

## Ordinary saints

[Revised edition of fb180802 piya on Facebook]

It is said that there are always people in this world who think that there must be somewhere a saint who is worth worshipping. Hence, they run around looking for such a saint. Where there's a demand, there'll always be a supply. There are many people who are itching to be worshipped. When the two meet we have a cult that invariably courts disaster.

What we worship in these hollow men is what we think we are not, what we think we have not. They are not real saints, for sure, just our shadow that we chase excitedly after, like Peter Pan flying around after his fugitive shadow.

We may also say, conversely, that there are no such things as “**saints**,” but just ordinary people. We are, all of us, ordinary people, with our passions, positive and negative. This sounds more like a self-confession than a universal truth – that we feel we are ordinary, that we are not good enough, or don't have to be good.

### Non-self

It may even be ignorance or rejection of the Buddha's teaching of the 4 kinds of “**sainthood**”: streamwinning, once-returning, non-returning and arhathood. Just because we say that there is “no such thing as saints” does not mean that they do not exist, or that being free from defilements is impossible. Just because it seems impossible in materialistic Japan does not make it is so everywhere else.

What the Buddha rejects—in the spirit of the **non-self** teaching—is the notion that sainthood is a licence, status or title conferred by a priest or guru or power-figure upon others. According to the suttas, sainthood is simply phases in our mental cultivation and spiritual development (like infancy, childhood, youth and maturity in human development). It makes sense to say, then, that there are *no* saints, only “moments” of **saintliness**.

### Saintly

From this, we may then say that there is every chance for everyone to be saintly. We can even be **Godly** although we cannot and should not be “God”; for, there is no such eternal being. Whatever exists must be impermanent.

To be saintly or Godly, we need to be **loving** (accepting others unconditionally), **ruthful** (showing kindness even to those who do not deserve it), **joyful** (appreciating the goodness in others), and **peaceful** (in the face of both bad and good).

### Being, not status

None of this confers upon us a licence, status or title, someone to be worshipped as an official saint. A canonized saint is a man-made dead saint. A **status** is a false fixed

idea that someone is an entity, an unchanging blob of saintliness—that the person's body (what is seen, heard, smelt, tasted or touched) is saintly. Saintliness is our evolving **being** that rises above self, fear and doubt: it is our good heart that betters our speech and acts.

Being saintly surely begins with our **body**. We have to habitually abstain from killing, from taking the not-given, from exploiting other persons for personal pleasure. We should *not* kill because life gives us our first meaning: we are alive. All beings ordinarily and everywhere love their lives. We should *not* steal because nothing in this world belongs to us, except our actions. We should *not* exploit the person of others, because like others, we too love freedom: the right to say No.

Right actions entail **right speech**, wholesome words—words that are helpfully honest, that touch the heart, that bring and keep people happily together, that are useful and better others. Hence, we are saintly in our actions *and* speech. We communicate with others with both body and speech. Wholesome communication is, in fact, the basis for a wholesome community, society and world.

### **Above self**

This is only a start. We must then work on our **mind**—which defines the quality of our speech and actions. A dark mind darkens our speech and deeds; **a bright mind** of good brightens our speech and deeds. Hence, we need to work on our mind or heart (if you like) to rise above **the self**.

This means we need to understand and accept the fact that we are not alone, and that others value life, happiness, freedom and truth, just as we do. It means basically that we need to respect others, too. To “**respect**” others means to accept them as they are, as a start.

### **Look within**

Then, on a mental level of saintliness, we should not be **superstitious**. Being superstitious means to be ruled by fear, especially of what is *outside* of us. We are mistaken about how our problems arise, where they come from. Our problems basically arise from our own greed, hate, delusion or fear—they come from within us. Hence, it is foolish to seek answers or solutions from outside or from others, no matter how almighty we imagine them to be.

Others, like the Buddha and his saints, show us the way out of our problems but we must still **walk the path** ourself. Since our problems are rooted in our own mind, this is where we must uproot the sources of our problems.

Finally, we should not **doubt** our own capacity for good. Just because we seem to fail—which is really a self-perception—does not mean that we will forever fail. We are victims of conditions and circumstances. When we identify the real nature of

these conditions and circumstances behind our failures, we are more likely to understand how they work.

Then, we are more ready to “unwork” them. We have to start dismantling these negative conditions and circumstances of speech, body and mind. This is the saintly path to go. There is no status, title or even goal to attain: the path itself is our change for the better. We are the path.

### **Acting on it**

If we have understood and accepted what has been explained thus far, we will realize that we can and need to be **ordinary saints**. It is unhelpful to summarily say things like: “Oh, we are already good and enlightened!” Or that there is nothing to do about it, no need for change or becoming better. All such statements are meaningless (it keeps us from knowing what is true) and purposeless (it does not really free us from suffering).

This is just **religious defeatism** (I was going to say “Zen defeatism” but it wouldn't be fair): such seemingly clever words make us give up even before we start. Or worse, we end up exploiting others with our hollow ways of empty words. For, this is the way of religious materialism.

Much of religion is nothing but cunning empty words and empty acts, what Gurus drop into our pious palms that we think smells sweet. Give them a good sniff (if you must) but we must then at once abandon the Gurus with their droppings.

Then, we turn to our best and ever-present teacher there is: ourselves. To be our own teacher means that we must always be willing to **learn**. Only when we are true **learners** do we become saintly, even if only ordinary saints. We live examining our own lives a day at a time, moment by moment.

### **Life's sweet song**

Let us not forget then: we may be ordinary but we live our **saintly moments**. We keep inspiring (breathing) more of these living moments like a beautiful string of musical notes. We are a sweet song—such a sweet song that gets sweeter and clearer. We are ordinary no more!

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