

Unconditional Love

by Piya Tan

The Straits Times of 1st January 2009 (Home) carries an article titled "Religious groups bumping up aid kitty." It first mentions that the Singapore Buddhist Lodge has increased 2009's education budget from \$1 million to \$1.2 million. Significantly, the Lodge president explains, "What use is money if it's sitting in a bank?" after the global financial letdown that wiped almost \$400 billion off the local stock market (due to greed, dishonesty, and stupidity). The Buddhist Lodge is known to offer such help to any needy person even if they are not Buddhists.

Then, in the next paragraph. The Straits Times reports that the City Harvest Church is offering to pay its members' school fees and textbooks, and for some, computers. There are further conditions: successful applicants will have to fulfill 4 hours of community work (read church-related effort) and attend church services.

This piece of report is interesting as it helps us to see the difference between conditional love and unconditional love. "Conditional love" basically means I will only love you if you listen to me, do as I say, and, often enough, be like me. This is a narrow and tribal attitude. If you do not belong to the gang, "body and soul," you are out.

This was the situation with the brahmanical system up to the Buddha's time. There was the caste system then. An old story told that the brahmins (priest class) were born from God's mouth, so their task was to pray for others. Then, came the kshatriyas (warrior class) who arose from God's arms, so that their duty was to protect the priests. On a lower rung were the vaishyas (the business class), born from God's thighs: they were to serve and enrich the two upper classes. And fourthly, were the feet-born shudras (menial workers), who did all the lowly work none of the other classes would do.

Still, you would be lucky if you belonged to any of these classes, especially the first three. You were entitled to "benefit" from the prayers of the brahmins, that is, for a generous donation. There was a "fifth" non-class, the outcastes, who were mostly the dark-skinned natives.

The class or caste system was maintained by the fair-skinned Aryan invaders, and the creation myth was understandably invented by the brahmins for social control and self-advantage.

All this seemed to work for a few thousand years, that is, until the people became more settled and educated, and began to think for themselves. They realized the oppression of the brahmins, the "established church." More importantly, after millennia of meditation history, many of them came closer to understanding the true nature of life. In the growing stillness of their spirituality, these yogis noticed that the brahmins were simply enslaving their minds with false views and misguiding them with oppressive and false religion.

The new group of serious thinkers and reformers were called shramanas, that is, religionists who rejected the established brahmin "church." The most prominent, and most awakened, of these anti-brahminical reform teachers are the Buddha.

The Buddha is the most prominent of the non-brahminical teachers because he speaks out the loudest and clearest against the oppressive and misguided brahmanical gurus and systems. The Buddha's teachings in the Suttas that speak out against the blood sacrifices, social discriminations, exploitations and false teachings of the brahmanical system remain today as some of the most inspiring records of the struggle to free society and ourselves as individuals from systems (especially religion) than wants to herd us up like cattle with their God-idea, and cage us up like sheep with the eternal-life promises.

The Buddha teaches us to break out of these false cages and invisible fences, to free ourselves from tribal notions of religion. The Abrahamic religions that first arose in the Middle East are understandably the most tribal, because they lived in tribes in the deserts and wilderness, and they needed some kind of single-God-idea to unify them against other tribes and to be under the social control of the leader (almost always a male).

Even as I write, the Israelis and the Palestinians, both belonging to Abrahamic family of religion, are relentlessly and viciously bombing each other!

A wholesome large-scale effort is a secular government that protects religious freedom. This is perhaps the best we can do on a social level. There can only be true peace, prosperity and progress in an individual when he has unconditional love.

In fact, early Buddhism teaches unconditionality on all levels. We begin by accepting ourselves unconditionally, just as we are, and start from there to better ourselves.

Then, we learn to see others just as they are, accepting them unconditionally, but we can only do this when we have accepted ourselves unconditionally (that is, uncaging our minds and freeing our hearts).

Buddhism also teaches us how to accept ourselves and others unconditionally, that is, through the cultivation of lovingkindness. May all beings (not just humans, but all beings, animals, non-humans, etc) be well and happy. We treat other as we would have ourselves treated, which is, of course, the golden rule. In this sense, Buddhism is the universal religion.

What does it mean to show unconditional love? When we meet a fallen being, we first try to help him up, and then teach him to help himself. When we meet a man hurt with an arrow, we gently remove that arrow, and nurse him so that the wound would heal itself.

No greater love has a man than this, that he LIVES for another. I say this unconditionally. (See Visuddhi,magga 9.40-41/307 & 9.108/321)