

Superstition¹

Cause and effect. Essentially, superstition is a belief that a single cause is behind any act or event, that “there is a reason for everything.” First of all, reasoning is a human faculty; it is the way we think. When we reason out or rationalize an event that has happened, or we think or wish had happened, we give it “meaning.” If this meaning harmonizes with true reality, then it is true and real.

Otherwise, such a meaning might be “real” only to us: this is a virtual reality, something only real in a very private way. If such a reality becomes so very private and limited to oneself that no one else experiences it and it does not reflect true reality, then it is likely to be madness.

Secondly, whatever happens in this world happens on account of conditionality (*paccaya*). In other words, many causes work together to produce many effects. Sometimes we might be able to notice only a single effect, but this is because we choose to see only that effect, or we are unwilling or unable to notice the other effects. This inability to see beyond a single effect is another defining aspect of superstition.

As such, superstition is a misunderstanding or wrong view of causes and effects, that is, an ignorance of the nature of conditionality.² It is a deeply seated wrong view that, when we are faced with an inexplicable event or insurmountable problem, it compels us to seek answers externally in a single cause. On a deeper level, we might conjure up demons to blame, or invoke God or gods to succour us. We end up thinking in terms of some “abiding entity” or “cosmic essence” that is behind everything. The most common expressions of superstition are the beliefs in a creator-God³ and an eternal soul.⁴

Fault-finding and excuses. An important aspect of attachment to rituals and vows is the notion that the solution to our problems, or some kind of relief or “purification,” is to be found in external actions (such as ritual offerings or self-flagellation) or from an external agent (such as turning to a God-figure or to spirits).

To be superstitious, in simple terms, means to attribute our difficulties and misfortunes to “bad luck” or some external agencies (“other” or “others”), instead of learning to calm and focus our minds, so that we can understand the situation (see the causes and effects), or to open our hearts to solve the problems, or to at least learn from the sufferings that attended us.

Common examples of superstitions, especially in the name of religion, are resorting to “good luck” rituals or “karma-purifying” ceremonies. In extreme cases of such superstitious beliefs, the rituals may require some objects from our workplace or our personal effects or even finger-nails that are blessed! When the superstition centres around an object, especially when it is regarded as being “lucky” in itself or having some kind of power of its own, then it is called fetishism.⁵ Such an object is called a fetish.

¹ SD 40a.8 (5.2): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/40a.8-Emotional-independence-piya.pdf>

² On conditionality, see **Dependent arising** = SD 5.16, esp (2.3): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/5.16-Dependent-arising-piya.pdf>

³ On problems of God-belief, see eg **Te, vijja S** (D 13/1:235-252) = SD 1.8:

<http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/1.8-Tevijja-S-d13-piya-pto11.pdf>

⁴ See **Is there a soul?** = SD 2.16: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/2.16-Is-there-a-soul-piya.pdf>

⁵ The word fetish goes back to the Latin *facticius*, “artificial” and *facere*, “to make.” It is an object believed to have supernatural powers, or in particular, a man-made object that has power over others. Essentially, fetishism is the attribution of inherent value or powers to an object. See **The person in Buddhism** = SD 29.6b

Superstition is an existential indolence, so that we weasel up blames and excuses. It is really a slothfulness at not exerting ourselves in finding the real conditions behind issues and problems. So we seek religion and information to endorse and reinforce our superstitions. When such endorsements or reinforcements go beyond ourselves, they can cause great and general harm, and prevent many others from their chance to become better people. If such an aberration is found in a leader, the damage can be even more harmful and widespread.⁶

Religion as brainwashing. Broadly speaking, brainwashing refers to any kind of effort or process of removing old ideas or keeping out certain ideas, especially religious ones, to be replaced by new or selected ideas, approved of by the individual, group or institution. Such a process is very common in God-centred religions, but it may also be found in Buddhisms where devotion is unquestioningly given to a guru or power-figure. However, in this latter case, the term “mind-control” might be more appropriate.⁷

Brainwashing can also occur in a very private and personal way. This form of brainwashing is essentially the limiting of ourselves to a very narrow world-view, especially a psychological or religious one, like Rapunzel in her tower, but one without any window.⁸ The psychological lack of openness to true reality and wholesome change can result in various problematic types of personality disorders,⁹ but here we will focus on the effects on a very narrow and closed religious view.

How do superstitions and rituals brainwash us? Firstly, “brainwash” here means that we are compelled to be either unwilling or unable to see that we are capable of helping ourselves and of personal salvation. So we turn to an external agency for succour and salvation. Such an agency is often self-defined, specially shaped by our lacks, needs and fixations. Or it is learned (heard) from others, especially by way of family or cultural conditioning, so that it is deeply imprinted upon us, preventing any new self-liberating learning.¹⁰

Superstition tends to objectify or thingify our natural qualities. If we are, by nature, kind, we tend to project our goodness onto a loving God. If we have a violent trait, we see our God as a violent and vengeful God. If we are lustful by nature, we are likely to see God as allowing unbridled sexuality and passion since he created them after all. If we are narcissistic or power-crazed, then we think that God is on our side (even exclusively), and that we have the right, even duty, to dominate, exploit, or convert others. We tend to be like the God we have created.

Secondly, if we brainwash ourselves, it means that we almost exclusively feed our minds with only “approved” or “proper” information, and conduct ourselves only in very limited ways to prevent any wholesome self-change. The motivating factors behind such self-limiting actions are the four biases (āgati) of greed, hate, delusion and fear. Greed fetters us to a perpetual mating ritual of yearning and seeking what we think we lack, and so

(4.3.3): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/29.6b-The-person-in-Buddhism-piya.pdf>

⁶ **The Three Roots Inc** = SD 31.12 (5.1-3): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/31.12-Three-roots-Inc.-piya.pdf>

⁷ On mind-control, see **Cult Buddhism** = SD 34.5 (1.1.3): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/34.5-Cult-Buddhism.-piya-tan.pdf>

⁸ See **Emotional independence** = SD 40a.8 (5.2): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/40a.8-Emotional-independence.-piya.pdf>

⁹ SD 40a.8 Appendix (Identifying personality disorders).

¹⁰ On imprinting, see **Gadhabha Samāṇa S** (A 3.81/1:229) & SD 24.10b (1): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/24.10b-Gadhabha-Samana-S-a3.81-piya.pdf>

desire. Hate works to reject all that discourages or hinders us from this hunting and mating ritual.

Delusion is what blinds and blinkers us so that we lose sight of everything that is good, and see and taste only what we lust for. Fear is a sense of loss at the thought of losing what we have captured or cling to. Greed or lust breeds fear, and fear blinds us, chaining us to rituals of beliefs and rituals of vain self-assurance. It is the uroboros devouring its own tail and refusing to stop, thinking that the pain is other-inflicted.¹¹

R251 Simple Joys 87

Piya Tan ©2012 120620

¹¹ On brainwashing, see **Cult Buddhism** = SD 34.5 (1.1.2): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/34.5-Cult-Buddhism.-piya-tan.pdf>