

Helping one another in faith

How non-Buddhists can do Buddhist meditation

In 2006, one of my meditation class students, a concerned Christian who teaches and counsels at a small church here, came to see me. She asked me how she could get some of her congregation members to meditate. She was concerned that so many of them not only have problems, but are “cerebral,” meaning that they tend to simply follow what the pastor said from blind faith or expect some kind of immediate palpable benefits from their faith. She also remarked that there are many “false prophets” who teach their own concoction of “Christianity,” when they are really opinionated materialistic people.

So what’s new: we see the same problems in Buddhism, I replied without much comfort. Looks like we share the same problems and concerns, despite coming from different faiths. I mentioned a few passages from the Bible that, in my opinion, have close affinity with Buddhist meditation. For example, the Bible says that “the Kingdom of God is within you,” that is, the truth is *not* out there: it is *in* here, which means that meditation can help.

One of the skillful means I suggested to her is that, for a Christian practising breath meditation or lovingkindness cultivation, it is being like Christ crucified. One is removed from the ground and nailed to a cross. Christ was then in an intermediate state, suspended, as it were, between earth and heaven. Similarly, in meditation, we let go of the world, for a while at least, so that we can enjoy higher states. This transition from the world to meditative peace, can be painful at first, but it is worth it.

We shared a number of other interesting points of our respective scriptures related to meditation. At one point, as if by way of comforting her, I told her that the path we have taken—to bring the healing truth to others with the message that they can help themselves—we may have to work alone. Yet, we should neither fret nor fear working alone, especially when it is something in which we hear a calling (that is what “vocation” originally means).

Just before the Buddha’s awakening, his only five attending monks deserted him in contempt, accusing him of being “luxurious” for having eaten a plate of milk-rice (so that he could nurse his body for deep meditation). If the Buddha had conceded to the five that “the majority is right,” we would have no Buddha Dharma today. He struggled on alone on Vesak Day to become the Buddha.

Even so, just before the Crucifixion, in the garden of Gethsemene, the sad Christ was all alone praying for guidance while his followers were asleep around him (although he had asked one of them to keep guard). In fact, after he was arrested by the authorities, his own close disciple Peter *denied* him three times! (This is the apostle who was later enthroned as the first Pope.)

Similarly, today we see many so called Buddhists denying the Buddha, or inventing their own Buddhas; or claiming some teacher of theirs, or the “future Buddha,” to be more relevant today. But my point is regarding something closer to heart: how we should regard failure and suffering. It’s all right to fail; it is normal to have problems, to suffer—but it is also important to humbly seek help when you need it. When we really need help, we begin to know who really are the caring friends and those who are not—or perhaps, not yet.

Weekly Reflections by Piya Tan

Then she comforted me, as it were, by pointing out that the Old Testament contains the story of the prophet Elijah who lived in a time when many prophets were killed by those in power. Elijah thought he was alone and was in fear, but God was behind him all the time. It is interesting, I thought, that fear and loneliness often go together. In meditation, we know the meditator is never lonely, that is, as long as he feels *joy*. It is the lack of joy that makes one feel lonely, not the absence of others.

Sooner or later we will have to stand *alone* in some difficult situation or in an important moment of our lives. It means that something great is awaiting you. You are not really alone: you have your *good karma*, and if you have *joy* deep inside you, you are never alone. Look within at the present moment of the breath: it is the only place you can touch life and reality. There lies true joy and freedom.

We come into this world alone, and will leave it alone, but while in between let us bring solace and wisdom to those who do not yet understand the meaning of this. 25th December is “Buddhist Renewal Day”: think not of what you cannot do, but of what little or much you CAN do for yourself in the Dharma; then do this for others, too.

Only one thing stills trouble me: what would the Buddha or Christ say, if he were alive and well today, looking at what we have done to their teachings!

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