

Constructive Critique of Buddha

by Sven Nilsen, 2021

In this essay I give a constructive critique of Buddha, about how emotional pain can cause counter-productive isolated extremism, the role of female avatars, whether profound revelation is attributed to some ritual practice and enlightenment as a form of learning process after achieving nirvana.

Sometimes it is useful to look at things from a new perspective. This is not to judge established beliefs and doctrines as good, bad or problematic, but to develop constructive critique as a way of probing the space of possibilities.

For the sake of the argument, let us say that Buddha experienced emotional trauma at young age when he lost his mother and this caused him emotional pain. His journey for answers can be interpreted in this context as a universalization of his personal emotional pain, projected from his mental self onto others as a form of dissatisfaction with life on behalf on humanity. With other words, Buddha thinks he is looking for answers “out there” which can solve all problems, so when he experiences nirvana, he is mistakenly recognizing it as the ultimate form of wisdom. Nirvana in this context can be thought of as resolving the emotional pain and for the first time feeling what an ordinary person feels in absence of anxiety and being satisfied with life.

Nirvana is often described as a state of blissfulness, ecstatic enlightenment, happiness or eternal knowledge. However, it can be useful to consider nirvana in terms of a relief from ignorance and unhappiness. Instead of nirvana as a place of 0 relative to 0 , it can be 0 relative to $-\infty$. The change of perspective does not alter the relative change of 0 . This constructive critique of Buddha is not about downplaying the importance of nirvana as spiritual awakening. On the other hand, it can make it easier to reason about nirvana from our perspective, as an inaccessible mental state made partially accessible by mathematical transport. Now, in this sense of nirvana as 0 , it becomes possible to view it as a beginning instead of a goal.

Buddha before nirvana is a misfit in society. Being raised as a spoiled child, he is unable to provide for himself among poor people competing for resources. He relies on begging to survive. With other words, the push toward Buddha as a spiritual person is part in his failure, not due to a personal flaw, but due to circumstances in his life and society. His mental or physical abilities are not the problem, as he excels at everything he is interested in. The problem is his background, which is not relevant to any reachable position within society. By being prophesied as a potential great conquerer, Buddha wasted his life developing skills which are highly flexible, yet no master of a practical craft is willing to take him as an apprentice. He does not fit the narrative that society tells itself to position people high or low, thus society does not know what to do with him.

The mirror image of not fitting into society, often reflects itself as a personal view of society as a state of unrest, on the brink of collapse or needing some form of “ultimate wisdom”. Buddha is no exception to this view. He trains under two gurus, before committing himself to not leaving the shadow of a tree until he has obtained his answer. Buddha pushes his body to the extreme, starving himself almost to death and hallucinating. This form of asceticism might be viewed as a way of cleansing body and mind, but it also can be viewed as an unhealthy foolishness in search for truth where there is none. Upon achieving nirvana, Buddha realizes the futility in the search for answers.

The next thing that happens is a woman giving Buddha a bowl of rice. This symbolizes Buddha seeing himself, a nirvana of 0 in terms of other people. The woman, having not carried the burden of his emotional pain, is still within nirvana as she participates in ordinary feelings and awareness.

The bowl of rice is a proof of Buddha's failure to fit into society. Upon accepting it, he also accepts his past and what might lie ahead in the future. This is not a problem-free way of looking at the world, but a problem-accepting and problem-facing view. It also marks a change in how Buddha views women. In this "other" world, he sees that the woman has problems too, laboring away in the background while men go on abstract adventures to find the "ultimate wisdom". Previously, women were to Buddha only what they meant in relation to himself, as objects of desire or duty, tying him down to this world. Now, he can start to see the world through the eyes of other people who previously were "beneath him", since the emotional pain he carried is no longer blinding his sight.

This change of perspective, with the recognition of the world through the eyes of an "other", has its opposite in the discrediting of female avatars in mythology. By taking away women's ability to become agents of change in society, the role of women is reduced to labour and to maintain society through reproduction and service to men. Even today, most of the work done in the world is still done by women, while the richest people are dominantly men. A bowl of rice given by a woman to a man in this world is taken for granted, supported by stories of "courageous" men who set out on adventures to find the "ultimate wisdom", while overlooking the practical wisdom in front of them. The Western worldview lost the role of women as "wisdom-giver" at the same time it gained the role of men as "philosopher". For every Plato, the rise of mortal man to eternal fame, there is a Seshat, a goddess who was reduced to a relation of being a wife or daughter to some other god.

For every Buddha or Jesus that fails to find their place in society, there is a woman who does the work needed for them to survive. These men have never truly left society in the first place, being held by an "invisible chord" that gives them nourishment for another day. The story of Buddha is particularly telling by this interpretation, in how Buddha by losing his mother at young age could not find relief for his emotional pain, despite being taken care of and fed by women every day. This is because, prior to nirvana, Buddha could not see women as anything beyond objects of desire or duty, tying him down to this world.

Upon achieving nirvana, Buddha gains his sight and recognizes a woman's world by his own world.

Nirvana in this sense is just a beginning of a long journey of enlightenment, like a baby opening its eyes for the first time. It is through this process of learning that Buddha returns to society, a process that is not without problems or obstacles. The role of Buddha as a great teacher is still in its infancy. He accepts both men and women as students.

When the story of Buddha was written, it was through the lens of Buddha as a refined avatar, one that awakens in a single moment and achieves ultimate wisdom through a long search for it. However, from another point of view this search for wisdom is a foolish chase after dead ends for something that existed right in front of him all the time. Once he opens his eyes and starts seeing, the knowledge Buddha seeks is obtained through a process of trying, failing and learning.

The ritual of meditation is often viewed as a means to obtain enlightenment. However, it can also be seen as a way of clearing one's mind such that when the eyes are opened again, the world appears as new. The cleansing of the spirit by ritual practice is not like removing bacteria feasting on a corpse, but a process in which the way of seeing is improved over time. Clarification within the mind-eye.

This means that enlightenment should not be confused by the means to achieve it. The divide between Platonism and Seshatism goes much deeper than the medium in which a person first learns about it. Likewise, the role of the great teacher might be seen as a sign of failure to fit into society through other roles, due to the return from a long-lasting foolish search for ultimate knowledge, but now being forced to teach by being unable to work. It is this process of finding a place in society, after achieving nirvana, which gave us Buddha the great teacher, that is the path to enlightenment.