

## **Why rituals should be abandoned**<sup>1</sup>

Without thoughts our mind is a blank slate, like that of a newborn baby. We would then be helpless because we are unable to respond to the world outside. Even if we had the kind of body we have right now but our mind is a blank slate, we would act like a baby, and would not last very long without any external help.

This blank slate is like the newly formatted memory of a computer. We need to format it before we can use it. This is like our learning of language. The first kind of language we learn is one of direct reference and experience to people (mommy, daddy) and things (doggy, kitty). In due course, we learn the language of emotions. And in time, we learn to read and write.

As this language learning evolves, we also learn to use ideas (perception), which are essentially a memory-based mental activity of recognizing a present object or stimulus by relating it to a similar experience in the past. All such knowledge, then, is necessarily of the past.

From such ability to recognize the present from the past, we form views. As far as the present conforms, or seems to conform, to our past, we feel reassured. Our views of self, others and the world seem to work. This is a safe world, but one in which we do not really learn anything new. Or, we do not allow anything new to intrude into our world-view.

The problem is that we are not alone. Besides family members, we come to make friends, and notice that there are many other people who live and think differently. As we become more aware of such differences, our notion of self becomes stronger. A common behaviour is to draw closer to those who share our views, and push away those who do not.

For many, if not most, of us, this self-view only becomes stronger as our learning and experiences broaden, and as we age. This may or may not make better persons of us. If we habitually and unconsciously build up this self-view, then we will only become ever more self-opinionated, plodding along through life burdened and blinded by our shell of views.

Or, we might realize, even often notice, how we change our views over the years, especially as we age. Or, we are willing to forget the self, at least momentarily, and try to imagine, even accept (rightly or wrongly), the views of another, especially when we feel uplifted by them. On the wholesome side, we are more willing to learn from others. Such wholesome behaviour is more likely to bring us happiness, but we do not always know how to do this properly.

What powerfully hinders us from learning from our experiences is that we think that we are always right. Whatever does not concur with our database of the past, does not compute, and must be wrong. In other words, we do not have an evolving self or growing mind. This is a fragmented or modular self, an island cut off by floods of views from other islands with views, but without any means of contact or communication.

Yet, the younger we are, the more we are willing and able to learn and better ourselves. But as we grow, conditioned by social conduct and rituals, propelled by our views, our ability to learn is severely curtailed. We have been conditioned by our parents, family, friends, schools, religions, society and the media.

---

<sup>1</sup> This is a reflection inspired by some of the ideas in Richard P Hayes, "[Ritual, Self-deception and Make-Believe: a Classical Buddhist Perspective](#)," 1992. Hayes is emeritus professor of Buddhist philosophy, and here he gives a philosophical view of meditation. Although his key terms are helpful, I do not fully agree with all his views.

If the conditioning is negative, then we are likely to have a fragmented self, be an incomplete, even hollow, person.<sup>2</sup>

We are incomplete because we are heavily dependent on external experiences, on the approval of others, to authenticate our selves. So we move through life collecting people and things that agree with us. People and things then burden our lives, yet we do not feel really connected with them. We feel alienated from them. Our interactions are mostly ritualistic: saccharin words, plastic smiles, airy acts. We feel no joy in them – so we turn to distractions.

The main reason for the fragmented self is that we are either unable or unwilling to use our own minds, to look into our own hearts. Yes, we think are doing this, but thinking is what created all these views in the first place. The reality is that we are simply deceiving ourselves: our thoughts simply deceive us. Self-deception is most difficult to notice when we are always looking outside without really looking at ourselves.

We may have a better idea of how self-deception works by seeing it as a ritual. Our ritual way of thinking puppets the strings of our actions and speech, making them ritualistic, too. It shapes our rigid personality, one that never bends, but eventually breaks through our inability to see beyond the “I.”

Rituals, good or bad, are rooted in a kind of make-believe or simply pretending by way of suspending reality. One common Buddhist example here is the ritual of bowing respectfully to an image, usually that of the Buddha. This ritual often includes an offering of lights, incense, flowers, water, fruit or even food. This ritual is clearly an act of pretending in that we are acting *as if* we were in the presence of the living Buddha, even though clearly this is not the case.

Such ritual gestures of giving is “make-believe” because often enough we (the Buddhists) actually have the lights to brighten our room; or burn the kind of incense that we like; or offer the kind of flowers that we prefer; or would later eat the food offerings ourselves.

A second Buddhist ritual is that of sitting in meditation. Whether done alone or in a group, this ritual involves sitting, usually on the ground, like a meditating Buddha. Sitting in this way evokes the Buddha’s calm appearance, an image of one free of greed, hate and delusion. But as many of us may be aware, this is not always the case (especially for beginners, casual meditators or ritual followers): we struggle just to *look* as if we are calm like the Buddha, but we are still struggling with desire and ill will; burdened by sloth and torpor; shaken by restlessness and remorse; befuddled by doubt.

We may be told that this make-belief behind such rituals reinforces our sense of belonging to a “Buddhist” community. Bowing before an image in a certain way (along with other rituals) differentiates one group or sect from another. Such ritual actions make us members of a particular group or tribe, and exclude those who belong to other religions, even other Buddhisms. Such a group, “my” group, “our” society, might even be seen as a special community of the wise or the holy, who are above and beyond ordinary people.

In fact, such a belief – that we are members of a privileged group -- is clearly partisanship, a false sense of group solidarity. Such rituals then are instruments of self-deception. As noted, this self-deception is rooted in a fragmented self and blindsided groupthink. For such reasons, the Buddha admonishes us to abandon any attachment to rituals and vows.

In practice, however, rituals can be an important part of Buddhism: this is where the make-belief is drastically diminished, and the “true reality” aspects are highlighted. For example, the various offerings we make before a Buddhist image are all objects for reflecting on impermanence. Even a Buddhist image

---

<sup>2</sup> Further see Piya Tan, Reflection, “If I were a hammer,” R269, 2012: [link](#).

serves to remind us of some level of true reality: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and non-self; or to inspire us with compassion (even for the undeserving) and moral courage for good (even in the face of overwhelming odds).

When meditation is properly done, and not as part of a sectarian practice or partisan Buddhism, it is a basis for inner stillness and unconditional love – both of which inspire joy in us.<sup>3</sup> This joy is a key to seeing the Dharma of the suttas, which, in turn, gives us a better self-understanding. In due course, when we have broken such fetters as those of attachment to rituals and vows, and practising the perception of impermanence, we board the boat that follows the Dharma stream to awakening.<sup>4</sup>

R349 Revisioning Buddhism 98

[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

Copyright by Piya Tan ©2014 rev

---

<sup>3</sup> See Piya Tan, Reflection, "Not by food alone," R262, 2012: [link](#).

<sup>4</sup> See **Entering the stream**, SD 3.3: [link](#) & **(Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1), SD 16.7: [link](#).