

## **Non-sectarian**

A friend from Australia, known for his compassion and friendliness, after reading Reflection 390, “The Buddha, One and Only” (2015),<sup>1</sup> wrote back to thank me, but admit that the reflection was quite challenging, particularly for someone who is “trying to be” non-sectarian. Then, he realized the usefulness of questioning: Was I being caught up in the “right or wrong” (agree or disagree) dichotomy, or should I appreciate the purpose of learning Dharma. While the former tightens more knots, the latter is liberating, he concluded. This reflection is based on my reply to this kind and thoughtful friend.

Trying to be non-sectarian can be difficult in the sense that it is like living a simple and joyful life, with shopping malls (religion) sprouting all around, and noisy crowds filling them. They keep on buying because the products are well packaged and marketed, and promise all kinds of wonderful benefits, whether we need them or not.

The crowd is enthralled by the young and good-looking sales representatives who speak with enticing voices over the merits of the products. The products they are selling are the “best” there are, and none other is worth even looking at. One salesman even claims that some 900 million (or thereabout) consumers use his product. Therefore, it is the best, and we should purchase it, too.

Experts have often warned against these instant-success products as they do have serious side-effects. But who are these experts who do not use the products, anyway? They are simply small-minded, jealous over the huge success of the omnipresent products that are the craze of the crowd. So argue the marketeers.

The point is that those who see no benefit from the product are silenced by the roar of the crowd. Or, they quietly fall away, wondering if they had been wrong, the odd man out, the crowd’s reject. A few thinking consumers suddenly realize they are in the wrong crowd. They simply want to have nothing to do with the crowd. But they are very few and far between.

Freedom has a cost. Often it means we must stand alone, be alone, like the Buddha sitting under the Bodhi tree. But it’s infinitely better to be alone, to walk away from the crowd that is going the wrong way. Early Buddhism teaches just that: we need to renounce the crowd.

First, we need to leave behind the madding crowd. Originally, temples were forest-monasteries and wooded retreats where we can be by ourself, or with like-hearted people who love inner peace and true friendliness. Today, they have mostly become religious malls.

Then, we need to leave behind the clutter of our senses. They are like 5 ringing phones. We simply need to turn them off, for a while at least. Then, we have the peace to just be with our own mind. As we befriend our mind, we notice that it is full of stories and thoughts we have created for ourself. So now, we need to let go of these stories and chatter.

Being “non-sectarian” actually begins here, in our own mind. The only way to clear our mind and free our heart is not to take any of these stories and chatter seriously, not to believe them at all. We need to renounce them. This is our first non-sectarian act, and the key one. For, once

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<sup>1</sup> See R390 “[Buddha, one and only](#)”.

we are caught up with one story or chatter, we will be sure to have issues with others. We become a solipsist – we see only ourself to the total exclusion of others.

Being "non-sectarian," then, is not about being religious or even about religion (unless we make it so). Indeed, we can say that being non-sectarian is to simply renounce all religions. But then, we would be depriving the medicine from those who need it most, the religious crowd.

Once, when I was still a Theravada monk, a nephew of mine, a born Christian, came to visit me. The temple bell rang for the morning puja. As Buddhists are wont to do, I told him that he should go to pray in the church down the street. "I can't," he said. When I asked why, he replied, "Different denomination!" "Now, you know why I'm not a Christian. If I joined one church, I have to denounce thousands of others. Don't I lose a lot of friends that way?"

Being non-sectarian is not about being popular: a friend to all is a friend to none. Being non-sectarian neither means that "everyone is right" (which is undiscerning hypocrisy), nor that "everyone is wrong" (again we have failed to examine striking similarities). Non-sectarian means "I'll listen to you," like when we listen to someone who is hurt or suffering, or someone who is bursting with joy over some success. It is about compassion and gladness, both expressions of lovingkindness.<sup>2</sup>

Being non-sectarian means that we take no sides, especially where there is more than one side. So, taking any side means looking less or not at the others. But right and good are not sides of things. They are universal truths. Everyone in their right mind would accept what is good and right. The difference is how they speak about them and how they go about it after that.

Above all, being non-sectarian is the most blissful moment we can have, if we work at it. It is when the mind is at peace with itself, especially when we are communing with nature, looking at a beautiful flower, listening to a gurgling stream, hugging a huge ancient tree, or simply gazing at a mountain through the mists and clouds, or at a starry night sky. We don't even need religion here.

The best experience of being non-sectarian is when we are free from all thoughts and emotions. Our mind then takes no sides and has no sides: it is like still waters, running deep, calm and clear. When the heart is calm, we feel forever; when the mind is clear, we see everything. In all things, there is no side to take: there is only our being.

Religion is a crowd; spirituality is a liberating aloneness. A spiritual person is ever alone even when he stands before a crowd, or is in the midst of a crowd. That's the best way to pull others out of the crowd when they show the least readiness. The crowd is blind to itself, just as religion sees not itself.

Organized religion is like a city struck with a terrible illness, and we, the spiritual, are the only ones not infected. Since we cannot heal the inhabitants' illness, we should at least keep away from them. When we are safely away in the fresh space of the forests and hills, we discover that there are healthy peaceful people happily living there.

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<sup>2</sup> These are the "divine qualities," viz lovingkindness, compassion, gladness and equanimity: see *Brahmavihāra*, [SD 38.5](#).

Religion tends to be an urban illness today. It seems to be the playground of the affluent and the leisurely, an elite club who think they are untouched by suffering. If we even appear to be suffering or lacking, we can't be members. We are left to karma (they say) and our own devices. Yet, if we are patient enough, a lone individual will come to us uninvited to offer us just the succour that we need. Or, we can be that lone individual looking out for the ill and lost, to raise their spirit, to inspire them. Then, we are the most non-sectarian person of all.

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

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