

To be free, bond

If we are familiar with early Buddhism, we would have heard of the 5 or 6 realms. These are those of devas, humans, asuras, animals, pretas and hell-beings. We know that humans and animals exist. We hear stories of pretas (the departed), but we have never really seen them or the asuras (exploitative demons) or hell-beings (violent in nature) or devas (divine being). We will examine these states, not as outer realities, but as our own psychological states and being.

While we may have a human body, we rarely have a human mind. A human mind is one full of curiosity and experimentation, a great propensity for learning and bettering ourselves; for kindness and caring for others, reaching out even to animals and the world; above all, for good and awakening, that is, to see true reality. All these qualities are mostly absent from the other beings, even amongst the devas, that is, gods or angels. In a sense, the devas don't need these qualities because they seem to be enjoying pervasive joy and blessings.

The point is that we are rarely human. "We" or "I" refers to our minds or hearts (or both). When we are happily meditating or in deep selfless prayer, we are devas in those moments. When we are enjoying some profound pleasures, we seem to be like gods or angels – just for those moments. Then, we all fall down, back down the rabbit-hole of reality.

However, if we notice that all such experiences are impermanent; if we notice they are changing, passing with the moments; if we feel that they are becoming other, gone just as they have come – then, we are learning to be *human*. Our body and its uncertain taste of pleasure and pain are the messengers of our humanity. But we easily forget this precious truth.

We often mistake the messenger for the message. So, we keep chasing after the elusive messenger for more pleasure, ever-lasting bliss, eternal heaven, perpetual paradise, omnipresent God and cosmic Buddhas. We fail to learn or we forget that whatever exists must exist in time: time is change.

Failing to understand impermanence, failing to accept becoming other, failing to stop change, we seek what is outside of ourselves, we try to count our pleasures and blessings. Happiness becomes things, things that are measurable; people become numbers that we keep collecting. We think we can do what we like when we have numbers, that we are in charge.

We are addicted to numbers, to the power of bigness. We measure people by their looks, shape, size, strength, titles, qualifications, wealth, holiness, what they have – people and feelings don't matter. We're are unable to feel, so we seem not to hurt; but we keep hurting others. We still have a human body, but our mind is that of an asura.

Some of us are addicted to routine, going through ritual, repetitive acts and habits. Rituals and habits give us a sense of security and control. Like Sisyphus of Greek mythology, we keep pushing our rock up the hill, then, it rolls down again, as we run after it. We learn to enjoy this as an achievement, especially when the rock hits

bottom and we grasp it. We lust the thrill of pushing it again, and running after it again.¹

Or, we are like the dung-beetle of the **Milhaka Sutta** (S 17.5), proudly pushing our dung-ball around.² We have a human body, but our mind is that of an animal, rising, eating, working, mating, again and again, then dying, but never learning anything about life or why we do all this.

When we are unable to relate to people, we often compensate by hoarding things and seeking likes. People become things, mere voices, mere words, physical looks or bodily shapes. We hide behind a persona, a mask, in some social network – fervently and hopefully eyeing the screen, but never really seeing or knowing people or making friends. We are afraid or knowing others; afraid of being known. This leaves us with a dark emptiness. We need to fill a dark abyss. We then resort to rituals and substances, even to drugs – we have become an addict. We are a preta, one departed from the humans.

Finally, when we fail to see the humanity that defines us, we identify with the group, with the safety of the crowd – we see power in the tribe. We see neither salvation nor security outside the tribe. We see those who are not with us as being against us. We see the need to reject them, even destroy them. Indeed, we may even want to destroy all else, so that we – as a tribe – may exist alone and supreme. These are lives of violence and crowdedness: we have become a hell-being, a chimera of violence. Hence, the hells are depicted as the most crowded place there can be.

One vital thread is missing from all the subhuman states – the asura, the animal, the preta and the hell-being. This is the willingness and ability to accept the humanity of oneself and of others. Without humanity, we fall into the subhuman states, even when we bear a human shell. We may be human, but we are ever bent, lying and crooked; we stalk, we crawl, we pile, we hurt. We have very little space, if any, for humanity.³

The cure is to learn to bond with others, to seek a common thread, to offer space for others in our lives, and live joyfully in the light. If we, as parents, fail to give that space to our children and young, we unwittingly relegate them to subhuman levels. Fortunately, children are often resilient, and quickly flourish when they move into a wholesome environment or connect with some truly happy beings. They often learn by imitation. If they mirror our negative qualities, who is to blame, then? If they mirror our wholesome qualities, our human future is bright.

If anyone or anything is to be blamed for the subhuman traits in us, our children and charges, it is the conditions that pervade such a relationship. People simply respond to conditions. When we create wholesome conditions well and long enough, people will respond wholesomely.

Yet, humans, at their best, are not tribal animals. Humans, at their best, are invariably, alone. It is aloneness that conditions humans to evolve beyond the crowd, be-

¹ On the Sisyphus myth, see [SD 23.3](#) (1); [SD 48.3](#) (1.2.2.2); [SD 49.2](#) (4.3.2.1). On reflections related to Sisyphus, see [R138](#), [R141](#), [R204](#), [R208](#); desiring his rock, [R453](#); laughing at his rock, [R416](#).

² Milhaka Sutta (S 17.5), SD 100.11.

³ See [Saṁsappaniya Pariyāya Sutta](#) (A 10.205), [SD 39.7](#).

come more than a mere species. The most creative moments of beauty are when the artist is totally alone with his tool whether it is a pen, or a pencil, or a brush, or his words, or his body. The finest moment of scientific discovery is in the scientist when he is alone, with a still mind, and looks at the world with his heart. The philosopher is lost alone in his thoughts which then enrich others and posterity.

The roots of the greatest moments in human spirituality are in man's utter aloneness with himself, to discover himself. This is best and beautifully illuminated by the lone Buddha sitting under the Bodhi tree, radiant, shining through the blinding night of ignorance. He shines like the lone bright sun, giving life, love, light and liberty to all who are willing and able to see for themselves that true goodness, even godliness, can only be found within ourselves.⁴

When we bond with others, when we bow in Dharma to others, we seek to bond with that inner goodness. The first step of our Dharma bonding with others is the respect we show them: accepting them as they are. We forgive them for their flaws, we love them, confident that they will learn and grow from them. We rejoice in their goodness and happiness, and this inspires joy in us, too.

Finally, no matter what we do, we have to leave this world just as we have arrived. This is but our camping ground as we move into the light of awakening. Good campers leave nothing behind, but the world as it is. This way, those who inhabit it will be able to rise above the world (just as we have done) by their own goodness, making it a better world, even as it is.⁵

R473 Inspiration 306

Piya Tan ©2016

⁴ See Reflection, [The lone Buddhist](#), R234.

⁵ Further reading, see "The likely cause of addiction has been discovered ...":
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/johann-hari/the-real-cause-of-addicti_b_6506936.html