

True to all faith

One of the crippling difficulties of a religion, especially any of the world religions, is that once we join it or “convert,” we have to regard everyone else, even our loved ones, as “outsiders.” This is especially true of evangelical religions. Often, such a religion painfully divides family members and coldly alienates even close friends. Despite all our connections and closeness, there is this one great divide, that is, our religion, separating us from others.

On the positive side, we have people who, for some reason – provided that we are free to live and choose our faith – will openly embrace a faith or faiths they are deeply attracted to. Such person may or may not have given up their old faith, the one they are born into. Some find that somehow they have been so conditioned, or their family or social conditions are such, that they are unable to really give up their old faith.

Yet, they feel something deeply missing from their old faith. From a general survey of such people, they tend to be often attracted to some form of Buddhism. This phenomenon is growing so common today, that it is meaningful for us to see such people as being religiously or spiritually “bilingual.”¹

Just a few centuries years ago, such religious openness was virtually impossible, especially where religion was in the hands of the powerful or the class that ruled or run the community or country. With the rise of greater political freedom, the breaking down of social classes, more open learning, and the greater accessibility to religions (especially through the mass media, such as the Internet), we now have more personal choices of faith.

If we are religiously bilingual, it is as if our heart is in one place (the old religion) and our mind in another (the new faith). By “**heart**” here is meant our childhood conditioning (especially religious), our close connections with the near and dear, and, often enough, our social ambience. The “**mind**” here is our intellectual and social maturity. Either way, we are feeling more emotionally independent.

It is not that we lack faith *in* our old religion, but rather our faith (unqualified and intransitive), is seeking itself. We simply have deep *faith*, but not faith *in* our old religion. To have faith *in* is to be religious; to have *faith* is to be spiritual. More of us are seeking to be spiritual today. We are seeking the true spirit, not the form, of faith. We also fear the shadow of faith.

I was born into a multi-religious family in a multi-religious country. My immediate family was Chinese traditionalist, following a meld of Daoist, Confucianist and Buddhist values. My mother’s side included Catholics and Muslims. My father’s side had Protestants (of the Brethren church). On account of the forced conversion² of my only brother (the eldest) to Christianity, my mother pleaded with me to take up Buddhism for the sake of the family. This was the beginning of my Buddhist life.

For some 40 years now I have lived a deeply committed Buddhist life (including 20 years as a Theravada monk). In the early decades, I made every effort to study the major Buddhist traditions, including western Buddhism. On a number of different occasions, I had thought of joining the Chinese Mahayana, the Tibetan Dzogchen, and even a Nichiren group. My

¹ Jonathan Homrighausen, “Spiritually bilingual: Buddhist-Christians and the process of dual religious belonging.” [Buddhist-Christian Studies 35](#) 2015:57-69.

² Due to family difficulties, my parents had my elder brother living with our eldest uncle, whose wife is a strong Brethren evangelist. Although my brother was very open to all religions as a young person, living with an evangelically active family that runs a church, its members kept on badgering him (such as labelling him, “Unbeliever!”), so that he finally relented and converted. Even in my monk years (1970-1990), he asserted to me that being brothers came first.

main difficulty with Chinese Mahayana then was the fact that I was a Peranakan Chinese from Melaka whose mother tongue is Baba Malay and who spoke very little Chinese.³ With neither language nor wealth, I was regarded as being extratribal.

In the case of Tibetan Buddhism, despite meeting some of their leading teachers, I found difficulties connecting with them. As for the Nichirenists, although I had an admiration for their evangelism, I find them too exclusivist. I had a similar problem with Sangharakshita's Western Buddhist Order, when I was one of their Mitras in the 1980s: I was effectively told to renounce all my Theravada learning and training – which was like tearing my heart out.

Anyway, I was well treated as a Theravada monk, especially by the Thai community, and the Buddhists of Malaysia and Singapore, whom I closely worked with. However, in the 1970s, I was only one of a small handful English-speaking monks, all working on their own, in a community that was steeped in foreign and ethnic Buddhisms.⁴ Working as a **full-time lay Buddhist worker**, assisted by my dedicated wife, Ratna, has been more fruitful in many wholesome ways to this day.

The depth and joy of the early Buddhist suttas contrasted starkly with the religious commercialism, elitism and class club we often see in local organized Buddhism. In time, we found ourselves alienated from this strange worldly tribe, many of whose members seem to see Buddhism as something entertaining or magical rather than educating and emancipating.

On the bright side, we have a small but slowly growing number of Buddhists who see the value of suttas. These are the people, who in their quiet but loyal and loving ways, have encouraged and inspired us to work on. There are also those who confided in us that they are simply disillusioned with “temple” and organized Buddhism, and have nowhere to go to learn Buddhism. A number of such Buddhists have left their erstwhile churches, but found that our temples are actually trying to emulate the success of the churches. For these seekers, it is like getting out of the fire into the frying-pan!

Then, there are the spiritually-inclined from other faiths who often come for our meditation classes and Dharma courses, and those who communicate with us from all over. The common factor is that we are all drawn to the spirituality of the suttas and the joy of the contemplative life. Like them, we find ourselves simply alienated from the old faiths.

Sometimes, the spiritual challenge comes in an unexpected way. A Catholic woman from Sarawak, Malaysia, once confided in me that although she fervently and constantly prayed to Virgin Mary, she often dreamt of Guanyin and had visions of her. I told her that she was very fortunate to be twice blest. I advised her to continue her prayerful life and welcome Guanyin's blessings. In time, she will herself know what to do.

To be spiritual, then, we need not reject the good that are found in others. Even in the suttas, we find the Buddha teaching anyone of any faith or of none. There is no such label as “Buddhist” in the suttas: they are all seekers. However, when they themselves see true reality through the Dharma, they become streamwinners, those who have unshakable wise faith in themselves, and who will surely attain full awakening in due course, even in this life itself.⁵ Buddhism, then, is not about joining a crowd, but about becoming a true individual.

No matter what religion we have or had, or none at all, the early Buddhist suttas will raise us up from the rich ground of our spirituality, from all that is good in us. We should not be

³ More on Piya Tan's religious and social background, see Reflection, “[The good in all](#),” R429, 2015.

⁴ A Malaysian form of ethnic Thai Buddhism is found in the northern states of peninsula Malaysia (especially Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu), while the rest of the country and Singapore are dominated by a more priestly form of Chinese Mahayana, steeped in materialistic Buddhism.

⁵ See Reflection, “[Spiritual streaming](#),” R430, 2016.

discouraged by those who fail the faith: the brighter the light, the darker the shadows. Recognize the shadows, show them our lovingkindness, depart from them. Let us turn to the light. Then, surely, the truth will free us.

R433 Simple Joys 289

Piya Tan ©2016