

## Better change ourselves, than change religion

Unlike other world religions, early Buddhism does not teach a supreme deity, world-creation, world peace, or even prayer for succour. Or, we can say that early Buddhism does not speak of such issues as the evangelical and moneytheistic religions do. The evangelical religions want to dominate the world: they have a “world vision.” The moneytheistic religions (including some “modern” forms of Buddhism) are mostly interested in financial success and social domination.

We can say that these are the “macro” religions: they think big: they want to take charge of others, dominate society and the world. Often they think so big, as religious history attests, they even wage religious wars and commit religious violence. It seems as if they have become so big that they cannot help themselves. But the great disadvantage and danger of this is that it neglects a vital small detail: the individual and personal development.

Early Buddhism does not teach a supreme deity, for the simple reason nobody has seen one, we do not need one, and there are insurmountable philosophical problems about the notion. It might have been best, if such a deity exists, for him to appear in person publicly and tell all those who speak for him to stop doing so. But since he does not, anyone can say anything about him and do anything in his name. Some might say this is a supreme form of religious anarchy. Religion should be a way of leaving God alone, that is, until we actually meet him face to face, and let him speak for himself.<sup>1</sup>

Early Buddhism does not teach world-creation because there is no supreme creator. If we begin at the beginning, first things first, then we must admit that the notion that everything must have a beginning is simply due to the limits of our own thinking, our philosophical poverty (as Bertrand Russell puts it). Whatever exists (including God) must exist in time; hence, whatever exists must be impermanent. Time necessarily has no beginning. Numbers, too, have no beginning: it makes no sense to ask when did the numbers 1 or 1000 begin? Eastern philosophies and religions generally have a cyclic concept of time, and as such do not have the problems of a first beginning or final ending. Things seem to go in endless circles, if we really look closely.

God-religions tend to have a linear conception of time. God, it seems, creates the world at point A, and in due course decides to end it, at point B. Do not ask: what happens before A? or, who created the creator? Then there’s no problem. This is called a dogma: it discourages thinking and reasoning. Yet compared to eternity, our worldly life is just a tick in cosmic time, and we are challenged to decide between an eternal heaven and eternal hell.

As cosmic infants, we are told to decide our own destiny, without ever being taught about accountability for our own actions. We are enticed with promises of heavenly joy and threatened with the pains of hell so that we keep in line. But, if there is an almighty God, who really is responsible for our actions?

How can we ever know heavenly pleasure or happiness when there is no suffering in heaven? How can we know hell’s pains, when there are no pleasures for us to define pain with. Anyway, this problem seems to be solving itself, as most God-believers today avoid mentioning them.

---

<sup>1</sup> See further “**Please leave God alone**,” *Simple Joys*, 2009:15.3; also online version: <http://dharmafarer.org>.

True divinity is unconditional love. It is to accept and respect others just as they are, and to begin there, to gently and patiently raise them to greater heights, to our own level, even beyond. True divinity is compassion, that is, to show kindness even when others do not deserve it. (For, if they deserve it, it is simply gratitude.) True divinity is appreciative joy, rejoicing in the goodness of others, being happy at the happiness of others. True divinity is our heart's equanimity, a gentle silence and inner peace when even our best efforts fail. For, beings fare according to their own actions. There comes a time when even the most caring parent must let the growing child leave the safe shade of the family tree, so that he can discover his own goodness.

Early Buddhism does not teach world peace. Frankly, I don't think any religion really teaches world peace, much less bring world peace. A religion tends to speak more for itself and for its own glorification. There is no religion that really says, please choose the religion you like, or you don't need to have a religion. Hence, religion is a self-contradiction, when, claiming to care for everyone, or to pray for world peace, it really thinks only of its own good. Religion is often a clever way of saying that when we fail (being bad, etc), it's our fault, but when we succeed (being kind, etc), it is because of religion, or *my* religion to be exact. The point is that there is no good or bad religion, nor are there good or bad people. There are only good or bad *thoughts and actions*.

When a religion is alone and supreme, it will turn on its own kind. These self-inflicted sufferings perhaps only end when there are other religions, seen as a threat to itself. Then there are inter-religious conflicts and violence. We might say there are only two kinds of religions: mine and yours. And mine is always the best, that is until I switch to another.

Nowadays, religions are learning to accept one another somewhat more, not because they are more enlightened, but often because of the moderating presence of a secular government, or that science and free learning tell us more useful truth than religion does.

We are at peace today *not* because of religion. Our global peace and progress are the blood, tears and toil of so many visionary individuals working for political freedom, open education, social justice and common sense. If religions were left to their own devices, as during the colonial days or the centuries before that, I would not even be able to write this reflection, and you would not be free to read this.

Early Buddhism does not teach prayer, even for succour. There are those who will hug the clay feet of idols, or cry out to unseen beings, or commit bizarre silliness and atrocities when they feel they are in dire need of help. Or, they would pray for their own success, and the defeat of their opponents. Indeed, if everyone's prayers were answered, even if we limit this only to those of God-believers, we would mutually wipe ourselves completely out in a blink. This is more destructive than any weapon of mass destruction!

The Buddha declares that if we wish to have long life, beauty, happiness, fame or heavenly life, prayer does not help at all. The only way to win these blessings is to live our lives in a manner conducive to such goals. If we wish to have long life, we need to live healthily. If we want to be beautiful, we must keep to rules of good health, hygiene and beauty. If we want to be happy, we need to learn how to make others happy. If we wish to be famous, we must live a life that is virtuous and blameless. If we

want to go to heaven, we must conduct ourselves as if this life is heaven itself, that there are gods and angels—those great in virtue—around us, if we care to look closely enough.<sup>2</sup>

The truest religion is when we look into the eyes of the suffering, and see compassion, and we move our limbs with unconditional love to lessen that suffering. Even better, we teach those in pain how to help themselves. Above all, we need to teach ourselves to look within, where the real roots of suffering lie, and to remove them.

Revising Buddhism 40

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

Copyright by Piya Tan ©2011 rev 110704

---

<sup>2</sup> See **Iṭṭha Sutta** (A 5.43/3:47-49) = SD 12.4 (2). See also "Prayer without words," *Simple Joys 2*, 2011 ch 44: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/29-Prayer-without-words-101215.pdf>.