

Man, the unfinished

Science and modern thinking generally regard man as a species, as an evolving member of a group. The key word here is “evolving,” that is, man (I use this word in a non-sexist way) is still unfinished, as it were. Religions, especially God-centred and book-based systems, tend to regard man as a finished product, even as “images” of the divine.

In such a religious system, man must choose his God. Often this choice entails the exclusion of everything else that is “not God” or not accepted by those who define such a God. Man, in other words, is like a glass of drink that has run over, and the liquid is all over the table. Someone (a prophet or religious teacher) tries to sweep all the spilled drink back into the glass, where it belongs, as it were.

This is a curiously absurd imagery, but it surely reflects what the God-believers often tell us: that our wisdom is mere foolishness compared to what God knows. There are the two horns of a dilemma here. If we are that foolish, surely we would make a foolish choice whether to believe or not. Or, has the choice already been made for us (fatalism); then, why bother about it at all?

As such, the scientific notion that man is still evolving, biologically and intellectually, is a better model for human learning. Early Buddhism has no problem with such a notion, except for one key point. While science generally takes this evolutionary process as being brain-based, Buddhism regards evolution as being heart-based.

Now, we need to define “evolution” and “heart” here. In early Buddhist terms, evolution is a gradual process—a spiritual evolution—by which we discover true reality about the world and about ourselves, resulting in liberation from suffering, that is, breaking out of the cycle and chain of biological evolution.

“Heart” here means the mind; indeed, we often hear native Asian speakers using the words “heart” and “mind” as referring to the same thing. The Buddhist commentarial tradition even regards the physical heart as the seat of the mind or consciousness, just as the eye is the “seat” or sense-base for seeing, the ear for hearing, and so on.

However, while early Buddhism speaks of the five sense-bases, it is completely silent on the mind-base. The reason for this is simple enough: the mind, our consciousness, has no physical base. It is not located anywhere, not in any one place. However, for the sake of convenience, we could say that our mind is “located” all over our body, or better, our “being.” In other words, it is possible for us to extend our minds even beyond the physical body. We practise this in a positive way, for example, in our lovingkindness meditation.

When Buddhism says that we are “evolving,” it means that we are still unfinished processes. In other words, we are capable of learning, of growing wholesomely. For our present purpose, let us say that we learn in two main ways: the scientific way and the spiritual way, that is, worldly learning and Dharma learning.

Scientific or worldly learning is completely sense-based, and relates only to measurable things and processes. In simple terms, such a learning helps to create, or should create, the best, even ideal, environment for living and learning. If such a learning degrades, or worse, destroys, our environment and ecology, then it is useless and harmful knowledge, and

should be avoided. Worldly learning is about a healthy body, a positive person, constituting a healthy society.

Spiritual learning, especially Buddhist learning, is basically about the cultivation of a positive individual. The most vital part of this Buddhist learning is known as mental cultivation, that is, to know the mind, to shape it, and to free it.

We can only fully know the mind when we free it from the distractions of the physical senses. This is done by teaching the mind to give its full attention to a single mental object, especially the breath or lovingkindness. This is like discovering and extracting a raw diamond from the dirt and cleaning it up before cutting it. When the mind is patiently and lovingly able to see itself, it bursts into boundless bliss. We feel joyful, as it were, to know we have a precious diamond.

Once we are familiar with the raw diamond, we are ready to work on it, cutting and polishing it so that it can give off the brightest sparkle. Meditative bliss cleanses us of all the impurities that the physical senses have projected onto them. We must take our time to enjoy the blissful mind so that we are fully familiar with it. On emerging from this wordless bliss, we begin to realize that even this profound bliss is impermanent and mind-made—as is everything else we experience. But this is a powerfully joyful knowledge that empowers us with a meaningful and purposeful life.

The calm and clear mind gives us a vision of the true meaning of life: it is all impermanent and mind-made. The calm and clear heart inspires us with a true purpose in life: that of self-liberation. This special wisdom allows us to see more clearly into why people run around goaded on by their sense-desires, running after endless goals and short-lived pleasures.

We keep pushing this huge round boulder up the hill. On reaching the top, it runs downhill again. We follow it down and push it up all over again, and again. As long as we are at it, we seem to be enjoying it. One day, we realize that it is the nature of rocks, especially huge ones, to go downhill. Then we restfully sit on the hill-top enjoying the fresh air and great view.

In our joyful stillness on the hill-top, we might even wonder why Jack and Jill have been going up the hill, since our childhood days, to fetch a pail of water, and Jack falling downhill, breaking his crown, with Jill tumbling after. There is no water on a hill-top. The water is best found on low ground.

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