

A psychology of myth

A reflection on Section §1 of SD 52.1.

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If we do not understand myths, we are likely to be shrouded in superstition. If we do not understand how a myth works on the mind, we are likely to turn to rituals and vows. If we understand neither, we easily fall into doubt that cripples our spiritual development. A proper understanding of such a psychology helps build and refine our faith, effort, mindfulness, concentration and wisdom—the 5 faculties of spiritual growth.

Myth

A **myth** is a story or a conditioned conduct of a universal nature that has a similar effect on each and everyone of us. In fact, a myth is a way of defining certain conditioned patterns in our behaviour that has a significant effect on us or on others in a wholesome or unwholesome manner. When we understand the myth behind our conduct, we understand our conduct—we better understand ourself.

A very common mythic pattern of conduct is the samsaric cycle. This is a well known theme in Greek mythology highlighted in the myth of **Prometheus** who suffers for stealing fire from heaven which he gives to humans. Zeus, the king of the gods, has him seized and chained to some mountain rocks where every dawn an eagle comes down, tears him open and devours his liver. He fully and painfully heals through the night, and the cycle starts again at every dawn. This is a myth of the giver, even a martyr, who suffers for bringing happiness or freedom to us.¹

Another well-known samsaric myth is that of **Sisyphus**, who is punished for deceiving the gods regarding his age so that he lives well beyond his time. When the gods catch up with him, he is punished by having to daily push a huge boulder up a steep hill. When the boulder reaches the peak, it rolls down again, and Sisyphus excitedly runs after it. When it rests at the foot of the hill, he proudly starts his task all over again. He seems to enjoy this samsaric routine, seeing the rock as “his,” and his cyclic conduct as some kind of recurrent triumph and affluence.²

Superstition

Sisyphus thinks of his rock-pushing as occasions of recurrent triumph and affluence. Instead of seeing joy and peace within, he seeks and sees them outside of himself. This is the simplest definition of **superstition**. A very common Buddhist superstition is that we merely need to chant a sacred name, such as those of a Buddha or a Bodhisattva, or some unintelligible “words of power” (mantra).

¹ On Prometheus from a Buddhist perspective, see [SD 36.2 \(8.1\)](#).

² On Sisyphus from a Buddhist perspective, see [SD 23.3 \(1\)](#).

Such superstitious practices, of course, do not work. But if one believer out of a hundred, or even a thousand, claims that his prayer has been answered, and this exception is collected and highlighted—we have an exceptionally bright light that will blind any lookers with faith. The point is that this is merely an excuse for praying for what we are not willing to work for.

Economics of faith

Gurus who peddle such superstitions understand and exploit this mechanism of such an insidious behaviour. There are always religious texts that will promote or support such practices, or religious texts can be cleverly summoned into the service of such superstitions.

The guru is even more motivated to promote this lucrative means of harvesting the fruits of faith: it enriches him financially and his crowd faithfully. Religion marches on the belly of faith and promises. Go with open eyes and clear mind to any temple Sunday talk or any religious class, we are likely to see this Surangama at work!

Patterned behaviour

We need to understand how our lives tend to follow a pattern of growth. On a very simple level, we are likely to see our personal struggle as that of obtaining our basic needs of life—food, clothing, housing and health. We imagine we have full control of these through **money**. Hence, we see our life as an unending quest for wealth.

The wealthy then imagine they “have” everything, but need to perpetuate their wealth and protect their sources of income. Yet, often enough, both the wealthy and the not-wealthy suffer the same sense of **lack**—a feeling that they never “have” enough. This is because they project their happiness onto what they **have**, into things, of which they can never have enough because of their impermanence. Both *not* to have is to suffer poorly, and to *have* is to suffer richly, too.

This is the **Midas** myth of the golden touch. We want to turn into wealth whatever we touch — it all turns into gold. Even the king’s daughter, too, turns into gold. In the end he has so much gold that he cannot really do anything with them. He also loses what brings him true happiness. When we see happiness as being what we *have*, and then we *lose* what we have — we lose everything; we are nothing.

Doubt

When we do not see this vicious samsaric cycle—of seeking outside what is truly good and true within us — we continue to **doubt** our own goodness and freedom. Such an insidious doubt deludes us to have faith in an external agency of power (the guru) and of security (God). Then, we do not understand the psychology of myth—that our minds tend to work along patterned conduct so that we are ruttled into seeking what satisfies us by way of conditioned and recurrent behaviour.

Whenever we press a button on the guru's table, the guru or his slave feeds us a morsel, we feel gratified and grateful; we keep on coming back for more. In between, we must serve as slaves to the guru's every fiat and fancy. We are like Sisyphus and his rock. We even feel we are in control of things: what an achievement this button-pressing is for us!

One day, in a rare moment of mental clarity, we realize that we are like a uroboros eating our tail. We are simply feeding on our own self to the guru's delight—like a cat or dog chasing his own tail. We only need to stop biting, to simply stop like Aṅgulimāla before the Buddha. We only need to close our eyes, look within, and see our true liberating self.³ [3]

R540 Revisoning Buddhism 201

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

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³ On the 3 fetters, see **Emotional independence**, [SD 40a.8](#).