

Feel good or be better?

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Our reason for following a religion (showing faith in some kind of belief) is often that we feel good about it. We listen to a Dhamma talk and feel good about it, and want to hear some more. We attend a religious ceremony and feel good about it, and think that it is “meaningful.” We go for a meditation class or retreat and feel good about it. And so on.

All such activities keep us returning to that religion, and to keep on doing what we have been doing. During my half-a-century with Buddhism, I have seen some people actually following such talks, doing such rituals, even meditating. They keep on doing these things but do not seem to change. Then, they pass away.

Impermanence and unsatisfactoriness

Of course, it is hard to know whether a person has changed for the better or not. Or, that they are simply religiously following a talk, doing a ritual or meditating as a matter of habit without really knowing what is going on. In other words, they do not reflect on the what really matters—especially on impermanence, for example.

Perhaps, all they do is to happily meet other people who do the same things as they have done and compare notes. Maybe they enjoy speaking with respect and admiration about some famous or foreign teacher, and so on. But have their lives really changed?

Have they come nearer to the path of awakening? Or are they merely becoming more dedicated to a teacher, and merely becoming his fan, supporter and follower? In other words, they are still caught in the samsaric wheel of the world of beliefs, rituals and guru devotion.

But they have no real refuge at all.

2 kinds of change

The key teaching of the Buddha is change. We can speak of change in two important ways.

Firstly, change is everywhere. Everything changes, becomes other, decays. We change, become other, decay, die. This is a universal characteristic of all existence in this universe.

Change means that we cannot really take hold of anything to our satisfaction. Pleasures do not last. When pleasures end, suffering arises. When suffering ends, we feel good, but only momentarily. The whole cycle repeats on and on. This is the 1st noble truth.

Untruthful lives

But since we feel good, we do not see this truth. Our religious life has prevented us from seeing this vital truth. When we do not see the 1st truth, how can we ever see the other 3 truths? Our life is thus untruthful!

This is like our house is on fire, and we are still enjoying life in it. We do not even make an effort to put out the fire. How can we, when we do not even know there is a fire?

The second kind of change is that we must change ourselves, that is become better than before. If we keep on doing the same things since we started with Buddhism, we cannot say that is change. It is simply rituals, and they become fetters and hindrances to our progress.

We may think that we do not need to change, or worse, we do not even know that we need to change. Then, we have forfeited this wonderful human life with all its good past karma and present conditions.

Then death comes—we lose our human state since we did not value and use it.

Why be better?

More important than merely feeling good about Buddhism, we must understand why and how we need to change for the better.

Why do we need to become better? The simple answer is that when we do not want to change, we are caught up with our past karma and present conditions that keep us going in a busy circle—like an active hamster running in its wheel—and we think that being busy is a good thing.

In a Greek myth, Sisyphus is punished by having to push a big round rock up a steep hill; then running down after it downhill; and pushing it up again, ever and again. He keeps on doing this because he thinks that this is a great achievement! But this is samsara, cyclic life.

Aspiration to be better

We need to direct our mind to be better; we need to aspire to change, to go nearer the path of awakening. We need to aspire to at least streamwinning in this life.

The Buddha guarantees that when we do this, we can reach the path in this life itself (S 25.1), SD 16.7.

To aspire to streamwinning means that we make an effort to understand how our self-view keeps us stuck like an old fading photo of ourself.

It means that when we perform rituals, we should do them meaningfully, that is, learn from them to better ourself. Otherwise, we are just a shadow following our zombie-like body.

It means not to have any doubt or fear that we can understand the suttas, and that we are able to reach the path of awakening in this life. If not, it's like we are lost, going around in the same big circle and think it's fun.

A better person

To be better means to examine reasons why we fail to keep the precepts and strengthen ourself spiritually; to recall times when we do keep the precepts (like when we are attending a Buddhist class, course or retreat).

Then, using this good feeling, we meditate to calm and clear our mind so that we understand the suttas better. This, in turn, further strengthens us to keep the precepts better, meditate better, and so on.

Like small drops of water, we soon fill the pot—we have the rest of our life to do this. But time flies, and we grow old very fast.

Older and better

When we follow only the Dhamma of the suttas, as we age, we begin to understand it better. When we understand the suttas better, we need less rituals, we understand our minds better—we are at peace with a calm and clear mind,
more free of self-identity view,
more free of attachment to rituals and vows,
more free of doubt.

We are no more misled into feeling good simply because we are busy or well known or wealthy. We do not have to follow anyone any more because we now understand how to follow the Buddha's teaching directly like the Buddha's great saints.

We are now our own refuge.

We don't need religion to feel good any more—by our own effort, we have become better.

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