

Faith in fiction and fact

If we keep on repeating an idea – whether it is bad or good, small or big, false or true – we will believe in it in a matter of time. This happens in religion more easily than in any other form of organized ideas or human conduct. This is even truer today than ever before when anyone – bad or good, small or big, false or true – has access to any kind of facts about anything. Such views and beliefs are very easily spread through the mass media.

This is very true of Buddhism, especially as we have it today, than in most other organized or popular religion. This is because Buddhism is arguably the most tolerant and adaptable of religions (or whatever you want to call it). Almost anyone – Buddhist or not – can say or think whatever he likes about Buddhism. Most of what we see as Buddhism today are person-centred teachings, rather than truth-centred teachings.

Ask almost any Buddhist we know, what kind of Buddhist teaching they follow or recommend – they are very likely to fervently praise a certain living teacher or some ethnic guru. Neither the Buddha nor the Dharma is ever mentioned. In short, we have become a *guru-based* religion, even cult – a far cry from the Dharma-centre teaching of the historical Buddha.

What's wrong with "guru-based" faiths? The clearest disadvantage is that it is based on the ideas of a single person (neither the Buddha nor the Dharma), and his word is final, and his action blameless, even pure, in every way. This is sometimes called the "power-mode." Secondly, such a faith, invariably, centres on money. Whatever the teachings or practices may be, they subtly but inevitably point to making the faith, especially the teacher, richer, with a life of comfort and dominance.

In fact, it is not wrong to say that almost all religions, including religious missions (such as the foreign Buddhist missions) today are disguised but lucrative business systems. They invariably exploit their followers' faith for monetary profits. For this reason, we have the gospel of success, or fat "Buddhas" who grant wealth, and beliefs that are mystifying and grandiose, promising the devotee the highest afterlife reward – such as a passport to paradise – for their present faith and fee in the teacher and his teaching.

With such a free market of facts and wide range of facilities to spread any idea, anyone – lustful or charitable, hateful or loving, foolish or wise – can put together any view or belief he has, and make it bigger and more complex – even more violent – than it really is. In such an ambience of well-marketed Buddhism and bewildering bazaar of beliefs, it takes us some genius, and a lot of courage, to move away from such grifters. Indeed, when such self-centred and self-fabricated ideas of instant gratification are legion, simply to reject them, to move in a more sane direction, would be a revolution!¹

What has the Buddha to say about making such revolutions so that we do not fall for the guru, and his private and limited teachings? How do we understand the very source of religion itself – the sacred texts – so that we do not ourselves become charismatic and charlatans that society today so easily fall for, and deprive us of the real deal in what is really good and true, helpful and healing?

¹ See Reflection [Revolution!](#) R210, 2011.

The best guidelines for clearing away the intoxicating and toxic clouds of religion and beliefs is found in a short but remarkable early teaching of the Buddha preserved in **the Neyy'attha Nī't-attha Sutta** (A 2.3.5 + 2.3.6), the discourse on the implicit and the explicit. Literally, *neyy'attha* means “whose meaning is to be drawn out” (or implicit) and *nī't-attha*, “whose meaning has been drawn out” (or explicit). This very short text is here reproduced in full:

“Bhikshus [Monks], there are these two who *misrepresent* the Tathagata [the Buddha thus come]. What are the two?

- (1) Those who explain **a sutta whose sense is explicit** (*nī't-attha*) as being implicit.
 - (2) Those who explain **a sutta whose sense is implicit** (*neyy'attha*) as being explicit.
- These, bhikshus, are the two who misrepresent the Tathagata.

Bhikshus, there are these two who do not misrepresent the Tathagata. What are the two?

- (1) Those who explain *a sutta whose sense is explicit* as being explicit.
- (2) Those who explain *a sutta whose sense is implicit* as being implicit.

These, bhikshus, are the two who do not misrepresent the Tathagata.”²

The Commentaries explain these two terms – relating to the “ways of teaching” (*desanā*) – as referring, respectively, to teachings based on the person (*puggalādhiṭṭhāna desanā*) and on a concept (idea) (*dhammādhiṭṭhāna desanā*).³ Notice that the Pali word for “concept” or “idea” here is *dhamma* (*dhamma*, “truth” + *adhiṭṭhāna*, “application”).⁴

In fact, we can properly take *dhamma* here as meaning “truth,” which also incorporates “what is real (not false)” (*tathā*). In other words, we have 2 kinds of teachings: those based on fiction (myths, stories, fables, etc) and figures (similes, hyperboles, etc) on the one hand, and those based on truths and facts (represented by the term “idea”), on the other.

In short, we must be able to distinguish between fact and fiction. (I’ve used “fact” here to simply mean what is true and verifiable.) Fiction is, by definition, something false – not really true, something imagined – but they can be very useful in highlighting to us vital ideas about good and bad, kindness and cruelty, truth and beauty – in other words, about how we can grow as individuals, and as a community, local and global.

In early Buddhism, for example, many teachings are based on stories of gods, kings and fabulous non-human beings (like demons and dragons), and even a personification of all that is bad, called Māra (“Death”). When we apply the principle of the “two teachings” of the Neyy'attha Nī't-attha Sutta here, it means (if we are not to misrepresent the Buddha) that we need to draw out what these teachings are trying to tell us: What is the meaning or significance of this teaching or story?

As a rule, we cannot and should not take such stories *literally*. In other words, it does not matter at all whether we believe these events or beings to be historical (most of them are not).

² A 2.3.5+2.3.6 ([SD 2.6b](#)).

³ This idea is found in the Nettī-p,pakaraṇa (Nett 164 f), the Majjhima Commentary (MA 1:24) and the Paṭisambhidā,magga Commentary (PmA 449).

⁴ Further, see esp [SD 36.1](#) (1.11.2) & [SD 47.20](#) (1.2.3).

But, we surely need to understand what they are rightly teaching us, and put that into proper practice.

There is a dark side to religion which is very difficult to detect, but the effects of which are obvious enough in time – the devotees will be exploited and harmed beyond any human decency, and sadly they have themselves to blame for being blinded by the light.⁵ Sadly but truly, cult gurus, as a rule, tacitly at least, regard themselves as being *above* the law, and regard themselves *as* the law. They are, as such, sociopaths, who really have no regard whatsoever for humanity despite their lip-service.

Sadly, too, their followers tend to be attracted to their guru's "power-mode," highlighted by the cult teachings of imaginative Gods and deities, prayers that free us from our sins, rituals that destroy our bad karma, and gurus and vows that promise us good fortune, if not heaven itself. When we transfer our fears and hopes to objects instead of identifying or defining our psychological or emotional issues, and examining their causes, and solving them – we are only feeding the shadows, and are distracted from our real and lasting problems. We remain addicted to the dogmas and rituals, and driven by beliefs and hopes. Instead, we should be working to be truly liberated as emotionally independent individuals here and now through wise faith.

An important reason that gurus, cults, and false and exploitative teachings flourish is because those who know the truth, for the wrong reason, choose to be silent. While it is true that bandits prosper when the king is weak, it is also true that when the king begins to act nobly, the bad are put in their just places.⁶ During times of universal deceit, telling the truth becomes a revolutionary act.⁷

We must at least imagine the kind of happy life and future that would be widely beneficial. Imagination – when we understand its true nature – can be a vital part of the human experience and evolution. It allows us to imagine, to see beyond where and what we are now, beyond the limited or measurable, beyond race and religion, beyond life and death as we understand them. Even academic pursuits comprise both a scientific approach (mostly measuring and calculating the palpable) and a humanistic approach (cultivating the imagination, creativity and feeling beyond the limits of the senses, even the mind).

All we need to know right now, to begin with, is that our mind is capable of imagining virtual realities. But we need the heart to temper it with truth and beauty. There is one key difference between the mind and the heart: where the mind only *imagines*, the heart guides the mind to what is *truly good and beautiful*.

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

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⁵ See esp **Bad friendship**, [SD 64.17](#).

⁶ See **Cora Rāja Sutta** (A 2.39), [SD 47.7](#).

⁷ This famous quote is of uncertain origin, though attributed to George Orwell (but untraced): see <http://quoteinvestigator.com/2013/02/24/truth-revolutionary/>.