

Religion Without Words

Generically, there are two kinds of religions: the word-based and the word-free. The word-based religion is, as defined, based on words, especially a holy book that is believed to contain “the Word.” The word-free religion, on the other hand, is a training to see words for what they are, and to free ourselves beyond even holy scripture, so that we have a direct vision of true reality.

The earliest religions, even primitive beliefs, in essence, teach us to see the world for what it is, even if in a harmlessly imperfect way. They use a minimum of words, but a constant observing of nature and human behaviour. We are instructed and encouraged to live in harmony with others, with people as well as with animals and nature, with the animate and the inanimate.

The primitive religions, crude as they may seem to us, are deeply rooted in respect for others. Respect here means accepting others and our environment unconditionally. We then had greener trees, clearer streams, cleaner water and fresher air. The big religions of today are nothing more than big businesses bogged down with the buying and selling of souls, and they are very noisy.

As human society became more sophisticated, its religions, too, become more power-centred. In due course, as tribes grew larger, their leaders found it easier to control others and thus ensure its survival by using word-based religions. These leaders used words and ideas to construct fictional beings and virtual realities, promising power and freedom. Even today, we can notice how such religions often employ the language of power and dominance.

As language evolved, and philosophy grew, these ancient leaders and teachers discovered that they could conjure up images and emotions in others, and so control them. What is interesting is that if we use these same words, even the most wise, on say animals, or the trees, or even mountainous rocks, they have no effect at all on them. The reason is simple: they do not have minds, they do not use words, they do not understand language, not human language, anyway. The lesson is clear: use your mind, or others will use it. Your mind: use it or lose it.

Human language, in other words, is our means of communication and of social conditioning. Interestingly, although the kind of language we grow up with gives us the means of communicating and learning, yet this same language also limits the way we think and feel, and may even hinders our spiritual growth.

Yet, a human by nature is deeply curious. There are moments when we want to know what lies beyond words. When we were hearty children, and if we are still joyfully child-like, our imaginative powers are likely to be boundless. We could, for example, imagine what lies beyond our homes, neighbourhood, society, country, world or universe. The word-based religions have always tried to stop such dangerous investigations. Dangerous, that is, to such religions. For, they thrive on faith, especially unquestioning faith, and not to question what we do not understand.

Believe, they proclaim, that we might know. But what kind of knowledge is this? If I believe white is black, it might be said to be knowledge, but it is a false, or at best incomplete, knowledge. And if we are filled with such half-knowledges and false conceptions, our actions

are unlikely to benefit anyone. Indeed, we can see that much of human follies and sufferings are directly or indirectly caused by such word-based blindness.

Around the 6th century, a great movement began in the middle Gangetic plains of northern India, against the word-based religion of the brahmins, powerful priests who spun stories how they were born from the mouth of primal man or of God himself. The nobles, they claimed, were from his arms; the merchants, his thighs; and the workers, his feet. You would be lucky, it seemed, to be included in one of these classes. If not, you would be the outcasts.

The more wordy a religion is, the more it wants us to hand over our remote control. We should never hand over our remote (our mind) to any else, no matter how saved, or attained, or how enlightened, or how charming or how charismatic the preacher, priest, guru or teacher appears to be. If we hand over our remote to anyone else, then we become mindless robots, blinded moths perilously flying around a naked blaze.

Such wordy narratives chain us, instead of liberating us. To be truly free, we must reject such wordiness, or simply take them for what they are: stories. One of the best ways to free ourselves from such a tyranny of words and word-religions, however, is to feel the liberating power of silence. On a simple level, we can speak of two kinds of silence: the outer and the inner.

The outer silence is the rejection of using words to dominate others so as to prevent their own emotional and spiritual liberation. We should avoid words that arouse fear in others, or hurt them, or hinder personal growth. We need to understand how our five physical senses and our minds create the world around us.

The best way to create a healthy and harmonious world is to understand and enjoy inner silence. But first, we need to investigate the nature of our senses and our minds. We create our own worlds. Occasionally, we need to turn our senses inwards to give them a rest, as it were. Just let them be, at peace with themselves.

We need to enjoy the inner silence of our hearts. It is the stillness, the source of all goodness. It is the still centre of life's storm. It is the eye of the storm that is ever peaceful. This is the true heart of our lives.

A simple way to be truly at peace with ourselves is to spend a few minutes, doing nothing but enjoying the way we breathe. Naturally and simply breathe in, feeling "Peace!"; naturally and simply breathe out, feeling "Peace!" We don't even need to be religious to do this. Yet this is more peaceful than any religion can ever be.

If we can really taste this inner bliss, no matter what religion we belong to, or to none, we would be able to see a higher meaning to everything. We begin to understand ourselves better, and so understand others and the world better, too. We begin to feel truly liberated.

Piya Tan ©2011 110718