

WHAT NOT TO LOOK FOR IN A RELIGION

Reflections on the Kālāma Sutta
(for Buddhists and others
harassed by evangelists)
by
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Religion for itself

Following the 11th September 2001 bombing of the World Trade Center in New York by Muslim terrorists, troubling fundamental questions about religion arise again among thinkers. Is religion more of a bane to mankind than a boon? In a recent article published in the Washington Post (30 Dec 2001), Prof Pervez Amirali Hoodbhoy of Islamabad openly remarks:

... Islam—like Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism or any other religion—is not about peace. Nor is it about war. Every religion is about absolute belief in its own superiority and the divine right to impose itself upon others.

Never before in our history are we blessed or cursed with a global free market of religions and cults.

Every religion has its own methods of marketing itself and try to answer every whim and fancy of the prospective converts.

While it cannot be denied that **faith** is a powerful factor behind such efforts, **political power** and **material profit** are clearly more powerful motivators. In other words, religion is big business today.

Free charter of inquiry

In such a free market of religions, we need to be wise as regards what to purchase and consume. The question is whether we should buy things and pay for services that we like, or select those that are really good for our health and wellbeing. The Buddha has given us some open guidelines.

Once the Buddha was staying in a town in northern India called Kesaputta where the Kālāma clan lived. The Kālāmas visited the Buddha and asked him,

“There are some holy men and priests, Venerable Sir, who come to Kesaputta and claim that only their teaching is right and condemn the teachings of others.

Then some other holy men and priests come to Kesaputta; and they, in turn, claim that their teaching is right and others wrong. As a result, doubt has come to us. Which of these holy men and priests spoke the truth?”

The Buddha replied: “It is proper to doubt in things that are doubtful. Come, O Kālāmas:”

1. **Do not believe anything based on tradition (including prophecies and revelations).**
2. **Do not believe anything through lineage.**
3. **Do not believe anything through hearsay (gossip, rumour, etc.).**
4. **Do not believe anything because it accords with holy scriptures.**
5. **Do not believe anything through logic.**
6. **Do not believe anything because it is a point of view.**
7. **Do not believe anything through having considered the reasons.**
8. **Do not believe anything because one is convinced of some theory.**
9. **Do not believe anything through the testimony of some reliable person.**
10. **Do not believe in anything thinking, “This person is a respected preacher.”**

“Kālāmas, when you yourselves know what is evil, blameworthy and censured by the awakened wise, abandon those things. When you yourselves know that these things are good, not blameworthy, but praised by the wise, accept and practise them.”

These famous words of the Buddha, often been called **the Charter of Free Inquiry** (Kesaputtiya Sutta, A 1:188 f, 2:191 f.), were given by the Buddha over 2,500 years ago and their openness and uniqueness are still unrivalled even today. It reflects the Buddhist spirit of free thought and investigation leading to proper practice and self-realization of the true nature

of our existence and so winning true self-liberation. Let us now examine each of these points given by the Buddha.

(1) DO NOT BELIEVE ANYTHING BASED ON TRADITION (INCLUDING PROPHECIES AND REVELATIONS)

In ancient India when paper was hard to get and books were rare, religious devotees and students **listened** carefully to what their teachers taught and memorized them. The Buddha advises us not to accept anything by merely listening to others. The reason is simple: the teacher could be wrong; or the listener could have misunderstood the message.

A very common example today can be found in the **commercial advertising** which keeps on repeating the seeming superior quality of a product with only one aim: to arouse **desire** in the public, that is, the desire to purchase.

Modern commercial advertisements—especially outside the West—are not so much to inform as to create a desire for something, usually something you do not really need or could not afford. Worse than that: if you respond to such advertisements, you actually pay for it! No wonder the prices of such things are so high.

The rule is: **Avoid things that are well-advertised**. If you buy them, you will be paying for the advertisement as well. Imagine, if they are really good and necessary products, would they need any advertisement? Good wine needs no bush.

Moreover, they are not necessarily the best product, but most certainly more expensive than unadvertised one in many ways. This is even more tricky when applied to religion, because if you respond to such well-advertised religions, you will pay them with more than just money, but with your family, friends, job, culture and, often enough, with your own sanity.

There are today enough religious cults and groups to cater for every eccentric, perverse or insane opinion anyone may have. It is just a matter of looking around hard enough!

Subliminal conditioning

Many religionists, especially the evangelical ones, like to use this advertisement or “**propaganda**” technique (very much like the politicians during election time).

The evangelists use such slogans as “You are a sinner!” (to invoke fear and destroy self-worth), “The Lord died for you!” (as if we should understand it by their mindset) and “Believe and be saved!” (suggesting that we cannot think for ourselves).

Such slogans are repeated over and over until a person, when the will is weak or through peer pressure, simply succumbs to those subliminal suggestions. In other words, one gets so used to the idea that one actually believes those statements to be true!

The technique of repeating a message to influence other minds is called **indoctrination**. It is a very common method used by evangelists and closed religious groups (be they Western or Eastern) who take advantage of the listeners’ emotions. Such preachers try to put fear into their congregations and unbelievers with the terror of hell-fire, eternal punishment, the Devil and so on, or make promises of instant answers to their problems.

As a rule, these preachers do not really know what all these things are, and can only say that their religious scriptures say so. In other words, it is not through personal experience. If something cannot be experienced through our five senses and our minds, then it is said to be **metaphysical**, that is, purely speculative, and anyone can say almost anything about it!

For example, if a preacher claims that “God created the world”: this is a metaphysical statement. You cannot really prove or disprove such a statement. That is why the preacher declares that you must have **faith** in such matters.

However, why stop there, since we can just as validly declare that the world has **no creator**, and have less problems with such a statement. At least, one would not be punishing unbelievers if one’s religion became powerful, nor start wars and conquer others in the name of God.

The best way to avoid being indoctrinated is not to be emotionally involved; that is, not to be carried away by such talk. In spiritual terms, all such talks are really **idle and malicious talk**, since they are at best speculative and triumphalist. This was how Horace Walpole, the British writer, remained unconverted by the fanatically emotional preaching techniques of John Wesley, the famous Protestant evangelist.

God or Karma?

Some evangelists claim that their God is “loving” and forgives “sinners.” For whatever evil deed you have committed you will be forgiven—all you need to do is to believe. These “sins” however are not universally accepted ideas nor related to universal values.

“Sin” really means not believing in God: the question now is whose God? Each God-religion claims that only their God is true. How then can all such religions be true since they are all mutually exclusive systems?

The history of the God-religions is one of great and unjust suffering forced on innocent people and cultures. The hands of such religions are stained with the blood of innocents and unnecessary destruction, all done in the name of their God. [See the author’s article on “Say No! to the Evangelists.”]

Karma, on the other hand, operates by itself, justly and, one might say, unforgivingly. A Buddhist knows very well that karma “records” his every deed and their potential results. He also knows that whatever happens to him is the result of his past karma and present conditions—but it is within his power to change his present circumstances and future course.

Father-figure

Some people think that they are weak and need a “father figure” like a God-idea. This is like a sick person who says that he needs a healthy “doctor figure” to get well! After all, it is the way you think that makes you feel that you are weak or sick—with some help from the “You are a sinner” indoctrination of the evangelists. The real healing, however, takes place only in one’s own mind.

In a way, a Buddhist may believe he is “fated” to have become what he is, but he should not be “fatalistic” into resigning himself to some divine will and think that there is nothing in his power to improve things.

A true Buddhist understands that the past, in a manner of speaking, is fated—this is the “nature” aspect of our lives. The present and the future, however, are within our control—this is the “nurture” aspect of our lives.

We are made up of both nature and nurture—the **mind** links both of them. It therefore matters very much how we think: **as we think, so we are!**

Faith or knowledge

A loving God may forgive your sins, but karma will not: karma operates on its own due course! We should not push our responsibility to God or anyone else. We may ask God for forgiveness or even “bribe” Him through prayers, penances and sacrifices.

But **karma** is a natural order of things, like water finding its own level. This explains why Buddhists and Buddhist communities tend to be more peaceful and friendly than non-Buddhist ones. We know that our karma will return to us—that we *become* our karma!

By merely believing in a God-idea does not mean that we are forgiven of our “sins.” In his “Sermons”, **Augustine**, the 5th century Church Father, ironically wrote: “**Faith** is to believe what you do not yet see, the reward for this faith is to see what you believe.”

This is interesting because if Augustine’s logic works, then if we keep on believing that we have seen little purple (or green) aliens, we would actually be rewarded by meeting them one day! Coming to think of it, his logic may work!

The point is: does this Augustinian faith give us the wisdom to winnow away unreality from reality? Otherwise, we keep seeing little green aliens and believe them to be real! Imagine a religion that is based on this tricky notion as its foundation!

In other words, in such a system, the thinking has already been done for you. It is understandable that those religions that preach the God-idea demand faith and belief, because it is impossible to prove the existence of God—who, after all, is all things to all men.

Indeed, if prayer really works, all those we hate or dislike will be exterminated. And there are also those who do not like us: we, too, will be exterminated. So many of us will be exterminated that there will be very few left to pray!

The mind is the true creator

Buddhism does not demand such a faith as preached by Augustine because the Buddha teaches that the **mind** is the creator of all things. Any sane person will know that he has a mind. **You may deny God, but you cannot deny your mind!**

The First Noble Truth of Buddhism is that life—indeed all existence—is **suffering**. If you hate the word, it only proves the point—no one likes suffering. I do not like the word either: a better translation for the original Buddhist term *duḥkha* (Sanskrit) or *dukkha* (Pali) is **unsatisfactoriness**.

You may deny God, but you cannot, in your right mind, deny that there is unsatisfactoriness or suffering!

Buddhists do not blame “God” for the sufferings and unsatisfactoriness of this world: they blame it on their own minds.

Purpose of life

Yet if you realize that there is unsatisfactoriness in this world, you have realized the **purpose of life**. If you realize suffering, you know that you are not good enough. If you know that you are not good enough, it is natural that you want to be better.

The true purpose of life, therefore, is **to grow**, that is, to grow spiritually. This spiritual growth starts with the desire to be a better person and which matures with self-realization.

Buddhism begins with the obvious and goes on to discover the less obvious. It goes from what one knows to greater wisdom, as a result of which one has less and less ignorance until one is spiritually free.

The true religion sets you free; the false ones shackle you with a self-forgetting bondage that only becomes more severe. The choice is quite clear: “Believe and be saved!” (from whatever), or “**Know and be free!**”

(2) DO NOT BELIEVE ANYTHING THROUGH LINEAGE

A **tradition** is an opinion, belief or custom handed down from our ancestors, usually by word of mouth. In some religions, it refers to the unwritten part of their holy scriptures. The Buddha advises us not to blindly accept such traditions which, after all, are conditioned by the time and circumstances long ago, and may not apply to the modern situation.

Very often, the origin and meaning of such traditions are lost through the ages. Then people begin to follow them blindly and not daring to question them.

The test is a very simple one: if a tradition is meaningless and brings no benefit to the present society, it should be discouraged or abolished. This should be done especially when the tradition is harmful (ie going against the 5 Precepts) and allows some people to take advantage of others.

This is not to say that the Buddha was an iconoclast. In the last year of his life, for example, he declares that one of the important factors contributing to the progress of a nation and of the spiritual community is that of keeping to established norms and rules, that is, respecting social conventions (D 2:73, 79; A 4:15, 21). This teaching, however, is given in connection with social progress and harmony.

Meaningful ceremonies

Just because “our ancestors have been doing it” does not mean that the tradition is good for most people. Making meat offerings for the deceased, for example, goes against Buddhist teachings on two counts at least. Firstly, it is against the First Precept (that is, one should not kill, nor cause to kill, nor condone killing). This principle, known as the “threefold purity”, is taught in the Dhammika Sutta of the Sutta Nipāta.

It is important to add here that killing in the name of religion, whether it is God (whatever one calls Him) or the Buddha, is totally wrong and evil. A “religious” war is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms.

Secondly, the deceased is reborn into another life-form and as such cannot partake of any of the offerings (which are, after all, only a gesture of our love or gratitude that is better shown in personal ways like sweeping our ancestors’ graves at least once a year, or better, by doing social service and charitable work in their name.

Other examples of **negative traditional practices** are burning paper houses, noisy rituals and gambling during funerals. Most of such traditions (which are expensive, wasteful and environmentally polluting) have been invented and introduced by greedy priests and quacks who make a living through the ignorance, superstition and gullibility of the masses.

We do not need to convert to another religion just because we disagree with such practices—we only need to stop doing them and opt for simple Buddhist pujas (worship services) or use secular (non-religious) rites.

A **good tradition** is one that not only promotes material well-being in a person and harmonizes people together, but also brings spiritual benefit to oneself and to others. Such traditions are meaningful in that they reflect the true nature of life and remind one of the true purpose of life.

Such traditions are often simple and do not demand much expenditure or inconvenience—and they have an educational and spiritual value (that is, when the participants know what they are doing).

(3) DO NOT BELIEVE ANYTHING THROUGH HEARSAY

A **rumour** is a talk that some people try to spread about but which is of doubtful accuracy and often based on ulterior motives. It is very similar to **gossip** (small talk) and tends to spread very quickly.

A rumour often becomes public opinion or a view easily acceptable by those who are ignorant on the one hand, and those who profit by it, on the other. The Buddha warns us not to fall prey to rumours for their results are generally harmful.

Problem analysis

There is a beautiful Buddhist folk tale (**Daddabha Jātaka**, J 322) that shows how dangerous rumours can be. Once a hare was sleeping under a bush with large leaves and a huge ripe fruit fell on the bush with a loud crash. The hare was dreaming when this happened and it thought that the sky had collapsed. It panicked and ran through the forest shouting that the sky had fallen. The other animals foolishly ran after the hare and together they rushed blindly towards the deep ocean where they would surely drown.

Fortunately for them, a wise young lion saw them heading towards unseen but certain danger. With a loud roar, he stopped them in their tracks. When told of the reason for their panic, the lion then asked the hare to bring him to the scene of the “falling sky”, only to find that a ripe fruit had dropped with a loud crash.

The story is a clear example advising us to find out exactly what has happened and not simply listen to rumours. This story is perhaps one of the earliest examples of analytical psychology!

True but dangerous

Our newspapers today often carry advertisements offering to tell our fortune or selling some good luck charm (including Buddha images), and from their number and frequency they must be having a very lucrative business.

Even “monks” in robes advertise themselves as **fortune tellers**. “Buddhist monks do not lie,” it is said! But are they really Buddhist monks, and if they are, then they should know that fortune telling is clearly prohibited by the Buddha as an “animal art” (that is, a wrong livelihood).

Furthermore, can we afford the luxury of fortune-telling monks (much as they claim that they are using it as a “skilful means”) when we have a serious shortage of proficient monks who have studied the Scripture to teach us how to practise and spread the Dharma?

Assuming that fortune-tellers do make some right forecasts, it does not mean that all our problems are over. They have only temporarily got rid of the symptoms of our problems—but their root-causes are still there! That is why fortune-telling is like a drug you get addicted to them. In fact, good fortune tellers are often good amateur psychologists or character analysts, too.

People like to be told that they are going to be all right, and with some mysterious sounding terms and ideas like “seven years’ bad luck”, etc., the gullible clients are easily convinced.

Help yourself!

Are fortune-tellers really concerned over their clients’ problems or are they more hopeful of personal gains? **If fortune-telling really works, there would be no fortune-tellers around!** For, they would be the richest, most powerful and fortunate people in the world since they can know their fate and those of others!

A young student once came to me and asked if I could tell him his fortune. When I asked why he wanted to know his fortune, he replied that he wished to know if he would pass his examinations. Then I explained to him that if I had told him his fortune, there would only be two possibilities: either he would pass or he would fail.

If I were to tell him that he would pass, then he would most likely become over-confident; if I were to tell him that he would fail—then why study, he might think, since he was going to fail anyway. So I suggested, “Would you like to learn a technique whereby you can get what you want?” “Oh yes!” came an eager reply. I taught him the cultivation of lovingkindness and he left with a bright happy face.

True but useless

Commercial meditation (unlike “professional meditation” taught by qualified psychotherapists) was very popular in the 1980s and 1990s. The mental shamans who peddle this watered-down form of meditation had learned yoga or meditation from Oriental teachers and teachings, and then they concoct and package their own brand of “meditation” (claiming that they are “non-religious”).

Spiced with the saccharin sweetness of management psychology and success jargon and labelling it with an “affordable” price tag they attract achievement-hungry executives and sales-people who are unaware of the real thing that is more complete, more safe and free of charge.

A family I knew once paid nearly \$5,000 for a commercial meditation course. When they later tried Buddhist meditation, they realized, to their shock, that they had previously only received the “scraps” of what Buddhist meditation offers, and, to their relief, they have found the path to the heart of spirituality.

Fortunately, this late-20th century fad has faded, and more and more people (even those of other religions) are turning to the real thing – **Buddhist meditation**. It is common today, for example, to find many good Catholic priests who know about Buddhist meditation or who practise it. The reason is simply because such people have tasted the spiritual soup for themselves and found it peacefully nourishing.

As someone wisely puts it: “They know what God, not what the church, wants for them.” In other words, the final truth lies in oneself, not in an organization or group.

(4) DO NOT BELIEVE ANYTHING BECAUSE IT ACCORDS WITH THE HOLY SCRIPTURES

The early Buddhist Scripture or Tripitaka has been estimated to be about eleven times the Christian Bible, and the Chinese Tripitaka or the Tibetan Canon

is many times larger than that. Despite this fact, the Buddha does not insist that we follow the Scripture blindly. On the contrary, he advises us not to lead our lives only by the book - but more so by its spirit. The letter kills, the spirit lives.

Holy scriptures are man-made

Scriptures, no matter how holy, are after all, the work of human beings. Through the ages, there are bound to be some alterations, losses and additions. In fact, there are no sacred scriptures that are free from interpolations or additions made later by pious, ignorant or fanatical theologians and scholars.

The copyists or scribes themselves often make mistakes when copying the scriptures. This led to different versions of the same story or doctrine. That is why we have so many different versions of the same holy book (like the Bible).

Sacred scriptures were written in a language of a past time of a foreign place very different to ours. It is difficult to know the real sense that was originally intended in the written word. Meanings of words and ideas often change through the ages, and what we understand now may have a different meaning in the context of the scriptures or the intentions of the religious founders.

Very often the scriptures give stories and practices which are outdated and do not apply to our present way of life. As such, we should not simply follow such ideas and practices.

Blind belief in **sacred books** often started wars and fanaticism, even today. It leads to silly superstitions (like the ancient belief that the world was flat) and socially unhealthy practices (such as the caste system and the low social and suffering position of women).

Books after all are ink-marks on blank pages—they can be interpreted in any way (rightly or wrongly) by theologians, scholars, writers, lay followers, quacks and anyone who speaks before crowd.

Free market of religion

The **Internet**, as a radically democratic and global means of immediate communication, is a fertile flea-market of free expression. However, the main problem of Internet realities is that it is difficult to distinguish between the true and the false.

The wise and the insane alike with some knowledge of web-mastery or some help can propagate his ideas on a global scale at the touch of a button. However, in the hands of the wise, the Internet can be a great blessing.

So who or what is our best **spiritual authority**? Simply put, it is LIFE itself. A proper perception of human life must endorse the written word. For the true Buddhist, at least, his living experience and insight into the true nature of life and existence are the final authority—not the written word. Life is not a book to be read and believed: life is to be lived.

Being famous without any ability

God-centred religions are founded on the God-idea. Insofar as they place God first, they cannot really give the highest priority to life. Understandably, suicide bombers come from such religions.

However, the main reasons for such violent and dehumanizing terrorism are more political than religious. However, when religion and politics mix, the religious followers are caught in a double-bind, a religious catch-22, especially when one cannot reason beyond one's religion.

When religious teachers and leaders usurp God's place and claim that those who die for their religion would be rewarded with greater pleasures in heaven, what has the economically and socially impoverished men in a sexually repressed male-dominated society to lose? This is the meanest of all conmanship: **religious conmanship**.

George Bernard Shaw once quipped that "Martyrdom is the only way in which a man can become famous without ability." I do not totally endorse what Shaw says, but I think we understand what he means.

Life-centred religion

Let me repeat my point that a truly humanistic religion, one that really cares for mankind and the world, is a **life-centred religion**. A religion that teaches that God created man, can at best claim by that fact that human life is precious above all else.

Our global society now realizes that human life, indeed all life and nature, are interdependent. This is called **interbeing**, a word coined by Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk living in France. What

we do ultimately affects the whole universe around us.

Indeed, only a life-centred religion can be truly environment-friendly and compassionate to all beings. Only a life-centred religion can be truly **tolerant** of others: such a religion is Buddhism.

This is not to say that Buddhism is atheistic. The Buddhist texts speak of many heavens with different categories of angels and gods with a very powerful father-like god called Brahma who regards himself as the creator of the universe. Buddhists respect such gods as they respect life itself: Buddhists treat the gods like good neighbours—but we do not worship our neighbours!

This is because Brahma and all the angels and gods are a part of **the cyclic universe**. According to Buddhism (and Indian philosophy), time and the universe is cyclic: ours is a pulsating universe (a curved Einsteinian cosmos, if you like). As such, like the universe they inhabit, the divine beings themselves (including the almighty) are impermanent, no matter how long-lived they may be.

As such, properly speaking, Buddhism is a **transtheistic** religion, one that transcends theism. In other words, for Buddhists belief in God or gods are not necessary for personal or global salvation.

[Read *The Lesson of the Four-faced Buddha*. Dharma for the Millions no. 15.]

(5) DO NOT BELIEVE ANYTHING THROUGH LOGIC

Based on what has been said so far, one might misunderstand that Buddhism is very intellectualist (ie "rational") and be very attractive to the so-called "free thinkers" (who are neither "free"—in the sense that they are prisoners of their own notions and conceit—nor are they "thinkers" because they have not seriously thought about the stand they have taken!).

The true free thinker is an awakened person — especially the Buddha (who is truly **free** and who has **thought** most profoundly, and won awakening as a result)! Others vainly try to make the universe revolve around themselves.

The law and karma

Logic is the study and use of the conditions under which patterns of argument are valid or invalid.

Logical reasoning is used to find out whether a set of arguments is sound or unsound, regardless of whether they are morally right or wrong.

In other words, logic is concerned only with correct reasoning but not with good and evil, or moral right and moral wrong.

A lot of logic is used in **law** and the legal profession. A good lawyer is an expert in logical reasoning which he uses to prove his case for the benefit of his client. Whether the client is innocent or guilty, good or evil, the lawyer's duty is simply that of defending the client to the best of his ability.

If the lawyer succeeds in winning the case, his client is legally innocent; but if he loses his case, his client is guilty before the law. In other words, the client's guilt or innocence depends, to a large extent, on his lawyer's ability.

In this manner, the good and the innocent have sometimes been unwittingly condemned to shame, undeserved punishment, or even death. The law can therefore be cold, amoral and unjust! It has therefore to be tempered with **justice**. If a guilty person is duly punished, there is justice; but when the guilty party goes free or when the innocent suffers, there is a miscarriage of justice.

On the other hand, **karma**, or what has sometimes been termed "moral or natural justice", works without a judge, jury, lawyer or court. Karma works fairly and exactly for all—returning good for good, evil for evil, affecting all alike. No logical reasoning or long-winded arguments are needed for the operation of Karma, just as no amount of logical argument can alter gravitation.

Logic can be mechanical

"Logical" people often claim that there must be a reason for everything. However, if we care to reflect a little more deeply we would discover that most of the things we do or say have to do more with **emotion** than with reason or logic. A very good example is **love**.

We often do not know why we love someone or like something. This is because love (like hate, anger, jealousy, worry, etc.) is an emotion that controls every moment of our lives (both waking and sleeping). Even our dreams are founded on what we feel.

On a more important level, it has to be understood that we can only do something meaningfully and beneficially when we **feel** like doing it—not only because we **think** about it. The heart and the head must work hand in hand! Emotion and reason are the two sides of the same coin, and having them both in proper proportions makes a **balanced** person.

Balanced life

In other words, logic is only an instrument for testing the validity or soundness of an argument (as in the on-off logic of computers). It is not an end in itself, and much less a religion, in itself.

As such, we should not be unduly carried away by logical reasoning, but give proper consideration to the ethical, moral and spiritual aspects of an argument or a situation. The spiritual side of life is impossible to be proven by logical reasoning alone, if at all; it has to be felt and lived by each person for himself.

On a light note, one might say that if life could be lived by reason or logic alone, then we would evolve into "magnoccephalic quadrupeds", large-headed humans with a body and limbs like an octopus! I'm quite contented having a clear head at the top of things with a warm heart at their centre.

Yet this does not mean that we must live by blind faith. Life is to be lived on the wings of positive emotion and clear reason. The head and the heart should be balanced by **right mindfulness**.

Above all, we should not allow others to do the thinking for ourselves. All I am doing here is to encourage ("instill courage in") you to think for yourself to go beyond holy books, holy men, temples or churches and go directly to "God" himself.

If your body and mind are the temple of God, then you need not go any farther to find your life's answer.

(6) DO NOT BELIEVE ANYTHING BECAUSE IT IS A POINT OF VIEW

Reasoning is the intellectual faculty of the human mind. We often hear people say, "Everything must have a reason." This statement is not true all the time. It is just like saying that everything must have a cause. Time has had no cause: can one say when time began? Or, can we ask when the number 2 was invented? Similarly, not all things have a reason, for

not all things are within the thinking power or understanding of the human mind.

This situation—that some things (usually the most important ones) are beyond logical reasoning—is clear from scientific discoveries. The more we know through science (especially theoretical physics), the more we find that needs to be known—the more we really know, the more we discover that we do not know! Then we are getting somewhere. For that is where Religion begins.

The highest truth

The highest truth is beyond logical reasoning and human language, since language is only a **construct** based on social conventions and arbitrary ideas. Ultimate reality is something without a cause, origin or creator; for if it were so, then it would be subjected to change and destruction. Then it would not be the highest or absolute truth.

Many words and terms in religion are **meaningless** except within a religion (like a dialect with in society). As such, no religion is really universal: only the highest truth is universal. This highest truth is not a religion and yet it can only be realized when we understand what religion really is.

“God”, for example, is merely a meaningless term defined by the most powerful (religiously or politically) who “believe” in him. The wise do not try to **define** God, but they look for him within themselves. In this sense, **God has no religion**. There was a time when the white man’s God was powerful since the white man was the conqueror.

This dying echoes of this foreign glory can still be felt, albeit covertly, in our **mission schools**, whose champions now can only feebly try to continue evangelizing to save our “sinful” society (whether we need it or not) in more civilized ways.

These anachronistic missionaries have to resort to “more civilized ways” not because they are obedient to their holy books, but rather thanks to more civilized, democratic and secular governments, who have liberated us from the velvet-gloved iron hands of religious power.

The human mind is the almighty creator. It created society, history, politics, commerce, religion, holy books and God. The human mind is an ingenious organ that can think out such great ideas as the

Creator-god (almighty or otherwise), the Soul (immortal or otherwise), scientific theories and laws, and so on.

Yet, by this very fact, the human mind is also able to disprove such ideas or discover the necessity to correct or even abolish them when new knowledge dawns on man’s mind.

Nirvana

Whatever the human mind can think of, **it is just a thought** and as such is a conditioned thing—it is subject to change and is impermanent. Through his awakening, the Buddha discovered that there is the uncreated, uncaused and unoriginated state called **Nirvana**. It can be realised by anyone but each person must do so by himself. The Buddha has given us the recipe and ingredients; but we have ourselves to mix them in the right proportions, cook the mixture and enjoy the dish.

It is just like tasting something: only the taster will know exactly what the taste is. He cannot taste it for others! If he were to describe the taste, at best, he could only use comparisons but never make the inexperienced person know the taste as it is.

It is like being hungry—you have to feed yourself; no one else can eat for you. In this sense, no one can save another, since **you can save yourself!**

The problem is that evangelists of every faith and fancy try to remind us how “evil” and “sinful” we are. Sadly, this is a pious one-upmanship, of the more mentally pathological trying to subdue the less pathological: a case of the blind leading the blind.

To stretch the blindness rhetoric, one might say that the evangelists are like one-eyed zealots in the kingdom of the blind, thinking that because of their one eye they can reign over the those with no eyes. But when darkness falls, the blind can see their way better than the one-eyed!

It is as if we are living in a city of feverish inhabitants, where the most feverish cry out the loudest and the less feverish think that the loudmouth must be right since the smaller-mouthed could not cry out as loud. The Buddha has in one who has found the causes and also the cure for this fever, and he gives the cure to is.

When we merely believe in a religion, that belief is often motivated by greed, hate or delusion. In our greed, he hands out the medicine to us to break our

own fever. It is up to use to take this medicine since he does not force in on us.

(7) DO NOT BELIEVE ANYTHING THROUGH HAVING CONSIDERED THE REASONS

Some religions provide us with convenient and seemingly plausible answers to the disturbing questions of life. They say that man is born a **sinner** and therefore should be “saved”; that man is a **creature** and therefore belongs to the creator, and so on.

On the surface, these ideas appear to be plausible to the unthinking mind. Yet, on deeper investigation or even on asking simple questions, their invalidity and falsity are easily revealed. That is why such wrong approaches demand that one “believe and be saved”—but surely it is better to “**know and be free!**”

It is very convenient to claim that someone had created the world because it seems that all things have a **beginning**. These evangelists attribute this beginning to “God.” Then, one might ask: “But what caused God?” This is a perfectly legitimate question: after all, if everything has a cause, then God too must have a cause.

“But,” the evangelist might object, “I don’t mean everything has a cause—I mean that everything, except God, has a cause.” Why stop at just that point? If we stop somewhere, why not stop with the universe itself? At least, it is something of which we have some experience and some knowledge.

In his subtle humour, the Buddha says that those who claim the world is created by a God are like people who build a staircase to nowhere, or someone who declares that he loves the most beautiful women in the world but cannot find anyone to fit his description of her! The Buddha questions the God-believer if he had himself seen God, or anyone in his lineage before him as far back as seven generations—but no one had.

The Buddha declares that this is like “a file of blind man, clinging to one another, and the first sees nothing, the middle one sees nothing, and the last sees nothing”: the blind leading the blind! (Tevijja Sutta, D 1:238-241)

Evangelist trick

Modern evangelists face many disadvantages and impediments in their thirst for **global domination**

(that is what it ultimately comes to, if we read in between the lines of the evangelical messages). Firstly, they have lost the great political power that they had enjoyed during the European Middle Ages and colonial periods.

Secondly, the rise of learning, medicine, science, and technology (such as the Internet)—the liberation of knowledge from the Christian monasteries—have brought education freely outside the church and made the blind truly see for themselves.

As people become more educated, the evangelists run out of rabbits to pull out from their theological hats. Nowadays they often resort to pulling the legs of impressionable young intellectuals. Buddhist students often complain that they had been challenged by some evangelists on the Buddhist students’ non-theistic stand. The evangelists presented a **logical dilemma**, a Catch-22 (answering either way traps you!).

They claim that if God does not actually exist, then it is all right for the Buddhists—and nothing would happen to those who believe in him, too. However, claim the evangelists, suppose that God does exist after all— then believers would stand to benefit but what would happen to the Buddhists? (In religious philosophy, this is called Pascal’s Wager.)

An unthinking Buddhist would easily fall for the wrong answer. At best, the only honest answer would be: we don’t know! If he is a merciful God, would he not forgive the unbelievers whose wisdom is, after all, foolishness in his eyes? God wants us to go to heaven to be at peace with him, but the evangelists want us to go to their churches and swell their numbers.

Fishers of men

The holy books admonish us to walk humbly with our God, but we see religionists fishing for our souls, or charging that we are “lost sheep.” After fishes are caught in a net, they die, and we are not animals! Evangelical language tends to be negatively power-based and colonizing.

Informed Buddhists know very well that the Buddha is **omniscient** in the sense that he knows everything than can be known. According to the Dhammapada verse 153, the Buddha says that he has (through his Awakening) searched the whole universe (with his mind), well into the distant past but found no Creator other than our own ignorance and craving.

In the Discourse on the Divine Net (Brahma-jāla Sutta), the Buddha lists all the actual and possible types of religion and philosophy—monotheism, polytheism, materialism, etc. Through his own awakened mind and knowledge of past lives, the Buddha explains how these ideas came into being.

All religions and philosophies are man-made and **mind-made**. Short of awakening, any religion or philosophical idea is caught in the Divine Net! The spiritual purpose is to break free from this Net.

An astute evangelist might then ask: “But where does the mind come from? It must have come from God.” But, this is as good as saying that my mind comes from my parents (or maybe better, since the latter is **empirical**—for at least, I know who my parents are—but the former is purely **metaphysical**, ie speculative).

To spread this absurdity a little more thinly, we might invoke the eternal question: Which came first, the chicken or the egg? The Buddhist answer: the chicken is the egg! (If this answer is silly, think about the question.)

Radical cure

The aim of a true religion (or whatever you might call it) is to liberate our hearts and minds: the complete deliverance from the three great evils of **decay, disease and death**. We can go on helping people by giving them their physical needs (which is good to some extent), but we are only giving them a temporary cure for a long-term illness. After the medicine’s effect is gone, the sickness returns, because the cure is only **symptomatic**.

Even Buddhists grow old, get sick, and die—just like those who talk of “eternal life.” This is just the point: no one is beyond old age, disease and death. The Buddha however speaks of **two kinds of diseases**: physical and mental. He especially addresses the mental side of diseases.

“**The world is mad!**” declares the Buddha (Vibhanga Commentary). The world is mad with opinions, notions, and ideas: it is mad, burning with greed, hate and delusion. One may be healthy even for the whole of one’s life, but declares the Buddha, he has yet to meet a worldling (unawakened person) who is mentally healthy even for a moment.

C G Jung, a Buddhist-inspired psychologist, echoed the Buddha’s sentiments with his quip: “**Show me a sane man and I will cure him for you.**”

Mental health

Mental health means the freedom and joy of expressing oneself that at the same time benefits others and the environment. A healthy mind in a healthy body is excellent, but this can only happen in a healthy environment.

However, even a physically handicapped person can have a healthy mind. “Even if the body is sick, let not the mind be sick!” declares the Buddha. (Nakulapita Sutta, S 3:1 ff.)

On a short term, mental health might be achieved outside religion, but this is merely a temporary respite from a long-term illness. After the religious faith wears off or is overcome by greater forces, the sickness returns, since the cure is only symptomatic. Only religion of the spirit provides a **radical cure** by reaching into the depths of one’s mind, the source of all problems.

As a modern Buddhist saying goes: if you give someone a bowl of rice, you will feed him for a meal; but if you teach him how to grow rice, he will eat for a lifetime. Only a religion of the heart gives the **radical** or ultimate cure. This is the Buddhist goal: **mental health**.

(8) DO NOT BELIEVE ANYTHING BECAUSE ONE IS CONVINCED OF SOME THEORY

When we are new to or uninformed about a religion, we tend to have preconceptions and misconceptions about it. A **preconception** is an opinion, usually wrong, with which we have been brought up, conditioned to believe in and have accepted without question. A **misconception** is a wrong understanding that usually leads to superstitions or wrong practices.

When we merely believe in a religion, that belief is often motivated by greed, hate or delusion. In our greed, we turn religion into a **commercial business**: we desire for more and more people to swell our temples and churches. In our hate, we **politicize** religion: we openly or secretly pray for the failure and “salvation” of those who do not subscribe to our beliefs.

In our delusion, we turn religion into an **ego-trip**: we think we are always right and that God is on our

side—we create our own God (and gods) and we programme Him to hate and kill our enemies. Indeed, we often hear religious leaders claiming: “God wants you to do this and that...” Man has usurped God’s place.

We only see what we want to see; we only hear what we want to hear. Our sense-organs and our minds have become **filters**. However, when we free our senses and clear our minds, we turn them into **mirrors of truth** wherein we would see things as they truly are. None are so blind as those who would not see.

Religion is opinion

Man is a hive of opinions living in a wilderness of speculations. When he finds that a certain idea agrees with his opinion, he takes it to be true. An idea which does not agree with his own, he takes to be untrue out of self-centred pride or blinding ignorance.

In fact, it is very difficult for such a self-opinionated person to learn new things or broaden his outlook. He is a prisoner of his own opinions. He is like the proverbial Zen teacup that overflows with tea and cannot take in any more.

There is also a tendency amongst some Buddhists to think that the kind of Buddhism that they are born into or the first tradition they encounter is the “purest” form of Buddhism there is and to denounce other schools.

Does he know his own religion?

On the other hand, some unscrupulous preachers who would not stop at anything to get converts may present his religion in such a way as to appear to agree with his listener’s opinions. One such “evangelist” once approached me and asked me to give his religion “a chance.”

The author replied that according to that religion, all are sinners. The evangelist answered that that was not really the case! When the author quoted the relevant Bible reference, the evangelist was taken aback. The evangelist did not seem to know his own holy book.

[It is no small wonder that there are over 22,190 Christian denominations in 1985 with a nett increase of about 270 new ones each year - that is, 5 new denominations a week! Source: *World Christian*

Encyclopaedia, 1982:171. This was over two decades ago – there are even more Christian denominations now – all swearing by the same God and swearing (openly or privately) at each other!]

Fanaticism

There are those who believe that only their religion, their sect, their teacher, or their ideas are right; all the rest are wrong and evil. Such a person is called a **bigot**; and if he goes out to force his ideas on others, he is called a **fanatic**. Such people are dangerous to society and even to themselves, for they easily cause quarrels, mass violence and wars which lead to killing and hatred, and ultimately they often even lose their own lives which they do not value anyway.

Such narrow-minded and mentally unstable people are a hindrance and danger to human progress and the advance of knowledge. There was a time when theologians taught that the world was flat and that one would fall off the steep sides down to where the dangerous monsters were waiting to devour one! They also believed that the earth was the centre of the universe, and that the sky was a shield with holes through which rain fell!

Those who did not accept these ideas or spread new ideas were made to “recant” their crime and “confess” their sin. Otherwise, they would be excommunicated or, worse, be burnt at the stakes (so that their bodies do not go to heaven!). Although the famous Italian scientist **Galileo** was not burnt at the stakes (partly because he was too well-known), the ordeal the Church put him through caused him great humiliation and anguish.

There was a time in mediaeval Spain and elsewhere in Europe when there was a religious police force, called **the Inquisition**, which tortured (using thumbscrews, the wrack and other more painful methods and devices) and even (mercifully) executed people, even fellow religionists, who did not follow the orthodox teachings of the Church (like the notion that the world was flat, and that Christianity was the only true religion). The powerful church felt that this was necessary so that these unbelievers have turned away from the “religion of love.”

Not surprisingly, in due course, society revolted against such revolting religious ways. Europe today is mostly a museum of churches, many abandoned and used for secular purposes. The church-going population has drastically dropped, even then

restricted to mostly old people. New religions are becoming attractive since people still feel a need for something spiritual.

In 2001, in Italy, Buddhism was elevated to a “state religion” amongst others. In Australia, Buddhism is today the fastest growing religion thanks mainly to its emphasis on meditation and mental healing.

East and West

The blessings that Westerners and Australians see in Buddhism surprisingly differ from what most Asians see in Buddhism. While the “First World” has gone through a painful period of religious domination and global political power through Christianity, its thinking population find in Buddhism a refreshing answer to their spiritual needs mainly through inner peace, that is, the conquest of self, replacing the world-domination ideology their ancestors saw in the Bible.

Many Asians who have emerged from the colonial lifestyle, somehow remained loyal to the colonial religions probably because of past conditioning and convenience.

The younger Asians who have never really known what the colonial period was like in their own homelands tend to have the wrong notion that the Christianity is a “modern” religion and a faith of the elite. In other words, they see worldly advantages in it, rather something spiritual.

To follow a religion simply to keep up with the Joneses is a classic “kiasu” (one-up-manship) attitude. Such a person who lives by the standards of others will always be left behind since they are stuck in their captive colonial mentality. This is especially ludicrous because the descendents of those same colonial masters are now turning to Eastern religions, especially Buddhism. Maybe it will take another generation for the new fad to catch up.

[If you are troubled by evangelists who harass you and causing doubts in you, try reading “**Say No! to the Evangelists**” (Dharma for the Millions no. 11).]

Religious freedom

With the rediscovery of Greek learning during **the Renaissance** and the age of colonial discovery (which brought Oriental wealth and spirituality to Europe), Christianity began to decline and the people became

freer to think for themselves. The discovery of Buddhism by the West, officially, occurred only a couple of centuries ago. Buddhist contacts in the West must have occurred many centuries earlier, but more research needs to be done for the details.

With better communication and the influx of Oriental migrants to the West, Buddhism is getting a stronger foothold there. Westerners are discovering the fresh spiritual air and mental peace that meditation breathes for them.

Buddhist teachers do not feel the need to be evangelical in their approach. All they need to do is to announce the Buddha’s teaching, and above all be a good example themselves, and enthusiastic searchers will come. Good wine needs no bush.

It is recorded in **the Udumbarika Sihanada Sutta** that the Buddha says to the ascetic Nigrodha: “Now, this I say, Nigrodha, not desiring to win pupils, not wishing to make others give up their ways of life, not wishing to establish you in wrong ways or to make you give up ways that are good.” (D 3:55 ff.)

The Buddha teaches us to open up our hearts and broaden our minds to new things and to experience them in order to evaluate them, and accept what is good and beneficial for ourselves.

There are so many things that man has yet to know. Let us not forget what Hamlet said to Horatio: “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, | Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

Spiritual example

Sāriputta became the Buddha’s disciple not through meeting the Buddha but another humble disciple called Assaji who was calmly walking on his alms-round. Sāriputta was impressed by Assaji’s serenity and bright joyful countenance. So, he went up to Assaji and asked him his religion. Assaji humbly answered that he was only a beginner (although he was then already a Buddhist saint!).

Sāriputta then persuaded Assaji to give him just a brief teaching, which Assaji did. Even before the four lines of teaching were completed, Sāriputta listened and became a Saint, and requested Assaji to direct him to the Buddha. This is a classic example of Buddhist “conversion.”

Compared to this peaceful spiritual dialogue, a callous evangelist's accosting of others with his gospel is utterly crude and uncompassionate!

(9) DO NOT BELIEVE ANYTHING THROUGH THE TESTIMONY OF SOME RELIABLE PERSON

People react differently to the seeming abilities of others. Some are impressed and accept their ideas; others feel jealous and do all they can to condemn them. The simple-minded are easily moved by a person's ability, especially if they are fiery preachers, hell-raising prophets and charismatic miracle workers. In such cases, the deeds of these people appear to justify their ideas.

Miracle or Truth?

Simple people blindly accept such teachings because the speakers invoke the fear of hell-fire, of the doom that awaits them at the end of the world, or they could heal the sick and perform various "miracles." However, one should realize here that it is the miracles that one believes in, and not in the teachings of those miracle-workers.

For this simple reason, the Buddha has disallowed his monks and nuns to work miracles to spread his teachings. Those who are converted in this manner would believe more in the miracles than the teachings. Moreover, those converted as such would be those who are only influenced by the show of power and whose mind are weak.

Besides, if the Buddha allows the working of miracles by the monks, future monks (namely, those of today), who could not perform miracles, would face difficult problems to spread the Buddha's teachings. In this connection, the Buddha declares that the greatest miracle is that of **education**.

Do miracles happen?

The Greek orator **Cicero** said that "Nothing happens without a cause, and nothing happens unless it can happen. When that which can happen does in fact happen, it cannot be considered a miracle. Hence, there are no miracles."

We hear of many religious preachers, and even some common people, who have certain powers, such as the ability to heal the sick, walk on water, fly through the air, and so on. These powers are not usually the result of the present life-time. They are very often the

result of past actions, that is, experience and knowledge that one has accumulated from past lives.

Meditation

This is especially true when the person concerned is a young child. Some of them are even able to describe what their past life or lives were and when these reports were tested and verified by qualified people such as scientists, they were found to be true. Most of such powers are the result of deep **meditation**, that is, the harnessing of mental energy.

In other words, if anyone should meditate, he would be able to gain these powers, too. But, this is not the aim of Buddhism, for such powers are not permanent. Moreover, they do not get rid of the 3 great D's or evils of decay, disease and death.

Visions

Some people have claimed that they have seen holy figures of their religion, e.g. Virgin Mary, Guanyin or some god. It is very interesting to note that most of these people are very religious and come from very traditional parts of the country where that religion is very strong.

Indeed, throughout recorded history, we have had people (for reasons best known to them) who have claimed to have seen or met divinities and even demons (such as the Byzantine emperor Constantine claiming that he saw a blazing in the sky; the Indian emperor Harsha had a vision of Avalokiteśvara).

Once I was approached by two young school-girls from a local Catholic convent school where large numbers of girls were having religious "visions" and becoming Christians—and that they too were beginning to be affected. These two Buddhist girls began to doubt their own religion and gave me an ultimatum to prove that Buddhism is "true"—failing which they would join the other side!

I listened carefully to them for over an hour and then explained to them the fundamentals of Buddhism. The crucial point, however, was when I asked them if any of those visions or experiences were new at all.

In other words, whatever they thought they saw or felt were constantly spoken of by their teachers (some of whom were nuns) and their over-zealous adolescent colleagues. In short, it was group conditioning and mass hysteria. In psychological

terms, this mass hysteria in the Catholic convent is identical to the one that occurred in some religious schools in Malaysia (see next section).

[However, consider the interesting case of a pious Catholic woman in Sarawak, Malaysia, who is a devotee of Virgin Mary, who had visions of Guanyin and feels great affinity with the latter.]

Hysteria

The spate of mass hysteria among young women in Malaysian religious schools in the 1980s is another interesting case in point. Observers reported uncontrollable screaming and crying, extraordinary physical force and aggressiveness, verbal abuses, rude antics, compulsive running or marching, mental dissociation, loss of memory, hallucinatory images of ghosts and deities, and of sinister old men and women reappearing in nightmares.

The public attributed the causes of such hysteria to superstition, spirit possession and even poor nutrition. But studies by experts reported in the local papers reveal that the reasons were **psychological**.

In his weekly column "As I see it" (in the Star of 3 Aug 1987), Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia's first Prime Minister, observed that religious schools tended to teach only about "heaven and hell, what is good and what is bad for a person."

As a result, the students "have no idea of the world at large, so they become very tense and highly emotional and it is not surprising that they break out in hysteria." The answer is therefore proper counselling and a balanced education.

Ghosts

The important point to understand here is that the popular local belief in ghosts, hauntings, hallucinations and charms are often only **symptoms** of some deeper emotional problems that the subject finds difficulty in expressing.

Many such problems have their roots in the lack of love and attention afforded to the subject when young. Parents who are superstitious and fatalistic often aggravate these problems in their children.

Early counselling, psychiatric help and proper follow-up by the family and close friends are the best correctives and preventives. Some parents need re-

education in such matters. Above all, teachers (both religious and secular) should be trained regarding how to detect and resolve emotional difficulties in the young.

The most terrifying ghosts and demons are the shadows of our own minds.

Prophecies

Some religions boast of prophecies, saying that they can predict what will happen in the world and so on. But prophecies are not found only in religion. Even non-religious people, such as the famous French astrologer Nostradamus, made fantastic predictions some of which seem to have actually happened.

However, like most astrologers and prophets, he put forth his predictions in cryptic or secret language that sometimes would be taken in several ways can mean different things different people. Some unscrupulous religious people, for example, might take advantage of his prophecies to twist them to suit their purpose and convenience.

Another common practice by some religious teachers and scholars is to compose or write the prophecy after the event had happened to add weight to it. This is difficult for the lay-person and later readers to detect. The theologian knows this problem only too well but, of course, telling the truth to the congregation would hardly be profitable to the religion. One wonders how much of such a religion is really based on truth.

End of the world

Some predictions were simply wrong or badly misunderstood by the theologians themselves. An amusing example is the prediction of the end of the world. The first great date for the end of the world was the year 1000, when thousands of Christians across Europe awaited expectantly and hundreds of pilgrims went to Mount Zion to await the second coming of Jesus Christ.

In 1524, a German astronomer and preacher named Stoeffler predicted that a great flood would end the world, and his parishioners dutifully built rafts and arks. When the waters did not rise, they deservedly threw him in a pond! Modern doom-peddlers are more fortunate (and pernicious) with the help of TV and the Internet.

Self-delusion

Some people are easily moved by exotic and mysterious practices such as trances, speaking in tongues, hypnotism and stigmata. A person who gets into a trance is called a “**medium**”, a word which means that the person acts as an intermediary or receiver (like a radio) to receive some other energy (whether external or through self-delusion).

This practice however need not be a religious affair, although it is often wrongly interpreted as one. Most mediums are physically frail and mentally weak in waking life simply because they unconsciously indulge in super human efforts during their trances. Trances are dangerous because one is not in control of one's own mind, what more of one's body, when one is in trance.

[Read “**Why People Fail**” (Dharma for the Millions no 17) which further discusses such problems and gives some suggestions regarding Buddhist motivation. <http://dharmafarer.org>]

While there may be *bona fide* mediums and psychics, there are more *mala fide* ones. Sexually deprived and economically needy conmen and conwomen regularly appear in our daily newspapers accused and convicted of cheating, molestation and rape of their clients. Although the fires burn them, the moths are still drawn to them in the ignorant night of desperate needs.

As long as one sees the problem and its solution as being outside of oneself, one would continue to be burned. All our fires burn in our own mind, and have to be extinguished there.

Speaking in tongues

Speaking in tongues or **glossolalia** is a form of trance and has to be learned (though in some cases one may be “born” with it). In other words, someone has to coax an initiate to start babbling something which the speaker and his listeners could not understand, or the initiate must get emotionally involved in the whole affair and to be carried away by it.

What does speaking in tongues prove? If some Divine Power had wanted his creatures to get his message, why should he use some unintelligible and neurotic technique? Why not appear openly in a large crowd of people and declare his divine will?

Chinese Taoist mediums (insofar as they are true mediums) also speak in tongues and in doing so prescribe folk medicine and tell the fortune of devotees.

Why not believe in our own homemade glossolalia rather than an imported one?

(The fact that one is English educated, especially from a mission school, has a lot of hold on why one finds Christianity more attractive than one's own culture! Is this not a case of mental conditioning and deculturization rather than wise faith?)

Hypnotism

Hypnotism is often used in religious practices but rarely in a manner where the congregation is aware of it. A common example is the rhythmic drum-beating of animistic and spiritualistic religions accompanied by trances.

A gifted preacher often makes use of his loud voice and gestures to produce hypnotic suggestions and effectively move his congregation. The best way to prevent oneself from falling victim is, of course, not to get emotionally involved in the whole affair (as mentioned earlier in the case of Horace Walpole).

Stigmata

An interesting feature of popular religion which is especially well-known among the Catholics is that of stigmata. The term **stigmata** is used by the Catholics to refer to the marks corresponding to those left on Christ's body by the nails and spear at the Crucifixion, said to have been impressed on the bodies of St. Francis of Assisi and others such as Padre Pio of recent times. They attribute such signs to divine favour.

Such signs as the stigmata have nothing to do with the divine or miracles. They are psychosomatic manifestations just as one could get ulcers by constantly worrying and focusing on negative thoughts.

They are the result of prolonged preoccupation and concentration of the mind on a certain object, in this case, Christ's wounds, until one actually is able to conceptualise or project them to appear as real in one's mind and then materialize them on one's own body.

Kasina meditation

There is a very common and basic feature of the “kasina” meditation done by the Buddhists. An object is concentrated on until one is able to visualise it without looking at it. Then one comes to a stage when one is actually able to create the object in the absence of it.

These extraordinary things stir one’s curiosity and stretch one’s mind, but are of **no spiritual value whatever** in the salvation of man. They still do not get rid of the three great evils of decay, disease and death. As such, the Buddha discourages us to be moved by such things. The greatest miracle is the liberation of one’s own mind from greed, hatred and ignorance.

Instead of trances, hypnotism, etc., Buddhism speaks of **mental absorption**, that is, a deep state of meditation. However, in this case, the person is very calm and at ease, and he knows what is happening to him. He has full control of himself—he can get into this state or get out of it whenever he wishes. He is a happy, healthy and calm person in his waking life, and of course a very wise person, too.

[There are many Buddhist centres in your country or area that offers basic meditation, but it is important to make sure the meditation teacher’s credentials are good. Try asking around, and you will have good idea who is qualified meditation teacher after a while. You might like to read “**Basic Buddhist Meditation Practice**” (Dharma for the Millions no. 8).]

(10) DO NOT BELIEVE ANYTHING, THINKING THIS PERSON IS A RESPECTED PREACHER

After warning us about the various pitfalls when looking for the right religion for ourselves, the Buddha goes on to warn us not to blindly accept the words of our own teacher, that is, even those of the Buddha himself! This spiritual lion-roar has sounded unchallenged for over 2,500 years. In the history of world religion, no religion has come even close to such wise openness.

The Buddha’s lion-roar is not an over-confident dismissal of other religions and system, but rather **that the highest truth does not belong to any religion** (not even Buddhism). It has to be cultivated by oneself (ie personal development through mental cultivation) in a gradual way like building a strong raft

to cross a raging river. Once one has crossed the river, one does not carry the raft about as a burden.

Even so, religion is only a tool in one’s spiritual development. As such, one should use it wisely before reaching the other shore.

Dangers of hero worship

In his **Discourse on Personal Devotion** (Puggala-pasāda Sutta, A 3:270 f), the Buddha mentions 5 disadvantages of being totally devoted to a person, whether a monk or lay person (that is, hero-worship). Such a hero-worshipper would feel disturbed:

1. when the “hero” commits an offence and suspended by the monastic Order;
2. when the suspended “hero” has to sit at the edge of the congregation (ie not given an honoured position);
3. when the “hero” is in a distant place;
4. when the “hero” leaves the religious Order;
5. when the “hero” dies.

Feeling disturbed in this manner, the hero-worshipper would not be able to keep up his spiritual practice and as such would fail in his personal development. (A 3:270 f.)

[I have further discussed the problem of cults in ch. 3 of *The Total Buddhist Work*, 1983. Sadly, since I wrote the book, the problem of Buddhist cults and “fan clubs” is still growing.]

On enlightened masters

On a couple of occasions, I have encountered some curious people who asked me if I was enlightened—and if I was not, then I cannot be their teacher! I wonder if they have yet found any enlightened teacher, or whether they would know if they have actually found one. My favourite answer is to ask such people what is it that they have done to deserve an enlightened teacher?

Once when Sāriputta, the Buddha’s right hand monk declared that the Buddha is the most awakened and wisest of all the Buddhas and teachers. The Buddha then asked Sāriputta if he had known all the Buddhas in the past and of the future, or whether he could read the mind of the present Buddha himself. Sāriputta humbly answered that he did not, but that

he had based his lion-roar on his own awakening. (Sampāsadanīya Sutta, D 28)

The great disciples of the Buddha expressed their aspirations to become foremost disciples in the distant past and then spent many virtuous lives building up their spiritual perfections. They gave no arrogant ultimatum to a teacher.

We get teachers we deserve

Instead of making unfounded claims of someone's sainthood or looking for "enlightened" or someone "moved by the spirit"—claims that are based on one's own conceit or delusion—one should concentrate one's effort on one's personal development.

There are many good teachers, but even more false ones. In the absence of good teachers, one should like a busy bee collecting the essential nectar of wholesome teachings from these teachers but rejecting their eccentricities and weaknesses.

Stand in the light before the teacher, and keep out of his shadow.

The teachers that we encounter (or do not encounter) are usually the result of our own past karma. This does not mean that we should not make an effort to find truly good spiritual teachers. Karma can be broken: in fact, bad karma (negative habits) can be consciously broken. Good teachers help you do this.

The kind of teacher we look up to is often the projection (or transference) of our own views and personality. If the teacher fits our desires and standards then we are likely to declare him or her to be "good."

It is common, for example, for some people to be attracted to a teacher because he is "handsome"! This is like buying a book because one likes the cover, and not reading the book at all.

Then there are those who collect gurus, accumulating initiations and empowerments cluttering themselves with visions of power, when the real problem is a repressed sense of emotional insecurity.

Most gurus would not mind such devotion since it is mutually beneficial, but unfortunately only on material and superficial levels. You scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours, and let's not talk bad about one another. In psychology, this is called **co-dependency**.

Knowing a person

In the Discourse on Conditions (Tḥāṇāni Sutta, A 2:186 f.), the Buddha teaches us four ways by which we can know a person:

1. By associating with a person, you know his virtue.
2. By living and working with him, you know his integrity.
3. In times of distress, you know his fortitude.
4. By communicating with him, you know his wisdom.

In short, you should not only be close to your true teacher, but you should know and serve him or her well. This is how you will find a good teacher. Some guidelines help—you should reject a "teacher" when he encourages:

- Greed and lust.
- Hatred and fanaticism.
- Superstition and delusion.

Accept him when he encourages:

- Contentment and generosity.
- Lovingkindness and compassion.
- Mindfulness and wisdom.

The important thing is not to look for teachers: **look for teachings**. The test of the pudding is in the eating. If you cannot find a good teacher, **let the Dharma be your teacher** and wander alone like a rhinoceros.

Meaning of the Kālāma Sutta

The Kālāma Sutta has often been quoted but more often misquoted. Some erroneously regard the discourse as a *carte blanche* for transcendental licence and religious anarchy. It must be remembered here that **spiritual doubt** is a mental hindrance to spiritual development (A 3:62; Vbh 378).

Most people seem to know only about the first portion of the discourse, that is, **the 10 points** or criteria for the acceptance of a teaching or idea. This interesting discourse has three other important sections of which we should be aware.

After speaking on the tenfold criteria for accepting a teaching or idea, the Buddha goes on to point out that when you have **no greed, no hate and no**

delusion, you would enjoy benefit and happiness for a long time.

The Buddha then speaks on **the 4 divine abodes** (*brahma, vihāra*) or positive emotions, that is, the cultivation of lovingkindness, of compassion, of gladness and of equanimity—or, more simply, love, rith, joy and peace. For the beginner, it is sufficient to keep to the first practice—the cultivation of lovingkindness (*mettā bhāvanā*)—which, among other blessings, helps you to overcome fear, have courage to face people and generally keep a positive mind.

[You might like to read “**Basic Buddhist Meditation Practice**” (Dharma for the Millions no. 8) where the Cultivation of Lovingkindness is explained.]

The 4 solaces

The closing section of the Kālāma Sutta, which deals with the **4 solaces** is, to me, its most interesting and important section. As such, I shall quote it in full:

The disciple of the Noble Ones, Kālāmas, who has such a mind that is hate-free, malice-free, undefiled and purified, is one by whom four solaces are found here and now:

1. “Suppose there is **an afterlife** and there is **the result of deeds**, good or evil; then it is possible that after I die, I shall be born in heaven, endowed with bliss.” This is **the first solace** found in him.
2. “Suppose there is **no afterlife** and there is **no result of deeds**, good or evil; yet in this world, here and now, free of hate, free of malice, safe and happy am I.” This is **the second solace** found in him.
3. “Suppose **the evil begets evil**; then, how can evil come to me who has done no evil deed?” This is **the third solace** found in him.
4. “Suppose **evil-doer does not beget evil**; then, I see myself purified both ways [ie whether unintentionally or intentionally].” This is **the fourth solace** found in him.

At the end of the Buddha’s discourse, the Kālāmas were delighted and became Buddhists for the rest of their lives. These 4 solaces, incidentally, are the

Buddha’s answer to Pascal’s Wager (mentioned earlier) even before it was formulated!

The Buddha's challenge

Buddhism is a religion for you to “**come and see**” for oneself. One has only to give yourself a chance to have a taste of the Buddha’s Teachings: that would be an unforgettable experience and a most worthwhile one. Once the Buddha said in the Udumbarika Lion-roar Discourse:

“Let any intelligent man who is honest, not a deceiver, but an upright man come to me. I will teach him the Truth. And if he practises according to my instructions, he shall realise that supreme goal for the sake of which people renounce the world to lead the homeless religious life. He shall realise that supreme goal in 7 years, ... even one month ... nay, if he so practises for even 7 days, such a man coming to me shall so realise that supreme state.” (D 3:56)

Another important statement made by the Buddha is that whether Buddhas arise or not, the Dharma or Truth is always there; but it is the Buddha who clearly shows us what this Truth is and from whose knowledge we benefit. However, the effort must be made by us ourselves: Buddhas are only showers of the way. We must walk the Path!

*By ourselves is evil done,
By ourselves we pain endure,
By ourselves evil not done,
By ourselves become we pure.
One is pure or impure within:
No one can purify another.*

(Dhammapada 165)

*By you is the task to be done;
The Perfect Buddhas are showers of the Way.
Those who are practised in meditation
Are released from the bonds of the Evil One.*

(Dhammapada 276)

**KNOW DHAMMA,
MAKE DHAMMA KNOWN**

SOME SUGGESTED READING

- (1) Bertrand Russell, *Why I am not a Christian*, Allen & Unwin, 1957; since repr. (Thoughts of the greatest philosopher of the 20th century.)
- (2) W Sargant, *Battle for the mind*, Pan, 1959; since repr. (About brainwashing).
- (3) J Hoppers, *An introduction to philosophical analysis*, Prentice-Hall, 1967 (ch 7).
- (4) P Angeles, ed. *Critiques of God*, NY, Prometheus Books, 1976. (Philosophical analyses.)
- (5) Piyasilo, *Buddhism and the God-idea*, 1985. See <http://dharmafarer.org>.
- (6) Piyasilo, "Say No! to the Evangelists", Dharma for the Millions series no 11, 1988. (Free booklet) See <http://dharmafarer.org>.
- (7) Arun Ukhatkit, *Christianity - A Critical Study*, nd (Answer by an ex-Christian in Thailand).

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2. A History of Buddhism (a strategic study of Buddhism in society. Piya Tan, 2002) 5 lectures (full notes); full PowerPoint slides; Pali fonts.

Lecture series given at the Buddhist Library and the NUS Buddhist Society. Available in the ISEAS Library on the National University of Singapore campus.

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- ❑ Divine Qualities of Spiritual Dialogue. How love and positive emotions vitalize religion.
- ❑ The Emptiness of Religious Dialogue. How Buddhism provides the best common denominator for the world religions.
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