

The one that I feed¹

The real human struggle is between good and bad.² This is the task that defines our humanity, and by which we cultivate our divinity. Religion, on the other hand, is mostly our failure to understand this struggle, so that we try to reify what is a struggle of the heart into an imaginative belief in evil and the worship of a supreme being. Psychologically, such a worship is mostly a transference³ to a father-figure.

Religion always fails when it speaks of an agency, and become destructive and harmful when it pretends to make such an agency work for it, and so others must slave for religion. This agency is often defined as some kind of God or power figure. An agency does not define itself. God does not exist in himself or itself: we define agency or God into being. And whoever defines such an agency controls those who believe in it.

Any religion that uses stories and myths, depicting the struggle between good and bad, in graphic and colourful images, parables and stories, are more likely to succeed in touching our lives. However, the danger here is in taking these instructive means to be the final ends in themselves. This is like a carpenter worshipping his hammer, nails, saw, timber and other tools of his trade. A wise and skilled carpenter would use his tools to create beautiful and useful furniture. So, too, religion is meant to bring out (e-ducere) the natural goodness within us. This is the root meaning of “education.”

We are not always bad people; we are not always good people. Conditions make us so. In early Buddhism, there are many fascinating gods, demons and beings, brought to life in exciting and instructive stories: how Māra the bad one constantly works to hinder us when we try to do some good; the leisurely gods who seem to enjoy frivolous pursuits of fighting the asuras, like extended adolescents in their battle games. We are reminded to learn from these figures of bad and good, but neither to fear nor to worship them.

Beautiful as the moon, planets, stars and heavens may be, we are as helpless as they are when we worship them. We might however chart our life’s course by them. Still, we must not blindly sail on, but need to negotiate our way in dangerous waters and bad weather.

Nature, even as Mother, too, should not be worshipped: to worship is to idolize or admire from afar. It is better to respect nature: to respect means to accept people or things as they really are. To respect nature is to see good in the grass and trees, the sky and winds, the mountains and rivers -- not to exploit them but to live in harmony with them. For, we, too are earth, water, fire, wind and space.⁴

Gaze at the bodhi tree, as the Buddha does for 7 days, showing his gratitude for having sheltered him.⁵ Even a few moments of such a reflection will benefit us: just simply but lovingly see a tree, especially an ancient one with our mind’s eye. Even hug it warmly or talk to it: try and we will know how it feels like.⁶

See a beautiful tree, and spend some time visualizing the lone radiant Buddha sitting in her shade. The tree’s crest reaches to the skies as the Buddha’s mind touches the heights of

¹ This reflection is based on **Beyond good and evil**, SD 18.7 esp (4.5.5): [link](#).

² On why modern scholars prefer using “bad” rather than “evil” in the early Buddhist context, see **Beyond good and evil**, SD 18.7 (3): [link](#).

³ On psychological “transference,” see SD 24.10b (2.1): [link](#).

⁴ See **Mahā Rāhul’ovāda Sutta** (M 62), SD 3.11, esp §§8-12 (on the 5 elements): [link](#).

⁵ See **Dhamma & Abhidhamma**, SD 16.1 (5.2.2): [link](#).

⁶ See Stephanie Kaza, *The Attentive Heart: Conversation with Trees*, 1993.
<https://www.uvm.edu/~skaza/publications/assets/AttenHeartContents.PDF>.
<http://spiritualityhealth.com/articles/10-great-books-about-wisdom-trees>.

meditation. Her roots sink deep and stable into the earth, just as the Buddha's teachings fill our lives to the very core. We are each a bodhi tree, reaching out to shelter others, freshening and beautifying their lives and all around us.

The bodhi tree represents our goodness that grows, that shelters and heals others. It is rooted in the earth, lovingly called Mother, Gaia and by many other names. People may not remember nor celebrate our goodness, but the good earth remembers our every deed. Our thoughts, speech and actions are the ground that supports us: the good ground holds us and gives us precious life. This is good karma.

Karma is not merely doing good or bad, but habitually doing them. We are neither rewarded by good nor punished by bad: we *become* the good or the bad that we do. We *are* what we do. Yet our actions, if good, can inspire others in even more good: this is happiness. Or, our deeds can hurt others, bringing more bad: this is suffering.⁷

Time is good, too, if we respect it, see it for what it is, a means of change and exchange. Time is currency, but it cannot really be bought or sold. We can only spend it wisely; then it is good. If we waste it, then it is bad; for, it has taken away our opportunity for good. It has stolen what is really of value to us: to be true to ourselves. To know time is to know how to live well and to change for the better. We must know time before we can transcend it.

Good and bad exist only in time. They have no separate existence. We know one from the other, but they are real because they can bring us pain or bless us with joy. Either way, we are doing time. But we have a choice: pain is natural, suffering optional. Pain means a lack of joy, which is the way our physical senses and mind work. Suffering is when we do not let go of the pain that is already gone, when we keep feeding the memory of that pain.

If we do not feed pain, then we can learn from it. Pain means something is not right. We need to see the conditions that give rise to that pain, and to lovingly free those conditions. Suffering means that we are not there yet; the journey is in progress. If we can learn from pain and suffering, then we do not need any praise, pleasure or patronage from others.

Praise is a two-edged sword. We learn nothing from it; the praiser probably thinks he's better than us. If so, then he's cunningly arrogant; if not, then he's blindly foolish.⁸ The one who criticizes us probably thinks we can be better; then, we should thank him. One who is silent when he should speak is likely to be foolish, fearful, weak or cunning. Keep away from such people, unless we can truly help them.

Gain and loss, fame and obscurity, blame and praise, pleasure and pain are the eight winds that blow us around.⁹ We are caught in these ruthless tsunamis if we habitually measure ourselves and others. If we see good merely as gain, fame, praise and pleasure, then we are blindly heading into a storm of loss, obscurity and pain.

So good and bad go together. Compassion forgives the bad in others, even when they do not deserve it -- doing everything we can, waiting patiently, for the good to arise in them. If we understand evil or badness, we will see it as what takes away our opportunity to see truth and beauty within ourselves. Badness is the mud of our lives, lurking deep in our dark past. Let the lotuses of good taking root in this mud of ignorance -- learn from the bad -- and let them rise through the waters of craving, and blossom in the light of wisdom and awakening.

We see good and bad as separate realities because we fail to see them as aspects of our own minds. We create our own good and bad in the sense that we are ultimately accountable for what we think, say and do. The real war is within ourselves, that is, the war against greed,

⁷ See **Karma**, SD 18.1: [link](#).

⁸ See **Karaṇa, pāli Sutta** (A 5.194), SD 45.11: [link](#).

⁹ See **Loka, dhamma Sutta 1** (A 8.5), SD 42.2: [link](#).

hate and delusion. *Greed* seeks what we think we lack; *hate* pushes away what we see as different; and *delusion* is the blindness to the true nature of these two bad roots.

Greed creates false friends; hate creates false enemies; and delusion makes strangers of us. These roots are deep and have to be carefully dug out and removed. At least, they should not be fed or fuelled.

Following the 11 September 2001 bombing of the World Trade Center, NY, this story of unknown origin, circulated the Internet:

A native American grandfather was talking to his grandson about how he felt.

He said, "I feel as if I have two wolves fighting in my heart. One wolf is vengeful, angry and violent. The other wolf is loving and compassionate."

The grandson asked: "Which wolf will win the fight in your heart, grandfather?"

The grandfather answered simply: "The one that I feed."

Happy Vesak! A day to remember the only Buddha there is and to awaken to his teachings.

R344 Simple Joys 249

Piya Tan ©2014 140513 Vesak

Copyright by Piya Tan ©2014