

## **o6 Finding Buddhist Teachings in Star Trek**

Stories, myths, fantasy, are an essential part of human life.

As David Loy and Linda Goodhew write:

“In order to live, we need air, water, food, shelter... and stories ... They include creation myths, folk and fairy tales, legends about gods and heroes, Homeric epics and Norse sagas, Greek tragedy and Japanese Noh dramas, histories of kings and kingdoms, novels and radio plays, movies and television soap operas, some video and Internet games, and fantasies of strange people in strange worlds “long ago and far away.”

Myth and fantasy can be challenging to the way we live our lives. David Loy and Linda Goodhew quote the great science fiction and fantasy writer Ursula Le Guin:

“Fantasy is true, of course. It isn’t factual, but it is true. Children know that. Adults know it too, and that is precisely why many of them are afraid of fantasy. They know that its truth challenges, even threatens, all that is phony, unnecessary, and trivial in the life they have let themselves be forced into living.”

(Loy, David R.; Goodhew, Linda. *The Dharma of Dragons and Daemons: Buddhist Themes in Modern Fantasy*. Wisdom Publications. Kindle Edition.)

I don’t know whether the story of the Buddha’s life and enlightenment is factually true, or not. But for me its central myth of a human being discovering a way to transcend the usual limits of human understanding and find meaning and purpose in life, resonates with truth and challenges me to seek awakening.

But as well as offering important insights, stories, myth, and fantasy can be fun.

And it’s in that spirit, a mixture of seriousness and playfulness, in which I am going to talk about one of my favourite mythical worlds, ‘Star Trek: Next Generation’.

The television series features the crew of the Starship Enterprise exploring the galaxies in the late 24<sup>th</sup> century.

I’m going to focus on two episodes from the sixth season, starting with an episode entitled “Tapestry”.

I have a vivid memory of first watching this episode in my then home in Sheffield in northern England. I had just discovered Buddhism, though I knew very little of the teachings.

A new friend, Sthirananda, a member of the Triratna Buddhist Order, had recently moved into the spare room in my house. Satyaraja, another member of the Triratna Buddhist Order, was visiting Sthirananda, and all three of us sat down to watch the episode.

The memory is very vivid because during that screening I was first made loudly aware of the core teaching of the Buddha. More on that later.

Before I tell the story of the episode, for those of you unfamiliar with 'Star Trek: Next Generation', there's some important background you need to know.

The captain of the Starship Enterprise is Jean-Luc Picard, an authoritative and dynamic leader.

And during the series a mischievous god-like figure, called 'Q', makes the occasional unwelcome appearance, creating havoc and difficulty. Q has the power to shift through space and time.

The story opens with Jean-Luc Picard, severely injured in battle, seeming to die, despite the efforts of the Enterprise medical team.

Then Picard wakes up in a featureless world, to be greeted by Q with the words 'Welcome to the afterlife Jean-Luc. You're dead!'

Q explains that Picard had died because his artificial heart was unable to deal with the beam that blasted through his chest. And, Q adds, he might have lived if he had a real heart.

Picard had an artificial heart installed after being stabbed through his original heart in a fight when he was a young, 21-year-old, officer.

Q offers Picard the chance to go back in time, to avoid the fight and to keep his original heart and save his life.

Picard accepts the offer, goes back in time to when he was 21 years old, and avoids the fight.

The immediate consequences of changing history include alienating and losing his two best friends.

Then Q returns Picard to the present. Other consequences become apparent.

To Picard's great confusion, he is no longer the captain of the Starship Enterprise. He is a lowly officer.

Picard seeks out Commander Riker and Lieutenant Deanna Troi - both of whom served under him in his previous existence – and asks them to tell him honestly their evaluation of his abilities.

He is told that he is thorough, steady, reliable, and punctual. But he is not a leader. He is not willing to take chances and to stand out from the crowd. He never gets noticed by anyone.

So, Picard has been given a second chance at life, but he is no longer Captain Picard.

He confronts Q. He exclaims:

“I can't live out my days as that person, bereft of passion and imagination. That is not who I am. I would rather die than live this life!”

Q patiently explains what is different about the new Picard:

“That Picard never had a brush with death, came face-to-face with his own mortality., never realized how fragile life is, or how important each moment must be. So, his life never came into focus. He drifted. He learned to play it safe.”

But because Picard says that he would rather die than live this new life, Q allows him to return again to the scene of the fight when he was 21 years old. This time Picard fights and gets stabbed through the heart.

And then ....?

And then *Captain* Picard regains consciousness as the medical team finally succeed in reviving him and saving his life.

The scene then shifts to a later, private conversation between Captain Picard and Commander Riker, where Picard has just finished telling Riker what he experienced.

Riker comments that the events are similar to a near-death-experience.

I've talked elsewhere about near-death-experiences and Picard's story does indeed contain features common to such experiences. People who have such experiences experience them as real. Picard himself isn't sure whether what happened was real or a dream.

(To listen to what I said previously about near-death experiences you can listen to the final part of the relevant talk at <https://www.dropbox.com/>

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08%20Talk%20on%20Is%20Rebirth%20True%20%282%29.MP3?  
dl=0\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IwK9rtodlipdimp/08%20Talk%20on%20Is%20Rebirth%20True%20%282%29.MP3?dl=0)

One of the features of near-death-experiences is that there is a compassionate guide. As Picard comments, in this case Q, the mischievous, annoying god-like figure, gave him a vital teaching:

“Q acted with compassion. I owe him a debt of gratitude. He showed that there are many parts of my youth of which I am not proud of. There were loose threads, untidy parts of me, that I would have liked to remove.

But when I pulled on one of those threads, it unravelled the tapestry of my life.”

I said earlier that when I first watched the episode with Sthirananda and Satyaraja in my home in Sheffield I was made loudly aware for the first time of the core teaching of the Buddha.

I don't remember exactly when it happened - maybe when it becomes clear that Picard is no longer captain but is a lowly officer – but at some point Sthirananda and Satyaraja suddenly and simultaneously exclaimed “pratitya samutpada!”, “pratitya samutpada!”

I hadn't a clue what pratitya samutpada was. But I made it my job to find out.

It's the central Buddha teaching of conditionality, of dependent origination, that states that all things exist in dependence upon a web of conditions and when those conditions change, things change, and that includes human beings.

So, thank you to Star Trek for introducing me to pratitya samutpada!

Now on to the second episode which is clearly very much influenced by the writers' knowledge of Tibetan Buddhism. It's a complicated episode that raises many questions about the nature and role of belief and of truth, and the relationship between guru and follower.

On the Buddhist Wheel of Life there are six realms that beings can occupy.

One of those realms is the realm of the Jealous Gods or Titans. In this realm beings are always fighting, jealous for power. They need a powerful figure to control and channel their anger and jealousy, and to keep their civilization together.

In the Star Trek universe there are fearsome warrior beings called Klingons who very much occupy the realm of Titans. One of them, called Worf, is an officer on the Starship Enterprise.

Worf is having a crisis of spiritual faith. He is trying to summon in meditation a vision of a figure called Kahless who united the Klingon people many centuries before. When Kahless departed from his people he vowed that one day he would return.

But Worf is failing to resolve his crisis. After ten days of supreme meditative effort at the most sacred of all Klingon places, he has had no vision, no insight.

He gives it one final effort and to his, and everybody else's astonishment, Kahless appears, not just as a vision but as a real being, alive in the here and now. Kahless has returned.

However, Worf is not convinced. He suspects that something is wrong.

Kahless questions Worf's lack of conviction, to which Worf replies that questions are the beginning of wisdom and are the mark of a true warrior.

In return, Kahless insists that he has no need to answer questions from those he leads. It is enough that he tells people to obey his will, which, he insists, they will do even if it means their death.

Then Gowron, the current leader of the High Council of the Klingons, arrives. He strongly suspects that those opposed to his leadership have staged the apparent re-appearance of Kahless, to take power away from him.

Gowron is very worried. Already some of his own followers are leaving him to follow Kahless.

He says to Worf:

“Have you ever fought an idea? It has no weapon to destroy, no body to kill.”

He fears that the idea of Kahless will travel through the Klingon empire like a wave, leaving nothing but destruction behind, as the Klingons tear themselves apart over competing beliefs.

Even when the equivalent of a DNA test using blood remains on a sword used by the original Kahless, appears to show that the new Kahless is genuine, Worf still holds doubts, as does Gowron.

Gowron challenges Kahless to battle and defeats him but does not go through and kill him. Kahless laughs off the defeat. Nevertheless, faith in the new Kahless continues to grow among Klingons. Many want to believe.

Worf is, however, by now convinced that Kahless is an imposter. He forces his backers to admit that they have created a copy of the original Kahless using preserved genetic material, imprinting the copy's consciousness with stories from their spiritual texts that appear to the new Kahless as memories.

The new Kahless is an innocent clone.

Worf realizes that the way forward for the Klingon empire is not straightforward.

Although he tells Gowron the truth, he forces through a compromise, where people will be told exactly who the new Kahless is. He should be seen not as the original Kahless, but as an heir to the original Kahless.

Political power will remain with Gowron and the High Council, whilst Kahless will be given the ceremonial role as emperor, from where he will guide his people in spiritual matters.

Worf realizes that people need something to believe in, something larger than themselves, something that will give their lives meaning.

At the end though, Worf's own heart is still empty. He does not know what to believe.

But the new Kahless offers him some words of advice.

“Kahless left all of us a powerful legacy, a way of thinking and acting that makes us Klingon. If his words hold wisdom and his philosophy is honourable, what does it matter if he returns or not? What is important is that we follow his teachings. Perhaps the words are more important than the man.”

As I said earlier, the episode is complicated, but it does raise many relevant questions about the nature of belief, the relationship between guru and follower, the power of ideas, truth and the place of religion in the world.

As you can guess, I am a big fan of science fiction. I won't try to convince you all to join me as fans of science fiction, but I hope that these two episodes show the power of stories and myths to challenge what we think and believe and how we live our lives.

If you are interested, I can recommend two books that explore the relationship between fantasy and the Buddha Dharma.

First, David Loy and Linda Goodhew's book "The Dharma of Dragons and Daemons", which includes an examination of The Lord of The Rings by Tolkien, and other modern works of fantasy.

And second, a very playful book called "Cinema Nirvana" by film critic and meditation teacher Dean Sluyter which reviews and brings out Dharma themes from films including Memento, Jaws, Invasion of the Body Snatchers, and even Casablanca!

Both books are a really enjoyable and thought-provoking read.

Link to recording:

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/f3x0y4gc6ry1vnnmp72jg/06-English-Only-Star-Trek.MP3?rlkey=g5kkzmun8x6z3gyiios7u8520&dl=0>