

## I, Borg

One of the most exciting science fiction stories is that of "I, Borg," the 23rd episode of the 5<sup>th</sup> season of the US science-fiction television series *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (TNG), the 123<sup>rd</sup> overall episode. It was originally released on 10 May 1992, in broadcast syndication.

The Borg [singular as well as plural] are a fictional alien race that appear as recurring antagonists to the *Star Trek* teams. The Borg are a collection of species that have been turned into cybernetic organisms functioning as drones in a hive-mind called "the Collective" or "the Hive."

The Borg use a process called assimilation to force whole species into the Collective by injecting microscopic robots called nanoprobes, as well as by surgically adding cybernetic parts. The Borg are driven by a need for "perfection," and assimilate members of other species to further that goal.

Individual Borg rarely speaks but sends a collective audio message to the targets, ominously declaring that "resistance is futile." The exact phrasing of this pre-recorded-sounding statement varies and evolves over the various episodes and film. One phrase, from TNG, is:

"We are the Borg. Your biological and technological distinctiveness will be added to our own. Resistance is futile."

The complete phrase used in *Star Trek: First Contact* (1996), is:

"We are the Borg. Lower your shields and surrender your ship. We will add your biological and technological distinctiveness to our own. Your culture will adapt to service us. Resistance is futile."

The phrase "resistance is futile" became prevalent in popular culture from its use in the television show *TNG*.

The *Star Trek: TNG* series, set in the 24th century, follows the adventures of the crew of the Federation starship *Enterprise*. In the 123<sup>rd</sup> episode (the 5<sup>th</sup> season), entitled "I, Borg," a solitary injured adolescent Borg drone is found amid a crashed Borg scout ship on a remote planet. The *Enterprise* medical team restores the Borg to health, and, in due course, he shows signs of missing his Collective, and in due course admits "feeling alone." The *Star Trek* Chief Engineer, Geordi La Forge, gives the individuating Borg the name "Hugh."

Captain Jean Luc Picard of the *Enterprise* conceives the idea of planting a computer virus into Hugh and returning him to the Borg Collective, thereby infecting the whole Hive and destroying the whole species. However, as Hugh begins to demonstrate free will – he starts to use the single personal pronoun, "I" – they have to question that decision.

They decide to return him *without* the virus. This is followed up in the Season 6 cliff-hanger, "Descent," which depicts a group of rogue Borg who had "assimilated" individuality through Hugh but were in turn subdued by a rogue android called Lore. Many Trekkies swear that episode 123 is the best one of the series, even of all science fiction TV series.

The Borg theme, as a whole, inspires me to think about the question of free will and religion, especially regarding evangelism and ethnic Buddhism. Like the Borg, both the evangelical religions (or whatever they call themselves) and ethnic Buddhism are about the “tribe.” Evangelical Christians and ethnic Buddhists “belong” to a particular crowd that is defined and delimited by some kind of “culture” and rules that differentiate tribal members from outsiders.

However, we must concede that in the case of ethnic Buddhism, there tends to be more latitude for outsiders if they are willing at least to respect the ethnic ways. The evangelists, as a rule, are very strict about their membership – *you are either with us or against us* – although modern sensibilities and religious freedom prevent them from being too fanatical about such boundaries.

Like the Borg, an evangelist has no choice but to work towards evangelical “perfection,” that is, to *assimilate* others into their tribe. To them, “resistance is futile,” as our rejection will surely consign us to their hell, although such remarks are seldom heard outside the tribal walls. The minds of the evangelical Borg, in other words, is quite fixated on the tribe and its dogmas, and they seem to have no free will in such matters.

The ethnic Borg, on the other hand, do not see it as their task to assimilate anyone. Indeed, we are born into an ethnic Buddhist Collective, or we can mate our way into it by marrying an ethnic Borg. Even then, such a biological melding is mostly an external affair, as the couple is also free to gravitate to the other culture, or straddle between the two. In other words, the arrangement here is more flexible because ethnic Buddhism tends to be generally quite tolerant of outsiders. In fact, ethnic Buddhism can be a helpful stage for us to mature into the Buddha Dharma.<sup>1</sup>

There is another interesting difference between the evangelical Borg and the ethnic Buddhist Borg. While the evangelists are mostly book-bound – their faith is defined by the holy book – the ethnic Buddhists are by nature spiritually illiterate. As a rule, most ethnic Buddhists do not really know their scriptures. Their attitude towards the sutras and the sacred is often one of toady awe or fuzzy fear. Psychologically, however, both the evangelicals and ethnic Buddhists are superstitious in their respective ways. “Superstitious” here means that they tend to attribute any good that they enjoy to some external agent or divine grace or good fortune.

An interesting development in *Star Trek TNG* is when – in the double-episode *Descent* (seasons 6-7) – Hugh becomes an independent Borg leading a troop of rebel Borg to fight the evil android Lore from enslaving them. On a subtler level, we see evangelical Christianity engaging more with the world and revising significant parts of their dogmas and practices in the face of new learning and rapid weakening of church influence in public affairs. Such changes are often initiated by their own members who are more aware of the realities outside the Collective and of the world as a whole.

The ethnic Buddhists, on the other hand, tend to be more of a museum, and have essentially remained unchanged for centuries. Or, to be more fair, we must say that they reflect the dominant cultural trends of their own traditional societies, often dic-

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<sup>1</sup> On how we can mature spiritually through ethnic Buddhism, see SD [48.1](#) (5.2).

tated or influenced by their society and government.<sup>2</sup> What they preserve is usually a traditional form of ritual or magical Buddhism.

On a different level, we have the early Buddhist texts stating that all who have not attained the path – those who are not streamwinners, once-returners, non-returners and arhats – are “outsiders” (*bāhira*). Doesn’t this make the “noble sangha” – the common name for all the saints – a “Collective,” too?<sup>3</sup>

The noble sangha—the “community” of saints—is not a tribe that anyone can join. It is simply a name for all those who are either walking the noble eightfold path (that is, the streamwinners, the once-returners and the non-returners) or have reached nirvana (that is, the arhats, including the Buddha). This is like referring to all those who have graduated from a university course. These saints have broken the fetters that hold others down as worldlings.

The worldlings are “outsiders” in the sense that they have not started walking the path to awakening. They have not even signed up for any university course yet. The noble sangha, then, is not a collective, but simply a convenient designation for all those who are sure of awakening or are already awakened.<sup>4</sup>

All the “outsiders” have to do is understand and accept – either through wise faith or by investigative wisdom – the universality of impermanence. Then, we mindfully aspire to attain streamwinning in this life itself, that is, we go for refuge in the 3 jewels (understanding the meanings of buddha, Dharma and sangha), and work to overcome being self-centred, superstitious and doubting the efficacy of our self-effort for awakening.

There’s nothing to believe – certainly not in our self – but in ourself.<sup>5</sup> To discover our self, the best that we can be, we must understand what it means to be alone with ourself. This self-wisdom and self-transformation prepare and empower us to be able to inspire and heal others, even change society.

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

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<sup>2</sup> This situation applies esp to Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand, and also Tibet and Chinese Buddhism in general.

<sup>3</sup> For details on these 4 kinds of saints (*ariya*), see [SD 10.16](#) (11-14).

<sup>4</sup> On “outsiders” (*bāhira*), see **Cūḷa Hatthi, padōpama Sutta** (M 27,25.4) n + [SD 40a.5](#) (1.1.2); **Dakkhiṇa Vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 142,5(11)) + nn, [SD 1.9](#); [SD 47.1](#) (1.1.2).

<sup>5</sup> See **Entering the stream**, [SD 3.3](#).