

My Buddhist friends and I congratulate and rejoice in the gazetting of the Human Society (Singapore) in November 2010. To all humanists and the non-religious who believe in goodness, peace, and truth, this reflection is dedicated.

Every thing, everything

Every thing and everything: what do they mean?

“Thing” is a name we give to a part of the whole, a bit of the universe that we are focussed on for the moment. Actually, it is not really a “thing,” but simply a WAY of looking at the universe. And quite an incomplete one at that: seeing only a part of the whole.

Even then, we cannot hold this thing forever in our minds. It is different every moment, even though we may not detect it. Yet it is changing every moment. Otherwise, we cannot make sense of it. Only change makes sense. Only change exists. No change, no existence.

Conversely, whatever exists must change. As such, it is meaningless to speak of an “eternal” being or thing. That is why, if we must hold on to such an idea of something or some thing eternal, the best we can do is to BELIEVE it. That is, we can never really know such a thing, as it does not really exist. At best, we can say that it exists only in our minds.

But such ideas can be dangerous, especially when others do not see the same delusion that we have. So we call them “unbelievers,” and bomb them, or send them to hell, or worse. Anyway, hell is impermanent, too, if it exists. For there is no pain, unless there is pleasure: pain, after all, is the absence of pleasure, or arises from non-fulfilment of the desire for pleasure.

The universe itself – everything – is changing There are two kinds of such universes. The first is an external universe, if you like: the one that we perceive around us, or simply, the physical world. It, too, is changing every moment, every second, every micro-second, every nano-second, etc. This could take forever as it were!

Yet time itself is a concept, that is, our experience of relative change. When we are waiting for someone we love, it could take ages. But when we are spending time with that same wonderful person, time seems to fly. When we are very young, we keep asking when is new year, when we receive hongbao (packets of cash gifts). At my age (61), I wonder why December keeps coming so fast!

The other kind of universe – everything – is the totality of our experiences, that is, our eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind, and their respective sense-objects. This is the universe that we experience, or more correctly, this is the universe we manufacture and project for ourselves. We are the creators of our own worlds.

We have to be careful what we fill this personal universe with: heaven, hell, God, devil, demons, ghosts, desirable objects, hateful things, and on. We give them virtual lives when we believe in them. The problem is that this is a very private and limited company we are keeping.

There is an effective way of not falling into our own existential traps. Take them all to be mind-made, which they really are, anyway. Our five senses feed their respective sense-data to our mind, which is the real boss who makes “sense” of things. And how our minds (“we”) make sense of things is mostly the result of how we had thought and lived, that is, our past.

Whatever we perceive at our sense-doors (eye, ear, etc), are measured against our inner database of past experiences. If we thought that it had provided us with pleasure in the past, we would desire it now again, and again ad infinitum. If we remember that it had brought us pain in the past, we would reject it now and forever. If we are unable to collate it with any past experience, we simply do not know what to do with it: so we ignore it.

This only reinforces our ignorance, especially when we make no effort to investigate what all these events really are. They are not “things” at all because they are mind-made and they are subject to time. They are impermanent. This is the best we can know, and need to know.

When we accept the impermanence of every thing and everything, we begin to see this truth more clearly and more universally. We begin to see “ourselves” as parts of everything else. We are not alone, never alone. We are always a part of the universe. The most wonderful thing about this is that it is a most peaceful and reassuring feeling.

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