

Who's talking now?

Even though humans, as a rule, have the power of reasoning for ourselves, there often comes a time in our lives when we badly want to talk with someone about some very urgent personal matter. If we have a spiritual friend, a soulmate or a good friend, it often helps to have a living mirror to look into. However, there are occasions when it seems that no one is able to help us. Whom do we then turn to?

Although we are able to reason for ourselves, in times like this, we may still turn to some kind of imaginative “person” or something outside of ourselves for succour. There are many names for such a “person,” but, for convenience, let us call him “God.” In fact, as a rule (or at least, often enough) we actually doubt that such a being ever exists. Hence, the need for belief; we are expected, even demanded, to have “faith” in such an idea.

Belief here means the rejection of knowing, even when it proves the impossibility of such an idea. Theologians might even demand that we should “believe that we might understand: *credo ut intelligas*”! Hence, belief is here said to be more real than knowing. However, it is a *virtual* reality (as in computer games), not a *true* reality (which liberates us).¹

One explanation is that humans do not exist by reasoning alone, but more often we live with feeling. Ironically, we do not often *know* this! Just take a brief moment away from reading this and ask yourself: “Which do I do more: reasoning or feeling?” Recall the most important decisions we had to make, say, the toys that we liked, the friends that we made, the partner that we chose, the job that we took up, the religion that we professed, and even why we are reading this. [Please stop reading this, and reflect on it for a moment.]

When we reason (or “think” about something), we “measure” it. This measuring depends on palpable “things” that we think (that is, regard, perceive, construct) as desirable. In this sense, reasoning actually works only on the surface. It is the way of calculators and computers. We are more than thinking machines: we are feeling beings.

To “feel” here means to rely directly on our senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching. We need to add “thinking” as the sixth sense (it is the mind that makes sense of things). On a deeper level, we need to understand that our sense-faculties are the only tools of knowing, and the sense-objects (sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches and thoughts) are the only things we can ever know. In simple terms, this is the Buddhist theory of knowledge (epistemology).

Humans, then, are not only thinking animals; we are, more importantly, feeling beings. In vital ways, this is what makes us human. It is our feelings that often and really guide us in our choices in life.

And when we have no choice, or do not know what or how to choose, then we have a problem. A “problem” (or, more exactly, a “personal” problem) then is either a lack of choices, or not knowing what to choose. Notice how easy and quick a choice is when we *like* something, but when we see some personal limitations, we have to “think” about it.

In other words, when we choose to disregard the evidence of our direct experiences, we tend to manipulate them or fabricate “ideas” about them so that they are more acceptable to us. This “thinking” without feeling occurs to us more often than we realize. Indeed, when we look back in light and leisure, we often realize that we have tricked ourselves into wanting to believe, against all evidence of our sense-experiences.

¹ See **Miracles**, SD 27.5a (2.6): [link](#); also **Kesa,puttiya Sutta** (A 3.65), SD 35.4a, commentary §3.1 (6) pt 4: Faith in Buddhism: [link](#).

So it is with God. When we have run out of options, in the face of overwhelming fear, we turn to some kind of supreme being for succour. Of course, it is not everyday that we are faced with major disasters. It is the frequent bites of mundane mosquitoes that we need to swoosh away.

It is embarrassing to turn to friends, or even loved ones, to ask them to swoosh away such small discomforts, but it really seems big since it is happening to us. Still we need someone to turn to in such times. Why not God? Especially when he is never known to talk back at us. (Only preachers talk down at us, for their own ends or at their wit's end.) God is a good listener. The Buddhists, especially those following the ethnic traditions have Guanyin, or helpful gods recruited from Hinduism, or fearsome nature spirits.

If we omit children unbrainwashed by religion or power, society is left with these two: those who depend on "big brother" and those who are their own big brother, and so will have no other. If we were the former, we would feel safe to have someone we see as wiser to tell us what to do. We tend to follow what our perceived betters do: this is called "fashion," as in hair-style, clothes, life-style, even religion.

When we are unsure about what to do or what to think, we feel safer and more confident when someone is able to tell us what to do. What about the person who is giving the advice? Whatever advice, or even just plain words or gestures, or even non-responses of such an advisor can make us act or react in a karmic cycle.

This is one important reason why we never give advice in a counselling session. We do not know the counselee or client well enough to give advice to the problem at hand. Even if we think we know the problem well, it is someone else facing it: so our advice may not work, or may backfire. The key point is that when we do advise someone, we become karmically accountable, too. If the other person does well, that is good for us. If the person does bad, we are accountable, too. That's karma.

To be our own "big brother" or "big sister" means to be a self-counselor. Like it or not, we are actually talking to ourselves all the time. Even right now: notice the voice in our head – what's it saying now?

Try this the next time we have some big problem (or even a small one). Begin by asking ourself, "What's going on here?" Let our inner voice answer, don't help it. When we hear an answer, then ask "Why?" Then another inner answer comes. Ask "Why?" again. Do this carefully, like speaking to God, or Guanyin, or a Jedi Knight, or the Flying Spaghetti Monster, or whatever we believe in. Keep on asking "Why?" This method is sometimes known as "thought reduction": we keep asking ourselves until our thoughts are reduced to a good answer.

There is a better way to find answers in our lives (whatever the problem). I don't have any panacea here; only some good ideas. The first comes from a well known legend about Robert the Bruce (king of Scotland, 1306-1329). Just before becoming king, Robert was on the run from the English king's army who had 6 times defeated the Scots under Robert.

In the winter of 1306, it is said, king Robert, running from the English, hid in a cave on Rathlin Island off the north coast of Ireland. There he observed a spider spinning a web on the cave's roof, trying to connect its web from one point to another. Each time the spider failed, it began again until it succeeded. Bruce, inspired by this vision, rallied his people again, and after the Battle of Bannockburn (1314) defeated the English and finally won independence for Scotland.

This story is probably popular folklore, started by Walter Scott (1827). A similar story is told, too, in Jewish sources about King David, and in Persian folklore about the Mongol warlord

Tamerlane and an ant. Empowering stories such as these grow beyond their local roots to enrich, even liberate, our lives.

There is a legend of the Buddha before his awakening, when he first left the palace and had collected his almsfood. When he looked at the swill in his bowl, he felt like throwing up. Then he reminded himself that he had chosen to renounce, and this was the renunciant's meal. So he took the food just as it was. In due course, he awakened to be Buddha.

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