

Breaking free

The Buddha was against the idea that only those of certain social classes were “twice-born,” especially the priest or brahmin caste (who introduced the idea). They claimed that they were first born of their mothers, and then “born” or initiated into their class. They also claimed that only the “twice-born” were religiously and socially pure.¹ The Buddha teaches that we are born neither pure nor impure, but our actions make us so, and karma works on everyone alike,² just as water finds its own level and washes all alike.

On a broader mental level, we can still usefully speak of two births that we all need to go through. This is not a religious claim of being “born again” through faith or belief in some religious teachings, which is an imaginative way of saying that we have been accepted into a tribal religion or system. In fact, Buddhism speaks of our being “born again and again,” and there’s the rub. Imagine we keep coming back to the same cycle of chores and things around us. We will find this at least boring or, at worst, painfully meaningless. This is because we naturally want to grow, to be wiser, to be free.

Our first birth is that of our body being free from that of our mother’s, so that we can have a life of our own. Unlike animals, which are born with the basic instincts for survival, we are born completely helpless, and need the constant protection and nurture of our parents. We are humanized by them.³

Our first birth is only a bodily one, and our body matures naturally. Our mind, however, needs to be separately nurtured, first by our parents or care-givers, our family and relatives, our schooling and peers, our religions or some kind of beliefs – and most importantly, in due course, by our own efforts at knowing oneself, others and the world. This is our socializing process.

There are those who manage to learn from their past so that they are more free to think and act for themselves, making their lives both happy and meaningful.⁴ Such people become great teachers and healers, liberating us personally and enriching much of society. This is our individuating process.⁵

Unfortunately, not everyone really does well in his personal mental cultivation. We are often conditioned by the ideas and experiences of all those who have nurtured or influenced us, or by a dominant culture around us, for better or for worse. Many of us are stuck all our lives with such conditionings.

Some of our conditionings are so powerful that they can hinder, even stunt, our mental development for the rest of our lives. Or worse, we might glorify and transmogrify such negative conditions into “virtues” and act on them, so that we fall deeper below the human baseline.

¹ The Buddha’s humorous reply is that, in that case, the bird and other egg-born creatures would be similarly pure as they, too, are “twice-born,” first, their mothers lay the eggs, and then the eggs hatch. See **Aggañña Sutta** (D 27,3-4/3:81), SD 2.19: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/2.19-Agganna-S-d27-piya.pdf> & **Vasala S** (Sn 1.7), SD 72.2.

² See **Vāseṭṭha Sutta** (M 98 = Sn 3.9), SD 37.1: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/37.1-Vasettha-S-m98-piya.pdf>

³ See “We are not born human,” R216, 2011: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/RB44-Not-born-human-111130.pdf> & “To love is to learn,” R282, 2013: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/R282-130306-To-love-is-to-learn-107.pdf>

⁴ See “Sad is not really bad,” R278 2013: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/R278-130206-Sad-is-not-really-bad-105-rev.pdf>

⁵ On the individuation process, see **Saññoga S** (A 7.48) @ SD 8.7 (4): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/8.7-Sannoga-S-a7.48-piya.pdf> ; also Piya Tan, We got class? (Reflection 12 0523): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/12-0523-We-got-class-81.pdf>

This is the subhuman realms of the animals rooted in fear, ignorance, and routines of seeking food, rest, play and sex; the asuras, power-driven beings who are ever measuring others to manipulate and exploit them; the ghostly pretas whose only struggle seems to be that of having things, collecting things, caught up with things, but never satisfied with any; and the hell-beings who live only by suffering and violence.⁶

Buddhist mythology speaks of these four subhuman “planes,” but we need not wait for death or some other life to fall into these states. They are not fixed categories but mental states. They are real enough to us through our own force of habits. We can become any of them, right here and now, if we are to fall from our humanity. Our negative conditionings are the chains and fetters that can turn us into animals, asuras, pretas or hell-beings even here and now.

The Buddhist life begins with our efforts to prevent our falling into such unwholesome states. We are only and truly safely uplifted from them by our own goodness through the five precepts.⁷

These states, rooted in our past, however, still lie repressed and latent, so that we are not even aware that they are there, lurking in our lives’ shadows. That is why we sometimes, at the worst of times, find ourselves falling into bad thought, bad speech, bad action. And we are shocked, even remorseful, wishing all this had not happened. This is the beginning of our journey to inner freedom and spiritual awakening.

Buddhist meditation, especially the cultivation of lovingkindness, helps us to fearlessly face these mental demons so that we can free ourselves of them. Lovingkindness is grounded in unconditional self-acceptance which is then extended to others, so that our hearts are cleared of all negative states, and abide in bliss and beauty.

When we are filled with lovingkindness, good arises easily, bad is impossible. On a deeper level, we begin to see the chains that fetter us to our past and stunt our growth and freedom. These are the chains of self, of doubt, and of fear.

The chains of self confine and limit us to our bodies, so that we think that it is all we are, or that there is something permanent about them (such as our having abiding souls). This view fixates us to false and painful notions such as “I’m like that, I cannot change!” This view is then extended to others, too. We have been going through both bodily and mental changes since the day we were born, and we are still undergoing these processes, even as we read these lines. We are not entities, but processes. We are yet unfinished, waiting to awaken to our true self, as it were, one of joy and freedom.⁸

Yet we often wonder how we can ever be truly happy, so that we can stop running around like headless chickens. We each have a head and a heart with which to think and to feel: to see and learn from what is really going on in and around us. **The chains of doubt** not only hold us back from seeing the meaning of it all. It makes us doubt if we can ever be really good and happy. Since we cannot “be,” we fall into the rut of “have,” of collecting things, money, sex, power, even holiness. Yet, happiness is what we *are*, not what we have.

If we live our lives centred around only our body and self, then we would fear losing them. Fear arises from desire, the habitual tendency to collect and to have. Inevitably, we must lose what we *have*; we can only “keep” what we *are*. Fear breeds blind faith and superstition, the subtle or not so subtle ways

⁶ On how *mettā* helps, see B L Frederickson, “[Your phone vs your heart](#),” New York Times (Sunday Review), 23 March 2013: SR14.

⁷ See “Life’s three highest priorities,” R65, 2008: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/R65-08-1231-Lifes-3-highest-priorities-7.4.pdf>

⁸ See “Man, the unfinished,” R204, 2011: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/54-Man-the-unfinished-110817.pdf>

of fooling ourselves that we would not fail or face problems. **The chains of superstition** are our habit of looking for answers outside of ourselves, when the roots of our problems are really in our own hearts.

We begin to break these chains of selfishness, doubt and fear when we unconditionally love ourselves, by forgiving and accepting ourselves just as we are. As we bravely examine the roots of our pains, we see that there is *no one cause* and *no one* to blame: only conditions. We are all victims of conditions, rooted in mental states. We rise above these conditions by freeing our minds from negative inclinations and fixations. Lovingkindness is a great freedom-fighter. Hate and fear can only be conquered by love.⁹

As we think, so we are. If we fully feel our heart's love, then we rise above the prison of words and thoughts. If we live this love, then we free ourselves from our selves, our doubts, our fears – and we are truly able to show others the same joy of love and light.

R 286 Revisioning Buddhism 71

[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's example and teachings]

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⁹ For a special study, see **Emotional independence**, SD 40a.8: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/40a.8-Emotional-independence.-piya1.pdf>