

Beyond religion (Part 1 of 3)

We are heading that way, we must
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Let us provisionally and broadly define **religion** as "a system of belief in a reality that is above or other than the self." "**Belief**" means that this is a private experience; "**reality**" means it can either be what we project (a virtual reality) or what is true in itself (true reality). "**Above**" means gaining a greater power in a good sense. "**Other than the self**" means it is rooted in our present being but can and should be more than just that.

Such a religion, or aspects or forms of it, have been with us for over 100,000 years. It exists today in every culture, with nearly 90% of the world's population holding some kind of religious belief.

The mind is not just the brain

The mind scientists of our time generally think that religion is a **byproduct** of the way our brain works. Buddhism, however, does not teach that **the mind** is located anywhere, least of all the brain. The brain may function like the computer motherboard, but it must be connected with a screen/s (a monitor), some kind of "mouse," power supply, other components, and, of course, software.

All of this working together makes it possible for me to write this piece and see what I am doing. The mind, then, is not just the body: it is the total working of all our senses: the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and the mind. Buddhists call these the "6 sense-bases." The mind, so to speak, is behind all our sensing, including thinking. The mind can know itself (reflexive consciousness): this is a vitally important teaching in early Buddhism.

Self-consciousness

We have **reflexive consciousness**: we notice our self, or conceive of "ourselves"; we notice patterns within ourselves and in the world outside: this is called learning or "intelligence," if you like.

We connect A with B: when A occurs, B results. A is the cause, B is the effect. When this patterned thinking develops in "linear" progression: A causes B, which causes C ... D, etc, then, we **reason** that "A" must be the First Cause. We name this First Cause **God**, each culture has its name for this First Cause. We create our God who creates us. This is the way most religions, God-based beliefs, go.

Cycles

Traditional Asian religions, especially the Indian belief-systems notices something else. They see that the sun rises every morning from the same direction, the east (unlike in the northern hemisphere). Then, they notice the seasons, mostly a season of warmth, of rains, and of coolness. Again, the northern hemisphere cultures experience the seasons more drastically, as summer, autumn or fall, winter, and spring.

Either way, there is the seasonal cycle. Traditional Asian religions see the linear pattern as a part of a bigger cycle. There is the cycle of the sun—sunrise, sunset—we call this **day**. Then, we notice the cycle of the moon—the lunar **month**. There are seasons, that is, a **year**. Then we notice the stars, and speculated beyond the year. There must be a greater cycle of time.

Time: linear and cyclic

The point of this account is that in traditional Asian religions, time is not seen as linear, but as cyclic: it goes around and comes back. It's like the face of the clock: times goes round and around. Time has no beginning, no end. Hence, Asian religions tend to have a richer variety of Gods, gods, other beings, spiritual spaces, and how our world came into being, without a First Cause. We call this **samsara** (saṃsāra).

We have so far spoken of the “big picture,” a **macrocosmic** view of religion. On a smaller or more personal level of religion, the **microcosmic**, we try, at some point (such as when there is a birth, a death, a great disaster, or some inexplicable event), to reason why things happen. We often end up concluding: “Everything happens for a reason.”

Reasoning is human

Young children, for example, tend to believe that even trivial aspects of the natural world were created with a purpose (for a reason). In a series of studies by Boston University psychologist Deborah Kelemen, noted that when children are asked why a group of rocks are pointy, for example, they say something like, “It's so that animals won't sit on them and break them.” If you ask them why rivers exist, they say it's so we can go fishing.

We grow with this tendency to reason, coming up with ever more sophisticated reasons as we move on, but they are mostly our own views, our reflexes from past conditionings. What these children (which we often still are) have been expressing are **views**, that is, conditioned responses: we see things that way, or we have heard it from other children (young and old), or we just hope so. Of course, as we grow older, we realize how sweetly wrong we were, and know better, often enough.

Intention

Early Buddhism wants us to examine this “reasoning” more carefully. We will then notice that it is rooted in the way we think. They are not **really** what or how things are: we made it all up. This is what is called **delusion**. It may be sweetly childish or we can be very serious about it. Either way, we have created our own world, in which we live and die.

We tend to feel **good** (kind, loving, generous) when we accept others in our self-created world. The Buddha identifies this kind of thinking as “wholesome intention.” Or, we feel **bad** (nasty, angry, selfish) against those who reason differently. This is “unwholesome intention.”

How we **think**, our intention, decides how well we can get along with others, with the world, how we live or die, what happens or not thereafter. In early Buddhism this kind of wholesome intentional living is called **moral conduct** (sīla).