

## **The Horse's Teeth**

In every age of our civilized history, we have two kinds of teachers: those who want to control our minds and those who help us to free it. One common feature of all religions, especially the God-religions, is that its preachers want us to fully believe in what he says and do as he says.

There is a big problem here. There are thousands of groups of God-believers, even within a single God-religion. One honest God-believing theologian once quipped: We all believe in the same God, but we are hating and cursing at each other in the name of the same God!

Even as far back as the times of Elizabeth I of England or during the Ming dynasty in China, we have thinkers who spoke out against the limiting habits of religion and for the freeing of the mind so that it can really think for itself to see true reality, and not religious dogma or virtual reality.

Francis Bacon (1561-1626), Lord Chancellor of England, in one of his books published early in the 17th century reprinted a passage that he had found in the records of a Franciscan friary. This passage from 1432 relates how a group of friars tried to figure out how many teeth a horse had in its mouth. It is a good example of the “old” way of doing science.

In the year of our Lord 1432, there arose a grievous quarrel among the brethren over the number of teeth in the mouth of a horse. For 13 days the disputation raged without ceasing. All the ancient books and chronicles were fetched out, and wonderful and ponderous erudition, such as was never before heard of in this region, was made manifest.

At the beginning of the 14th day, a youthful friar of goodly bearing asked his learned superiors for permission to add a word, and straightway, to the wonderment of the disputants, whose wisdom he sore vexed, he beseeched them to unbend in a manner coarse and unheard-of, and to look in the open mouth of a horse and find answer to their questionings.

At this, their dignity being grievously hurt, they waxed exceedingly wroth; and, joining in a mighty uproar, they flew upon him and smote him hip and thigh, and cast him out forthwith. For, said they, surely Satan hath tempted this bold neophyte to declare unholy and unheard-of ways of finding the truth contrary to all the teachings of the fathers.

After many days more of grievous strife the dove of peace sat on the assembly, and they as one man, declaring the problem to be an everlasting mystery because of a grievous dearth of historical and theological evidence thereof, so ordered the same writ down.

(Francis Bacon, 1592, in CEK Mees, “Scientific thought and Social Reconstruction,” *American Scientist* 22 (1934): 13-24)

Most Buddhists would laugh or at least smile at this story, because we pride in the view that Buddhism teaches us to think for ourselves and to free our minds, and so be rid of suffering. And we are surely right in thinking so. Buddhism teaches us to know our minds, tame our minds, and free our minds,

## *The Horse's Teeth by Piya Tan*

But this is easier said than done. For if we follow any guru's teachings today, we will sooner or later, want to claim that *only* our guru's words are true. But we well know that after the Buddha's time, various Buddhisms arose. While such Buddhisms might be inspired by the Buddha, for various reasons they were compelled to adapt various Buddhist teachings to answer local challenges or for their own sectarian purposes.

Even within Theravada, too, after the Buddha Buddhism, for example, became more and more rigid and scholastic in its approach. Instead of learning to free our minds, we memorize and repeat concepts after concepts. Often we feel that only our method is right or the best, and all else is wrong.

There is nothing wrong in having views: after all, knowledge is language-based and provisional. But we should investigate carefully why we hold such views. For this reason (and not for this alone), for example, the Mahā Kamma Vibhaṅga Sutta<sup>1</sup> (M 136) warns us against the notion that only we are right and “all else is wrong.”

Some however have conveniently misconstrued this statement to mean that we can claim what we like of Buddhism. (This is actually more “I”ism or “I”-pod philosophy, than Buddha Dharma.) This is where, for example, people speak for the Buddha rather than letting the Buddha's Teachings speak for themselves (for example, by studying the early Suttas).

So what does Buddhism teach us here? First, we begin to learn things on a “word” level (using language and concepts). Then we continue to “think” for ourselves to test if such concepts and practices are true and useful. Then in due course we try to “directly experience” more and more of true reality for ourselves (especially through mindfulness practice and meditation). This is the beginning of the liberation of the heart leading to wisdom.

Let us not be blinded by the light, but let us awaken with it.

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<sup>1</sup> M 136/3:207-214 = SD 4.16