

To believe, to know, to feel

Unless we are a cult follower or seriously narrow-minded, we would notice that no matter what religion we follow, we are somehow influenced or informed (positively or negatively) by some other religions. Human communication has reached such a closely interactive level that we need not even leave our homes or computers to know things. Most of us, as a rule, interact with a lot of people, and with many different religions and non-religious systems.

Our first level of communication and experience, and often the most common, is to measure others by how they look, how they sound, how they smell, how they taste (the kind of food they take) and how they feel (in the emotional sense). In other words, we basically rely on our physical senses. Most people who follow a religion or claim have some kind of life philosophy (or none), do so in this way. This is the way of “belief.”

To believe is to judge a book by the cover. Most of us actually do this, since most other people do this, too. This makes us feel part of the crowd, and there is a sense of safety in numbers. The new and the naive might even see a well-dressed person as one who is successful and cultured, or regard a well-robed figure as a holy person of some status.

It is wise to remember here that the early Buddhist monastics clothe themselves very simply so as to be indistinguishable from other religious practitioners. Even the Buddha is not always easily distinguished from the other monks. The Buddha may be a distinguished teacher, but he is not always distinguishable from the other saints and non-saints. However, he is easily found out from what he teaches.¹

Certain kinds of sounds, especially loud rhythmic music, are more likely to hold our attention. And if we like the sound, we tend to like the sound-makers, too. Understandably, some religious groups can be very musical, and very noisy. In fact, the religion of noise has deep roots, going back to the preliterate tribal rituals of Africa, the American Indians, and other indigenous tribes. We love noisiness mainly because it enhances one sense and numb the rest, so that we do not have to think so much, if at all.

There are also religious foods and rules regarding eating, religious smells (from flowers, incense, etc), and religious touches (holding hands during prayer, hugging one another, greeting with holy kisses, etc). Such physically sense-based acts reinforce our link with the group, and strengthen group beliefs, and hence perpetuate the group or tribe. In fact, we might call this a tribal religion.

In a tribal religious system, as a rule, there is only one preacher or power-holder, one holy figure or God, and one tribe. This is to ensure the integrity and prosperity, even salvation, of the tribe. As such, the rule is that if you are not with the tribe, you are against the tribe. In the deserts and wildernesses of the world, such a closed system works well, like a herd of wildebeest standing together, pointing the heads of horns outwards against the lurking predators.

According to renowned historian Karl Jaspers, between 800 and 200 BCE, there was a major shift in the great civilizations of the times. The social environment was so fertile as to

¹ See **Dhātu Vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 140/3:237-247) = SD 4.17: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/4.17-Dhatuvibhanga-S-m140-piya.pdf>

produce outstanding “paradigmatic personalities” like the Buddha, whose ideas became a foundation for future religious and social thinking. This was the “axial age” (Achszeit), when individual thinking was valued more than group thinking.

In India, for example, the Buddha speaks against brahminical priestcraft and teaches the internalization of religion. God, in other words, is not up there or out there, but in here (in our hearts). This is the famous teaching of the divine abodes: the cultivation of lovingkindness, compassion, appreciative joy and equanimity. God is not a power-figure, the excuse for politics, but a love-icon inspiring unconditional love.

Buddhist spirituality begins with the understanding that the workings of the physical senses are our true sources of knowledge. We can only “know” what we see, hear, smell, taste, and touch – this is the “all,” everything that we could possibly take as evidence for knowing and measuring the world.

But there is something deeper, not of this world. The Buddha, well versed in the ancient meditative systems of his times, went further, in fact, beyond any other yogi before him. Not only did the Buddha transcend the world of physical senses in his meditation, he realized that there is no self or abiding essence in this non-sense-based realm (or anywhere else).

Other great mystics, too, have chanced upon this profound spiritual moment when we feel totally abandoned by all our physical senses. Some call it the dark night of the soul, and feel as if abandoned even by their deepest source of succour, God. This feeling of abandonment is the result projecting our ideas, our minds, onto the pure inner light of reality.

The mystic night is dark when we try to see it with our senses, or try to know it with our minds. Only when the mind is fully free of the physical senses does it really see itself. And what does the mind, or better, the heart, see, looking at itself? Beyond the senses, we have no words to explain this. Perhaps, a figure might help: it is like two huge clear mirrors facing one another.

The Buddha simply feels and enjoys this inner space and radiance just as it is, free from all outer projections. No self, no soul, no God, no race, no country, no religion, no politics, no Heart Sutra. Just peace, just joy, both one, yet even beyond oneness. He calls it nirvana.

[The value of this world is more full and enhanced, when we occasionally rise out of it to taste inner stillness. It is easy to believe what we want to believe. We begin to really know when we understand how our senses work, filtered and measured by the mind. And we truly begin to feel, when we look deep into the inner clear light.]

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Happy Buddhist Renewal Day (25 Dec) & Happy New Year