

Free thinking

In the Arana Vibhanga Sutta (M 139)¹, the Buddha reminds us never to think, “Only this is right; everything else is wrong.” He is referring to the point that there are many words for, say, a “pot,” depending on the dialect group you are communicating with. Some people might even stretch this Buddha saying to mean that all religions teach the same good thing. However, I don’t think any masters or experts of those religions are likely to agree. The point is that every religion, nay, every religious group, thinks it holds the only truth.

On a deeper, yet broader, level, the Buddha saying refers to conditionality, that many causes and conditions work together to bring about many more results and effects. The more time we spend reflecting on this, the better we understand how the world and life works. The more we understand conditionality, we wiser we become, and the closer to being true individuals.

The contrary of this ability and willingness to see is the tendency to blindly follow the group, to be caught up in the flood churned up by the rich, powerful and charismatic. To blindly follow the group is to stop thinking. We become lemmings running over the precipice into the abyss. The well known Chicken Licken story (“the sky is falling”), and its ancestor, the Daddabha Jataka (J 322), is worth re-reading, and re-telling our children and children’s children.

We all know the sky never falls: there is no “sky” up there, but emptiness. We only call it so. But something does fall on Chicken Licken’s head, and on the hare’s head in the Jataka. These falling things are still hitting our heads even now. They are called “ideas.” The moment we speak with someone, or see or hear something, we are being hit on the head with ideas: “believe me!” “join me!” “buy me!” “be me!”

The crowd never thinks; only the individual is capable of wholesome thought. That is why we see the Buddha sitting alone under the Bodhi tree. Only later, the five monks gather around to benefit from the Buddha’s awakening. The five monks, too, have decided to leave the crowded life, seeking the open freedom of the true Dharma.

When more such awakened people gather together, their minds shine even more brilliantly. It is in this sense that I understand the Chinese saying, “Three cobblers are better than one Zhuge Liang.”² Even when simple folks learn to think for themselves, they are often better together than even a single brilliant mind. That is why even the Buddha respects the noble Sangha of saints.

Many of us are either unwilling or unable to think for ourselves. We are unwilling to think for ourselves out of fear of rocking the boat, so that we would be cast overboard by those stronger than us. But many are unable to think

¹ <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/7.8-Aranavibhanga-S-m139-piya.pdf>

² Zhuge Liang (181-234) was the most brilliant Chinese strategist of his time, and a loyal minister of the Shu Han kingdom during the Three Kingdoms period.

mainly because we are blinded by the light of success, wealth, power, status or knowledge, and leashed by the fear of losing them.

We become like Sisyphus, who seems to enjoy pushing the rock up the hill, and when it inevitably runs down the hill again, we happily run after it to push it up all over again, and again. We are mesmerized by the predictability of the rock's motions and by the outcome of our actions. We seem to be in control of the rock!³

The Sisyphian rock can come in the form of our view of success, wealth, power, status or knowledge, so that we are fixated to it above everything else. We become enslaved to such views or desires so that we are unable or unwilling to allow ourselves to see better ones. We even show others where more rocks can be found to push up more hills.

All these decades of learning religion has taught me one important thing: we need to give up what we have learned sooner or later. I started off my religious life with the religion my brother was converted to, but soon found Buddhism freer and kinder. Then I found Mahayana bigger and better, only to discover that early Buddhism is simply closer to the truth.

As I search the Buddha's teachings, I am amazed at how the suttas keep explaining themselves, one truth leading to another, clarifying one another. The more I let go of things I have learned and the ideas I treasured, the clearer and more joyful the truth and reality appear. The more liberated I feel. It is like climbing up a high hill. The air becomes cooler, and the vegetation and rocks more beautiful, and it is more spacious. But from the peak, the view and vista are unspeakably peaceful and beautiful. Wish you are here.

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³ For a further reflection, see Yodhajiva Sutta (S 42.3) = SD 23.3:
<http://earlypalisutta.googlepages.com/23.3YodhajivaSuttas42.3piya.pdf>.