññaphala Sutta the limbs of the Eightfold Path are described in just the same way as the niidanans in the Upanisa Sutta i.e. as a progressive series of stages, each arising in dependence on the preceding one.³⁵ To say that, in this context, the Eightfold Path represents 'a stream' is not so far fetched, I think, as suggesting that the Eightfold Path represent the ear.

It is entirely possible to grant that Masefield is correct that in the majority of recorded cases, *the steam* is regarded as a negative image, but he seems to regard this as proving that it is negative in every case. And yet again we see that there are a number of cases, directly relevant to the point being discussed, which contradict what he is saying. In fact there exist at least two positive images of *the stream* and in one case this is given in the context of a sutta which is about stream-entry.

The Death of the Dhamma?

It was a profoundly challenging experience to read Divine Revelation in Paali Buddhism. The sheer volume of evidence was daunting, as was the confident tone of the book. My faith in the Three Jewels was hanging in the balance, because it rests on the belief that the door to the deathless was opened by the Buddha, and remains open due to the efforts of his enlightened disciples down the ages. I had to ask myself : what would my life be like if I was just practising in order to pass the time as pleasantly as possible until such time as another Buddha appeared in the world in some distant future? And what about all the very inspiring figures who came after

the Buddha – what of Nagarjuna, or Shantideva, or Milarepa, or Hakuin? At one point Masefield uses the example of Milarepa to show that Awakening is possible even with a large accumulation of bad kamma.³⁶ It's ironic because, according to Masefield, Milarepa, living 1500 years post-Nibbana, Milarepa could not have become Awakened.

However a counter example occurred to me, and following that thread I soon found that Masefield's complex knot of argument was unravelling. I hope I have shown that there are definite and crucial flaws in *Divine Revelation*, and that Masefield's attempt recast the Buddhadhamma, as dying with the Buddha, fails because of these flaws. Masefield overlooks many inconvenient examples which don't fit his model, and these examples are by no means difficult to locate! It highlights an ever present difficulty in practising the Dhamma – that is the tendency to seek confirmation of our existing views. Skilton also notes a trend in the Theravadin school “to exclude doctrines and practices incompatible with its preferred preoccupations”³⁷ He notes for instance the relegation of the brahmaa vihaaras in Theravadin abhidhamma and commentarial texts compared with surviving parallel texts from the Mahaasankhika canon – or indeed with its own canon.³⁸ Masefield's approach shows a similar tendency – he excludes, overlooks, or dismisses out of hand, evidence which does not support his case. He frequently suggests that something is absolutely the case, when he himself has shown it to be merely mostly the case, and when there considerably more counter examples than he has admitted.

I have tried to deal with Masefield's claims on their own ground, that is by taking a similar rather naïve approach to the Paali Canon. However that literalistic approach in itself is suspect, and ignores what we know about the process of the compilation and editing of the Paali texts. This means that we cannot take the Paali Canon as the literal word of the Buddha, or as having any particular authority. The Buddha apparently described his Dhamma as “ehipassiko” – literally “come-see” - that is come and see for yourself. The Nikaayas are not intended as the last word on the Dhamma, but as a starting point for spiritual exploration and practice. Perhaps the final word should go to the Buddha whose last words, with their allusion to the path of vision and transformation, and which implicitly tell us that he believed that the door to the Deathless would remain open, are reputed to have been:

“Vayadhammaa sankhaaraa. Apamaadena sampaadetha.”

“Compounded things are impermanent. Succeed by striving with diligence!”³⁹

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Notes

- ¹ Alev, S.
- ² Masefield. p.4.
- ³ Masefield p.93 (the four Paali terms are in English are stream-entrant, once-returner, non-returner and arahant)
- ⁴ Masefield p.142
- ⁵ Masefield p.93
- ⁶ Skilton. p.80
- ⁷ Walsh, M. p.567
- ⁸ Skilton. p.80
- ⁹ Lance Cousins. Post to the Buddha-L on 9 Oct 2002
- ¹⁰ Pali Text Society Dictionary
- ¹¹ see Sangharakshita. Vision and transformation.
- ¹² Sangharakshita. Survey of Buddhism. P.159
- ¹³ Mahaacattaariisaka Sutta. Majjhima Nikaya 117. In Bodhi. Middle Length Discourses
- ¹⁴ The story occurs at Vin 1:39 ff and is recounted in Nyanaponika Thera and Hecker, Hellmunt in both the chapters on Saariputta and Moggallana by Nyanaponika.
- ¹⁵ See Samyutta Nikaaya 22:83
- ¹⁶ Theragaatha VI.6 (verses 405 - 410) in Norman, Poems of the early Buddhist monks. p.48
- ¹⁷ Therigatha V, 40 in Norman, Poems of the early Buddhist nuns (Therigatha), p.48
- ¹⁸ Masefield p.142.
- ¹⁹ Samyutta Nikaaya V.347 in Bodhi The Connected Discourses of the Buddha, p.1792. Also occurs at D III.227
- ²⁰ Samyutta Nikaaya V.411
- ²¹ Samyutta Nikaaya 12:17 in Bodhi The Connected Discourses of the Buddha
- ²² Masefield p.99
- ²³ Majjhima Nikaaya 57 in Bodhi and ~Naan.amoli, p.497.
- ²⁴ Ibid. p.601
- ²⁵ This story is recorded at Vin 2:284 ff and recounted by Hecker in Nyanaponika and Hecker Great Disciples of the Buddha.
- ²⁶ See DRBP table 4.
- ²⁷ DRBP. P.133
- ²⁸ Pali Text Society Dictionary
- ²⁹ Samyutta Nikaaya v.391
- ³⁰ SN v.396
- ³¹ Upanisa Sutta Snii29-32. in Bodhi The Connected Discourses of the Buddha, p.? Sangharakshita mentions it in his Survey of Buddhism in 1956, and later in detail in The Three Jewels., See also Khema, A., Bodhi. Transcendental Dependent Arising.
- ³² SNv.397-9. in Bodhi The Connected Discourses of the Buddha, p.?
- ³³ SN v.400. in Bodhi The Connected Discourses of the Buddha, p.?
- ³⁴ Dutiyasaariputtasutta. Samyutta Nikaaya. v.347-8 in Bodhi The Connected Discourses of the Buddha, p.1792.
- ³⁵ Digha Nikaaya ii.218 in Walsh
- ³⁶ Masefield p.92
- ³⁷ Skilton p.67
- ³⁸ Ibid
- ³⁹ Mahaaparinibbana sutta. My translation based on the Paali version on the Chat.t.ha Sa.ngaayana CD-ROM